

Urban Fantasys

by Mercedes Lackey

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# Stories in Series

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Mercedes Lackey & Rosemary Edghill

4 - Spirits White as Lightning

Mercedes Lackey & Rosemary Edghill

5 - Mad Maudlin

Mercedes Lackey & Rosemary Edghill

### **SERRAteD Edge Series**

1 - Born to Run

Mercedes Lackey & Larry Dixon

2 - Chrome Circle

Mercedes Lackey & Larry Dixon

3 - Wheels of Fire

Mercedes Lackey & Mark Shepherd

4 - When the Bough Breaks

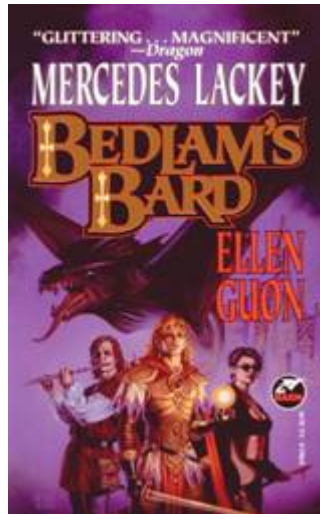
Mercedes Lackey & Holly Lisle

5 - Stone Souls (forthcoming)

Mercedes Lackey & Esther Freisner

# Bedlam's Bard

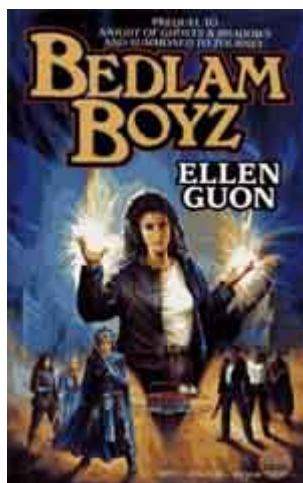
-- Bedlam's Bard --



Do Not Have at Present

-- Bedlam Boyz --

Ellen Guon



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## Chapter One

Sunset Boulevard was a blur of lights and noise, too many radios and car stereos, too many people talking and shouting and laughing. Kayla jammed her hands in the pockets of her denim jacket and wished all of it would just go away.

At midnight, it seemed like everyone was on the street, all the weird and lonely and “professional” residents of Los Angeles: the punks and the pretty boys in tight black leather, the women in brightly colored miniskirts, the dealers with too many gold chains beneath their open shirt collars. Ten feet away from where she stood, a nervous-looking blond man traded cash for a little ziplock bag with a bored-looking guy in a cowboy hat; both men stepped back into the shadows of the alley as a black-and-white LAPD patrol car glided past, like a silent shark prowling through the late night traffic.

Liane and Billy were twenty feet further up the sidewalk, gawking at leather jackets in a storefront window. She took her eyes off the panorama of the street around her, and joined them at the window. “Nice stuff,” she commented, looking at a tailored leather jacket with metal studs. The price tag said \$249 . . . but it might as well have been a million dollars, she still couldn't afford it.

She leaned against the cold metal bars over the glass and thought about stealing some aspirin. Just the same as every night for the last few months, it felt like someone was pounding on her skull with a hammer. The noise from the traffic only made it worse. “Guys, okay if we stop someplace for some more aspirin?”

“Another headache?” Billy asked.

“It's nothing,” Kayla lied.

“You've been having headaches every day for weeks now,” Liane said. “Maybe we should take you to a doctor. What if this is something serious?”

“It's nothing, guys. I'll get some aspirin, it'll go away. There's a QuickStart down the street, we can stop there.”

A red convertible slowed on the street next to them, the man in the driver's seat calling out to them. “Hey, chickies, want to party?”

Billy glared at the driver until he shrugged and looked away. The convertible pulled away back into the traffic.

“We could've just let him buy us some dinner and drinks,” Liane said softly. “Nothing more than that.” Liane had a hungry look in her eyes, the way she stared wistfully after the fancy red convertible.

Kayla thought about the man, and that he had a hungry look in his eyes, too. A different kind of hunger.

Billy shook his head. “He'd want something for his money, wouldn't he? And then we'd end up in a situation like last weekend with you and Nick.”

Liane, already pale under the streetlights with her white-blond hair and very fair skin, turned even paler. That had been an awful night, one that Kayla thought they wouldn't survive. Nick, a local “businessman,” had been watching Liane for a few days. When Kayla and Billy were busy buying Cokes from a street vendor, Nick told Liane that he wanted her to work for him. Billy and Kayla weren't his style . . . Billy was too mean-looking, with that knife-scar on his chin and that cold blue-eyed “Don't mess with me” look, a trick that he said he'd learned from his old man, who was currently up for armed robbery in Folsom. Not at all like the pretty boys on Melrose Avenue. And Kayla, with her long brown hair and green eyes that were too big for her face, knew she just wasn't cute enough for the chickenhawks, either.

Liane, on the other hand, was drop-dead gorgeous, blond and with the face of an angel. And she

attracted men like a magnet. Especially slimeballs like Nick.

*Maybe Billy telling Nick to go sit and spin wasn't the best idea,* she thought. Billy and Nick had screamed at each other for fifteen minutes. Nick had stormed away, and they were walking down the street two hours later when he and some friends had pulled up in Nick's blue Chevy, waving a pistol at them. It'd been a fast run through the back streets of Hollywood, with Nick screaming curses in two languages at them, until they'd managed to lose him by climbing over several fences and hiding in a gardening shed in someone's backyard.

But, even after a night like that, she knew that getting out of that latest foster home *had* been a good idea. The lady who ran the place was nice enough, but her husband was slime, and he'd -already started hitting on Liane, not even two days after she arrived there. True, every straight guy with hormones tried to hit on Liane, she was just too pretty for her own good, but this place was a foster home. It was supposed to be safe. Especially for someone like Liane, who was just a little too quiet, too easily spooked by people yelling, and scared of crowds and people standing too close to her.

Liane was quiet and shy, and it had surprised Kayla that the blonde girl had been the one who'd first talked about running away, about how she, Billy, and Kayla could go out on their own. It had started out easily enough, stealing enough money to take the bus from Orange County to downtown L.A. From there, they went to Hollywood, mostly because Liane wanted to see the Chinese Theater. It was Kayla who'd spotted the abandoned office building across the street from Mann's Chinese, and now Suite 230 (formerly an insurance agency, by the stationery they'd found in a closet) was their new home.

It wasn't bad: running water, though no showers or bathtubs, and plenty of old carpet padding to use for blankets. Kayla just wasn't certain how long all of this could keep working out for them, though—she knew they were balancing on the edge, with too many people like Nick waiting around to catch them if they fell.

Billy was the one who kept them together. Billy, who knew all about shoplifting and jimmying locks and using Sterno to heat up cans of chili. He treated them like his kid sisters, though sometimes Kayla caught him looking at Liane in a way that wasn't very brotherly. Kayla knew that she and Liane would never have made it on their own without him. *We're lucky he was at that foster home, too,* she thought. *I don't think I would've been brave enough to leave there without him. . . .*

Billy's words broke into her thoughts. "Hey, Kay, there's the QuickStart. Didn't you want some -aspirin?"

"Yeah, sure." Though she was sure that it wouldn't help. Nothing seemed to help, not anymore. "You guys hang around up front, I'll get the pills."

The headaches weren't the worst of it; she could live with the pain, not a problem. It was the weird dizziness that hit her every so often, making her feel like she'd touched a live electrical wire. She was sick with something, she knew that, but it didn't pay to worry about it . . . there was no way she could go to a doctor, at least, not now.

They walked into the store, a brightly-lit building with rows of metal shelves, past a cheerful woman who was chatting with the store clerk, a quiet-looking young man with shoulder-length blond hair. Liane and Billy started looking through magazines near the front counter, and Kayla moved to the back of the store. In the last few weeks, they'd refined shoplifting to an art, running interference and distracting the people so one of them could walk out with enough food for dinner. It was a lot easier than other kinds of theft. Kayla smiled in spite of herself, remembering how Billy had climbed through an open apartment window

only to find the occupant, a fat middle-aged man, up to his neck in bubbles in his bathtub with several rubber ducks floating around him. He'd yelled and Billy had practically fallen out the window, terrified but still unable to keep from laughing.

The three of them still laughed about that one, but the time when Billy had gone through an open house window and another guy had reached for a handgun next to his bed, that hadn't been so funny. Fortunately for him, the gun hadn't been loaded, and by the time the guy had managed to put some bullets in the revolver, Billy, Kayla, and Liane were already two blocks away and still running.

Since then, Billy had said that they'd have to get by without any more breaking-and-entering. Shoplifting, that was a good trick, though Kayla was getting very tired of pork-and-beans heated in the can, chili, and stew. Sometimes she caught herself fantasizing about fresh-cooked food, something that didn't come out of a can: baked potatoes, pancakes, or even bowls of oatmeal. Anything but canned -spaghetti.

She found the brand of aspirin she was looking for and checked the overhead mirror to make sure the clerk wasn't watching—those mirrors worked both ways, if you knew what you were doing—and slipped the package into her jacket pocket, smiling to herself. It was a quiet night, all right, and once she took some pills to get rid of the headache, she'd be feeling fine. . . .

Gunshots shattered the silence.

Liane screamed a moment later, a sound that echoed through the store. Kayla didn't even think about it; she ran toward the sound of Liane's scream and skidded around the corner of the row of shelves, stopping short at the sight before her.

The woman was lying very still in a pool of her own blood, sprawled across a small potted palm. The clerk's body wasn't in sight, but Kayla could see more blood sprayed across the wall behind the counter. A man wearing a long leather coat stood near the doorway and smiled at her, a military -assault rifle clenched in his hands.

Not three feet away from her, Billy held Liane in his arms, both of them frozen with terror. The man brought the assault rifle up, aiming at the three of them. Kayla brought up her hands instinctively to shield her face.

Nothing happened.

*He isn't going to kill us,* Kayla thought with a faint wave of relief, and opened her eyes.

The man was staring at her. Directly at her, not at Billy, not at Liane. A split-second later, she realized why: her hands were on fire. No, not exactly fire . . . it was a blue light that flickered over her hands, lines of light that weaved and danced around her fingers.

She was too startled to do anything except stare at her hands and the pale blue light. A wave of dizziness hit her, and that strange feeling of hot power, like electricity running through her entire body—she could feel the hair on her forearms standing on end, her hands tingling faintly where the light touched her.

*Oh my . . . oh my God . . .*

The light faded away. She stared at her fingers, and through them, saw the gunman shaking his head slowly, as though he couldn't believe what he'd just seen.

Then she saw his hands tighten on the rifle and knew that in another split-second he'd shoot them anyhow. . . .

Kayla didn't even think about it; she dived for him and that gun, sending both of them crashing into a rack of magazines. She tried to pull the gun out of his grip; he shoved her, hard, and she fell back against the blond woman's body, which gave way beneath her. She landed on the floor; her head hit hard against the linoleum. She blinked; the barrel of the gun was only inches from her face . . . she could see the man, smiling with delight, as his finger tightened on the trigger. . . .

Billy slammed into the gunman with a football tackle. The gun went off again, gunshots echoing through the small store. A bullet zinged past Kayla to impact the floor next to her.

She lay there for a moment, concentrating on breathing, then climbed unsteadily to her feet. Her legs were shaking so much she could barely stand as she moved to where Billy and the man were both lying motionless on the floor.

Billy was still alive, blood slowly staining through his shirt and jeans. She could see where the bullets had hit him, one in his leg, another in his shoulder. The shoulder wound was the worst, blood welling out in a wide stain down his side and onto the floor.

She wanted to scream, but knew there wasn't time for it. Billy was always the one who knew exactly what to do in a bad situation; she had to think the way he did, do something fast before all of his life spilled out onto the floor.

She tried to remember what first aid you were supposed to do for gunshot wounds. Applying pressure to stop the bleeding, that was the only thing she could think of. And shock—you had to cover them with a blanket or something so they'd stay warm. She didn't have a blanket, or anything to use on the wound . . . she pressed her hand against the ripped skin and shirt on Billy's shoulder. Blood flowed out around her fingers, more with every heartbeat.

*This isn't working. . . .*

She pressed harder. "It isn't working," she whispered. She looked up suddenly at Liane, still standing by the candy racks. "Go get help, damn it!" she yelled. Liane didn't move: she was standing -silently, staring at Kayla . . . at Kayla's hands . . .

. . . at the tendrils of blue light, twisting around her fingertips. The light brightened as she looked at it, radiating out from her hands, moving in rippling circles over Billy's shoulder and chest. Suddenly she saw Billy's wound -beneath her hands, through her hands, as though she was a ghost. No, it wasn't -exactly seeing . . . it was *feeling*, knowing, sensing the tears through the skin and muscle, the pressure of the tiny bullet lodged against the bone . . . *so small, to do so much damage!* The bullet, a little squashed piece of metal, was buried beneath a layer of muscle—she reached the part of her mind that was sensing all of this deep into the wound and tugged at the bullet, carefully working it loose.

It slid into her hand before she realized it. With a shudder, she flung it under the magazine rack, then turned back to Billy. There was more blood now, flowing from an artery that had been nicked by the bullet's passage. She touched the wound with unsteady fingers, and the blue light intensified, so incandescent that she had to close her eyes.

The light still shone through her closed eyelids, impossibly bright. Now she could feel the cut artery sealing itself, the muscles knitting -together beneath her fingertips. She could feel the energy pouring out



of her and into Billy, into the damaged tissue. And she knew this without seeing it, her eyes still tightly closed against the brilliance of the light. Somehow she knew how to help him, how to do whatever it was that she was doing, and it felt terrific. It felt better than anything she'd ever done before, exhilarating and electric, as though she was finally alive at last after being half-awake for years. Then it was over; the light faded away, leaving her dizzy and light-headed and as exhausted as though she'd been running for miles.

She opened her eyes to see what she'd done.

The bullet hole was gone. Billy's shirt was still soaked with blood, but the wound had disappeared, only a dull pink line marking where it had been. Her friend was still unconscious, but she could feel the life returning to his body, that the danger of immediate death was over. He was still in pain from another bullet in his leg, but even without looking at it, Kayla knew that she could close that wound as well. As soon as she took another couple seconds to catch her breath, she would . . . she would . . .

Dizziness and nausea hit her like a fist, and she fell back against the magazine rack, closing her eyes and concentrating on breathing.

*This isn't real, she thought. People don't just wake up one morning able to seal up bullet holes in their friends just by wanting it to happen. Something is going on here, something weirder than anything I've ever heard of in my entire life. . . .*

She heard a choked noise behind her and turned. Liane was still standing there, visibly trembling, making odd gasping sounds like she couldn't get enough air to breathe. Without saying a word, she ran for the door, flinging it open. The noise of the street outside was deafening in the deathly silence of the store.

"Liane, wait!" Kayla shouted. Not even glancing back at her, Liane ran through the doorway and out into the street.

Kayla tried to get up and follow her, but -another tide of dizziness washed over her. She slumped back against the magazine rack.

" . . . help me . . ." a weak voice whispered, very close to her. " . . . please . . ."

She looked around for the source of the voice, then realized, with a tiny start of fear, who it was. She stared at the gunman, lying on the blood-stained floor not quite three feet away from her. "W-what?"

"Heal me," he whispered, his face contorted with pain. "I know you can do it, I saw you help the boy. Please."

She edged away from him, shaking her head. He grabbed for her hand, pulling her close. "Please . . ." His face was very pale, his lip bleeding where he'd bitten it in pain. He placed her hand on his chest, rising and falling with each painful breath, against the torn flesh and warm wet blood.

*He killed those two people, she thought. And he nearly killed Billy. And he would've killed me and Liane, too, but now . . .*

Now his eyes were human again, not smiling -inhumanly at something she couldn't see or understand. She could feel her hands tingling again, that strange feeling like something was going to happen.

*I should help Billy, he's still hurting, his leg is still bleeding. I shouldn't help this guy, even if he is dying. . . .* She could feel, somehow, the sensation that his life was fading away in front of her eyes.

This time she called it to her, that strange cold blue fire, and felt it wreath around her hands and flow down through her fingertips. The man made a faint noise, something between a whimper and a moan, as the light coursed over his chest. She worked slowly and methodically, drawing the bullet out and sealing the wound shut. It was easier this time, in a way, though she could feel the exhaustion and dizziness pulling at her, a wave of darkness threatening at the edges of her mind. She fought it off for as long as she could, trying to concentrate on the man's wounds, but everything was moving too fast, whirling around her. . . .

No crowd had gathered in the convenience store parking lot yet. *Thank God for small favors*, -Officer Dale Walker thought, drawing his service -revolver and gesturing to his partner. She nodded, her pistol already out and ready, and edged closer to the door. He moved in quickly, gun held at waist height, covering the entrance to the QuickStart. Anne followed him in a moment later. He stepped over the bodies lying near the doorway, pushed the rifle away from the unconscious man in the long coat, then carefully bent to pick it up by the strap. Anne slipped past him, the petite red-haired woman checking through the rest of the store to make sure there was no one else in the building. He glanced behind the long counter: one motionless body, not a threat. She -rejoined him at the entrance. "All clear, Dale," she reported, and hearing that there were no immediate dangers, he took a genuine look at the bodies for the first time.

"*Damn.*" The woman was obviously dead. The young man behind the counter must have died -almost instantly—a bullet had caught him in the throat. He had a surprised look frozen on his face, a look he'd carry with him to the city morgue.

A few feet away, Anne Houston knelt next to the man in the leather coat, touching his throat for a pulse. Two kids were sprawled on the floor beside him. Walker swallowed painfully; the kids couldn't have been older than fifteen, maybe sixteen. Too young to be caught up in whatever had happened here tonight.

He crouched down next to the kids, checking them quickly. Both were covered with blood, and the boy . . . there was a wound in the boy's leg and a bullet hole in the boy's jacket, and a lot of blood stains, but no apparent wound there. *That doesn't make any sense*, he thought. *Maybe the kid moved after the first shot, fell into his own blood from the other wound, but it's -unlikely.* . . .

He pushed that thought aside, concentrating on his work. The leg wound was bad but not life-threatening, and could wait until EMS -arrived on the scene in a couple minutes. He turned to the girl, hearing the sirens as the -ambulance pulled up in the parking lot outside.

As he leaned over her, the girl opened her eyes, blinking up at him. "You'll be all right," he said, smiling reassuringly. She looked up at him, dazed and uncomprehending.

"Dale," Anne Houston said, her voice sounding shaken, "This is too weird for words . . . the guy's covered with blood and there's a hole in his jacket, but there's no bullet hole in him!"

\* \* \*

"Just shock," someone said directly above her. "I didn't find a head injury . . . she probably fainted during the attack."

Everything hurt. That was her first thought when she opened her eyes: her entire body felt like one big bruise, like she'd gone through the tumble-dry cycle on a clothes dryer. Someone was looking down at her, a tall man with graying brown hair, wearing the dark blue uniform of the LAPD.

"Thanks, Randall," he said to someone out of her sight. He smiled at her, his brown eyes crinkling at the corners, then looked up sharply as a woman shouted, "Dale, grab him!"

Kayla blinked and sat up, then wished she hadn't. Everything spun around her, and she felt like she was falling. Someone fell on top of her, and she screamed. It was the man in the leather coat, his face only inches from hers. "Got him, Anne," the police officer said, and hauled the man in the leather coat up against the magazine rack, twisting his arms behind him and slapping on a pair of handcuffs.

"Do you know this guy, kid?" the female officer asked.

Kayla found her voice. "I've never . . . never seen him before. But he . . . he killed those people. He would've killed all of us."

The gunman grinned at her, licking his lips. Whatever had been human in his eyes, for that brief moment when he'd pleaded with her to save his life, was gone again.

She tried to sit up, and everything went blurry again. When her head cleared, she saw two paramedics carefully moving Billy out of the store on a stretcher. The blonde woman's body was still lying by the counter, but someone had placed a blanket over her face. The policewoman was reading Miranda rights to the gunman, two other police officers holding the man by his handcuffed arms. The brown-haired policeman was next to her, watching her intently. "Do you feel up to a trip to the station, kid?"

She nodded, not trusting her voice.

"Good." He helped her stand up. Her knees were so wobbly, she had to hold onto his arm for support. "You're a tough kid," the cop continued. "You survive this, you'll survive anything."

*Will I?* she thought.

"She's magic!" the gunman shrieked suddenly, trying to wrest free from the policemen. He struggled briefly, staring at Kayla with insane eyes. Beneath the leather coat, his shirt was still wet with blood. "She healed me, she has the Devil's power! I saw it, she has the Devil in her!"

"Jesus, get him out of here," the policewoman said in an exasperated tone. The other officers complied, wrestling the man through the door.

"I'll take you to the station now," the brown-haired officer said. "Easy now, I know your legs aren't working too great just yet. We'll walk slowly, it's okay. . . ."

*Easy for you to say,* she thought resentfully. *You didn't just see these people get blown away in front of you, including your best friend almost dying, and then have that—whatever it was—blue light thing happen to you.*

They moved out through the doorway, and Kayla stopped short, momentarily blinded by bright lights.

There were several camera crews aiming cameras at her, and a huge crowd of people gathered on the sidewalk, held back by several police officers.

Kayla wondered if she ought to faint or throw up. Either seemed likely right now. . . .

“Just a little more,” the policeman said in a gentle voice. His grip tightened on her arm, as though he realized that she was about to fall. Half-supporting her, they walked to a police car parked on the edge of the lot. The policeman helped her into the back seat; Kayla fumbled with the seat belt strap for a few seconds before the officer reached over to fasten it for her.

There was someone already seated in the car next to her, a beautiful Chicano girl with feathers knotted into her hair. The girl gave Kayla a curious look. “Why are they not taking you to the hospital?” she asked. “I saw you lying there, I thought you were dead.”

“Please, witnesses can't talk,” the policeman said from the driver's seat. “Neither of you can talk about what happened yet, okay?”

*Okay by me, Kayla thought. I don't want to talk about it, anyhow. I don't even want to think about it.*

The officer drove in silence through the brightly lit streets. Kayla leaned her face against the cold glass and tried not to think.

Billy was alive. She knew that much, from the moment that her entire world had faded back from bright blue lights and hot electricity into normal -reality again. She'd saved his life, somehow, and the life of the guy in the leather coat.

*I should have let that slimeball die,* she thought, then shook her head. Even now, she knew she couldn't have done that. It didn't matter that the man was a murderer . . . even if he was slime, she couldn't just sit back and watch him die, not when she knew she could do something to help him.

Because she could. It didn't make any sense—none of this made any sense, really—but she could do it, whatever it was that she'd done. She could help people. A people-helper, that's what she was. The thought made her feel a little better, despite the awful headache and dizziness and pain.

Except . . . except that wasn't what the crazy man had called her. His words echoed in her mind: “She's magic. She has the Devil in her.”

*Oh God, Kayla thought. I sure as hell hope not.*

## Chapter Two

Kayla sat on the wooden chair, feeling the sweat drip down the inside of her shirt, wondering how much longer they'd have to sit in this room. “Can I have a glass of water?” she asked Officer Walker.

“Once the homicide detectives arrive, I'll get you something to drink,” the policeman said. “Just be patient a little longer, Kayla.”

“Okay,” she said, trying to find a more comfortable way of sitting on the hard wooden chair. All of this would be much easier to deal with if the chairs in the police station were a little more comfortable, she

thought. Instead, she was stuck in this empty room with Officer Walker, who was a nice guy but didn't want to talk very much. He'd said that to her when they arrived at the police station, that they'd have to wait in a separate room and not talk about what had happened at the convenience store until the homicide detectives from the Detective Headquarters Division arrived.

The Hispanic girl was seated on a chair by the door, looking as though she wished she was somewhere else. Kayla understood *exactly* how she felt.

The silence in the room was making her crazy, she decided. After all the noise of gunshots and screaming, the silence was more than she could handle. "Do you know who that guy was, Officer Walker?" Kayla asked.

"Kayla, I've already said that we can't talk about it, not until the detectives arrive. Please, no more questions."

She sat with her arms folded on her knees, curled up on the chair, until the door opened again. Two more police officers walked in, a blonde woman and a heavyset man. "So, Dale, what did you bring home today?"

Officer Walker stood up. "Consuela Rodriguez was the first person to arrive on the scene, and she called the police. Kayla here was in the store when it happened. She wasn't hurt; none of that blood is hers."

"I'll start with the kid," the woman said. She gestured for Kayla to follow her. Kayla did, wondering what was going to happen next.

They walked down the hallway to another -office. The policewoman closed the door after them and turned to a small table with a coffeepot, cans of soda, and paper cups. "Here, take a couple of paper towels; let's get some of that blood off you. Dale didn't even let you wash, did he? Would you like something to drink?"

"Anything with sugar in it," Kayla said, reaching for a can of Pepsi. She opened the bottle of aspirin that she'd lifted from the convenience store and swallowed several of the pills with some soda, then carefully wiped her face and hands with the paper towel.

The woman poured herself a cup of coffee and glanced up at the clock on the wall. "One A.M. Well, this will certainly be a long night. Have a seat, young lady. I'm afraid you're going to be here for a while, and I can't let you talk to anyone else just yet, not even your parents. By the way, I don't think I introduced myself. I'm Detective Cable. You can call me Nichelle, if you'd like."

Kayla gingerly sat down on one of the chairs. Detective Cable set a small tape recorder on the table next to them and took out a small stack of paper forms and a pencil.

Then the questions began.

Forty-five minutes later, Kayla was trying to stay awake as she explained for a second time how she hadn't seen the gunman actually walk into the store, how she hadn't seen anyone outside the store who could've been with the gunman, and that she hadn't heard the gunman say anything until after the police arrived.

*I wish Billy was here. He'd know what to say, how to handle this.*

“All right,” Cable said, stifling a yawn. “Let’s go over what happened when your friend Billy was shot. You said you jumped the guy, he knocked you down and you fainted, and . . . ?”

“. . . and I woke up when Officer Walker was asking me if I was okay,” she said, not saying anything about the entire “blue lights” situation. *They’ll lock me up in a padded cell in five minutes if I start talking about that*, she thought.

To Kayla’s relief, the policewoman switched off the tape recorder. “Thank you, Kayla,” she said with a tired smile. “Thank you very much. Now all I need is for you to fill out some paperwork, and then I’ll give you over to Elizabet Winters, our resident psychology therapist, specializing in juvenile psychology. She’ll want to talk to you a little, make sure that you’re handling all of this okay. I know it’s been an awful night for you, and you seem to be dealing with everything just fine, but we have to be certain. Elizabet will also call your parents and make sure you get home all right. I’m sure they’re worried about you, and will want to know where you are.” She set a form and a pen in front of Kayla, then walked over to pour herself another cup of coffee.

*Call . . . my parents?* Kayla thought in dismay. She looked down at the form and at the second line, where she was supposed to write in her -address. *What am I supposed to do now?*

*Maybe if I just fill it out quickly, then I can ask to go to the bathroom or something and get out of the building.*

*Then I’ll find Liane, and we can find Billy at the hospital. He’ll know what to do, he always does.*

*Good plan.*

She wrote in carefully: 6925 Hollywood Boulevard. Hollywood, California.

The other questions were just as bad; she put down fake names for her parents, grandparents, school, and everything else.

Cable took the form from her, scanning it quickly. Kayla sat and waited, trying not to look nervous. The policewoman walked to the door with the form still in her hand. “I’ll be back in a minute, Kayla,” she said, and left the room.

*Maybe I should try to get out of here now*, Kayla thought, then decided against it. Somebody would probably stop her before she could get to the front door. No, waiting until the right -moment, that was a better idea—wait until someone was taking her home, she could just walk away and then head back home, to Suite 230.

Home. Once upon a time, that had meant something better than an abandoned office building in downtown Hollywood. She thought about what the policewoman had said about calling her parents and fought back the sudden tears that threatened to -escape from her eyes.

*I wish you could call my folks, lady*, she thought. *I just wish you could.*

Elizabet Winters set down the case folder, rubbing at her eyes with a tired hand. Too many blank pages left to fill out . . . the file on that last runaway child would keep her here for -another hour, when all she

wanted to do was go home and get some sleep. At least there'd been a happy ending to that story, unlike most of them. She and Lieutenant Simmons had escorted the boy to the LAX airport, where she'd seen him off on the midnight plane to Chicago, knowing that the boy's anxious parents were waiting for him on the other end of the line.

Sometimes these things worked out.

Sometimes they didn't. Elizabeth didn't want to think about Marie, a lovely sixteen-year-old who'd been brought in to the station for child prostitution at least five times. The last time, they'd taken her to the county morgue instead, with five knife wounds in her. No suspects in that case yet, and Elizabeth doubted they'd ever find any.

“Hey, Elizabeth, you got a minute? I need some help.”

Elizabeth looked up, to see Nichelle Cable from Detective Headquarters Division. Nichelle looked just as tired as Elizabeth felt. “What's up?”

“I have a girl who witnessed a double homicide tonight on Sunset Boulevard. I didn't think there was anything unusual about her until she gave me this.” Nichelle held up the witness identification form and pointed at Line 2.

“So, she lives on Hollywood Boulevard? What's strange about that?” Elizabeth asked.

“I wouldn't have thought anything was weird about it, except that when I was in high school, I worked in a particular movie theater for a few months. This girl gave me the address of Mann's Chinese Theater.” Nichelle smiled. “I ran her name through the runaway database, and it came up cherries. Kayla Smith, state ward. She's been in Juvie twice for shoplifting and is currently -reported missing from a foster home in Orange County. She ran away two months ago. God knows what she's been doing since.” The homicide detective dropped the form on Elizabeth's desk. “She's all yours, Elizabeth.”

“Thanks,” Elizabeth said with a wry smile. “Anything else I should know about this child?”

“She's bright and obviously thinks fast on her feet. Doesn't look like she does drugs, though she's wearing a half-trashed denim jacket that would cover any tracks. No terminal case of the sniffles or jitters, anyhow, so I doubt she's a crackhead. Maybe you can do something for this one.”

“Maybe.” Elizabeth stuffed the case folder in her briefcase. “Is she in a holding room or one of the offices?”

“Simmons' office. There's still some fresh coffee in there, if you need it.” Nichelle yawned and stretched, smiling tiredly. “I'm calling it a night. You might want to buzz Collins and get him ready to process this kid. I doubt anyone would want to drive her over to Juvie at this hour.”

“You're probably right about that. Thanks for the coffee, Nichelle, I'll need it. Good night.”

“Good luck,” the policewoman said with a grin.

Elizabeth picked up her briefcase and her jacket and headed over to Simmons' office. Ten feet away from the office door, she stopped, closing her eyes for a brief moment.

She knew.

She'd felt it earlier, an "incident" in the city, magical power like a flare going off, as someone called down magic with all the subtlety of a high-explosive rocket. She'd wanted to go investigate, but with the boy to escort to the airport, there had been no chance. But now . . .

It was this girl. She could feel it already, even though she couldn't see the girl through the closed office door. But even at this distance, the sensation of power sparked around her, tingling and alive. Whoever this girl was, she was a little powerhouse, and probably remarkably dangerous because of it.

Maybe she was the cause of the double homicide?

No . . . she could sense the child's power, and it burned clean and incandescent. The girl was bright with power and promise, with no taint of death around her. Instead, it was something else that she sensed, something that she only saw dimly sometimes when looking in the mirror, moments when she could see herself and her own magic glowing within her. . . .

*The child has magic!*

Elizabet opened the door and walked into the -office. The girl looked up from where she was seated with her elbows propped on the table. She didn't look like much, just a street kid wearing jeans and a denim jacket over a stained T-shirt, long tangled brown hair, and large green eyes. Those eyes followed Elizabet as she draped her blue suit jacket over the back of the chair and then sat down across from her.

"I'm Elizabet Winters," she said. "Elizabet is a mistake on my birth certificate that I've lived with all these years. You're Kayla, right?" She -extended her hand. The kid didn't move, just sat and watched her with those terrified eyes. Elizabet withdrew her hand, wondering how to handle this.

"Who are you?"

The girl's voice was surprisingly soft, Elizabet thought. "I'm a psych therapist working with the police department," she said. "Usually I help the relatives of victims of crime, or work with people who have been through a traumatic experience. Like what you went through tonight. Do you want to talk about that?"

*Yes, I'd like to talk about it, but I also don't want to spend the rest of my life in a padded room,* Kayla thought, looking at the woman across from her. Elizabet Winters was a beautiful black woman in her fifties, black and silver hair coiled up in a braid. She sat silently, apparently waiting for Kayla to say something.

*What am I supposed to say? That some guy killed two people in front of me and shot my best friend, and I created this weird light show to get rid of the bullet holes? No way.*

"I've—I've had a bad night," she said at last, choosing her words carefully. "I'm okay, but I'd like to go home."

The older woman nodded. "That's a problem, unfortunately. Detective Cable wanted me to lock you up here for the night and maybe send you to Juvenile Hall in the morning, since it's a little impractical to take you back to the foster home in Orange County in the middle of the night."



“What?” Kayla sat upright in shock.

“I think I have another alternative,” Elizabeth continued, “since neither a midnight trip to -Orange County or a night at Juvenile Hall seems to be the appropriate answer.”

“Terrific,” Kayla said, and slumped back down in her chair. “So are you going to send me back to Mr. and Mrs. Davis? I know it doesn't matter what I think, but I don't want to go.”

“Obviously, or you wouldn't have run away from them.” The black woman smiled. “Kayla, if you could do anything, what would you do?”

“I—I don't understand,” she answered uncertainly.

“I'll rephrase this. Pretend for a minute that you don't have to go back to that foster home, or Juvie, or anything like that. If you could choose where you wanted to live, what you wanted to do, what would you choose?”

*Who is this lady?* Kayla wondered. *She isn't like any cop or social worker I've ever met before.* “I don't know. I guess . . . if I could have anything, I'd want to live with my parents again. But that won't ever happen, I know that.” At Elizabeth's questioning look, she added, “They disappeared when I was twelve years old. I was at school, Mom never showed up to take me home.” The memory of that afternoon was still burned into her mind: how she'd waited and waited at the school, then walked home, to find the police at her house. “Nobody knew how to find any of my relatives, so I ended up in a foster home.” She thought about it for a few moments longer. “If I could do anything, I'd want to live with people that understood me. Good people, not like Mr. Davis. People who like to talk about real things, and treat people right, and . . . and read books. People who do more than sit around drinking beer and watching TV.”

“You like to read?”

In spite of herself, Kayla blushed. “I love reading,” she said, looking down at her sneakers. “Sometimes it's the only way to escape, get away from everything.”

“Have you thought of going to college?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yeah, sure, but there's a snowball's chance of that, you know? You have to graduate high school before they'll let you go to college.”

“Maybe I can help you with that.” The woman stood up, pulling on her blue jacket and picking up her briefcase. “Time to go, child.”

“To Juvie?” Kayla's voice quavered, and she hated it for that. She clenched her fists, trying to keep her voice steady. “Is that where you're taking me?”

Elizabeth Winters smiled. “No, I have another idea. I'll need to find Lieutenant Simmons first, but I doubt he'd have any objections.”

Curious, Kayla followed Elizabeth out of the -office. Elizabeth led her through the corridors and open office rooms of the police station.

“The lieutenant's downstairs with our new psychopath,” one officer told Elizabeth, and she led Kayla

down a flight of stairs to a brightly lit row of holding cells. A sandy-haired policeman stood a few feet back from the rows of concrete-walled rooms, from which Kayla could hear someone screaming curses and obscenities. There was one small iron-barred cell next to the larger holding cells that had several prisoners in each, men that were mostly sitting around quietly. In the smaller cell was the man from the QuickStart, wearing a stained white shirt and jeans instead of the long black leather coat.

In spite of herself, she stared at the killer. -Another man, wearing jeans and a plaid shirt and seated quietly on a bench in the next cell, was watching her through the open bars. She avoided his curious eyes, looking instead at the man who'd tried to kill her.

There was something wrong with him, she could tell, even at this distance. Something broken inside that made him crazy this way. Her hands tingled, and she glanced down quickly, making sure that her fingers weren't glowing again. They weren't, fortunately. Kayla looked back at the crazy man, wondering just how one would fix something wrong inside somebody's head; it wouldn't be like fixing a gunshot wound, that was more like patching things back together. No, this would be like reaching -inside and changing something. . . .

Elizabet began speaking in a quiet voice to the policeman; with the lunatic screaming at the top of his voice, Kayla couldn't hear what she was saying.

"Hey, chickie." The gunman's voice suddenly dropped to a whisper. "I know who you are, I know what you did."

Kayla moved closer so she could hear him. "What?"

"It's magic, did you know that? I've seen magic, and that's what you did."

Elizabet spoke sharply from behind her. "Kayla! Get away from—"

The man reached out and grabbed Kayla's arm, yanking her toward him with inhuman strength. "Devil!" he screamed. Kayla was pulled hard against the metal bars, struggling to get free. The man's other hand clamped onto her throat, tightening painfully.

Elizabet's hand was on the man's arm, trying to pull him away from Kayla. A split-second later, Kayla felt a shock of hot fire go through her hands, a sudden pain like a knife. The man yelped and leaped back, falling onto the floor of his cell.

Elizabet pulled her back from the cell, blocking the lieutenant's view of Kayla with her own body. Kayla glanced down, and saw why: a handful of blue sparks, flickering like fireflies on a Southern night, were fading from her own fingertips as she watched.

"Are you all right? Did he hurt you?" Elizabet asked urgently.

Kayla shook her head. "I'm okay, really." She looked at the man cowering in his cell, clutching his left arm. "Did he—?" She turned quickly to look at the police officer, hoping he hadn't seen anything.

"Good use of pressure points, Elizabet," Lieutenant Simmons said, motioning for them to stand further back from the cell. "I've seen Ms. Winters do things like that before," the police officer continued. "It's some Japanese martial art, isn't it?"

Elizabet's eyes never left Kayla's. "I know a few useful tricks, Jeff," she said.

“Yes.” The police officer nodded. “In any case, Elizabet, my answer is yes. I don't see why you can't foster this girl for a few days until a judge figures out what to do for her. Just make sure the correct paperwork ends up on the captain's desk.”

“That's what you were asking about?” Kayla asked, her eyes wide.

“Only if you don't mind, child. If you'd rather go elsewhere, we can make other arrangements,” Elizabet said.

“No, that's okay by me.” Kayla didn't know what else to say. She thought about being locked up in Juvie, and decided that it would be a lot easier to get away from this lady than the cops at Juvie. Because all she could think about right now was running away, running as far away from all of everything that had happened tonight, until she didn't have to think about it anymore.

Then she thought about a warm bed, and maybe a chance to take a shower, maybe even get some clean clothes. *I'll see what her place is like, Kayla thought, And then I'll decide. Maybe I'll want to stay there tonight, maybe I can steal some stuff that I can get some cash for . . .*

*Maybe this lady is all right. I mean, she saw what just happened, and she didn't freak, or even say anything about it. Maybe she can answer some of these questions . . . maybe she can explain what in the hell is happening to me.*

She followed Elizabet out of the holding cell area, making a wide berth around the crazy man's cell. When they were outside the police station, she couldn't hold back the questions any longer. “You saw, didn't you? Why didn't you tell the cop? I don't—”

“Not here,” Elizabet said. “We'll talk at my house.” They walked to one of the few cars left in the parking lot next to the station, an old white VW Rabbit convertible. “We can stop by Cedars Sinai Hospital and check on your friend Billy if you'd like,” she offered.

“We don't have to. I know he's okay,” Kayla said without thinking.

Elizabet smiled at her. “Yes, you would know that, wouldn't you? All right, then we'll just go straight to my house.”

*She knows! Kayla thought. She knows exactly what happened!*

“Bitch!” the man screamed as the police lieutenant left the room. “She's an evil bitch, she's the Devil's daughter!”

Carlos Miguel Hernandez listened to the man's raving for another few minutes, then uncurled from his position on the jail cell's wooden bench and moved to the corner of his cell, as close as he could get to the other man. “Why do you say that little *puta* is the daughter of the Devil?” he asked conversationally. “She's just a child.”

“I saw it, kid!” the man shrieked. “I saw it, I saw it!”

“Please, *amigo*, calm down. Tell me what you saw.”

Carlos listened intently to the man's descriptions of the evening's events, and nodded thoughtfully. "Can you prove that this happened? Do you have proof?"

"I'll show you, kid, but you have to give it back to me, you have to promise!" the other man said shrilly.

"I promise, I promise," Carlos snapped impatiently. "And do not call me kid," he added. "I'm nineteen years old, I'm a man."

For an answer, the man's hand reached out through the bars, holding out his shirt. Carlos pulled it into his cell and looked at it curiously.

"Look on the right side, you'll see the mark," the man said.

Carlos turned the shirt in his hands and saw the bullet hole. The bloodstains around the hole were fresh, not yet darkened to the red-brown color of old blood. He brought the shirt closer to his face and sniffed. Yes, fresh blood.

"I have a hole in my jacket, too," the man said. "But no bullet wound. She healed me, she's the Devil's daughter!"

"I believe you," Carlos said. "If you were still hurt, you would be in the security ward of a hospital, not here in county jail." *How remarkable, he thought, And how very useful. Though if that child is the Devil's daughter, it is a kind and gentle Devil who would save the life of someone trying to kill her.*

*I want to see this miracle for myself, this child who heals friend and enemy alike.*

"Do you know who she is?" Carlos asked. "Do you know where she lives?"

The other man mumbled a negative. Carlos pushed the shirt back through the bars of the cell into the other man's grasp and sat down on the bench to consider what he had learned.

She could be very useful indeed, this healing child. Tomorrow morning, he would stand in front of the judge and pay his fines to leave this place. After that, he could begin searching for this child. Somehow he did not doubt that he or one of his homeboys, the Tyrone Street Boys, would find her, one girl in all of the city of Los Angeles. He stretched out on the bench and listened in silence to the incoherent words of the man in the cell beside him. Tomorrow, he would find her. . . .

"Nice place," Kayla muttered, looking up at the darkened house. She glanced at Elizabet. "How much does the police department pay you, -anyhow?"

"I also have a private practice," Elizabet said, -unlocking the front door. "Besides, child, I bought this house fifteen years ago, before the rich folks decided that Laurel Canyon was the perfect place to build a fancy house. You'll see, it's not much on the inside."

*Maybe you think so, Kayla thought, walking into the wood-paneled room, But I can sure spot a few things that would get me some good bucks at Mel's Gun and Pawn. She paused to look at a collection of crystal dolphins on a shelf in the hallway. I wouldn't even think of hocking those—they'd*

*probably break when I was carrying 'em out. But the VCR, that looks like it's new, and it's one of the better brands . . . that could be worth something. . . .*

A moment later, she noticed something else: the house was *quiet*. Not just from noise, but from the jangling pressure she'd felt for the last months, the sensation that the world was tightening down on her and making her crazy. Her headache faded as she looked around in surprise. *Totally weird.*

"I'm getting something to drink from the fridge. Would you like anything?"

"A glass of milk would be great," Kayla said, and Elizabeth walked away. Kayla studied one of the -crystal dolphins; it seemed to float in midair, caught forever in a leap out of the water. Only the tip of its tail touched the cut-glass water, the dolphin sculpture delicately balanced on that point.

"Do you like that one?" Elizabeth asked, walking up behind her with two glasses of milk. "I like to think of it as a representation of life, balanced perfectly at a single moment."

Kayla took the offered glass from Elizabeth's hand. "Thanks." She sipped the milk, then looked wistfully in the direction of Elizabeth's kitchen.

"Of course, you must be hungry, child. I probably have some sandwich fixings in the fridge. I'll show you where everything is."

Kayla followed her into the kitchen, and as Elizabeth took out a plate and silverware from the cupboards, she asked, "Why did you say, 'of course'?"

Elizabeth was silent for a moment. "Make yourself whatever you'd like to eat, then we'll sit down and talk."

"Yeah, sure." Kayla decided not to be polite about the fact that she felt like she hadn't eaten in weeks, and made a huge sandwich out of a whole wheat roll and several different kinds of cheeses. She sat down across from Elizabeth at the kitchen table, alternating quick bites of the sandwich with swallows of milk. The older woman watched without speaking as Kayla finished the sandwich. "So, what did you want to talk about?" she asked hesitantly, uncomfortable with Elizabeth's long silence.

"We have a few things to discuss," Elizabeth said thoughtfully. "Like what happened to you earlier this evening."

"You read Officer Cable's report," Kayla -offered. "It has everything in it. Did you want to know about something else?"

Elizabeth lifted her hand; white-gold light flickered over her fingers, glittering in the cold light of the kitchen.

"This is what we have to talk about," Elizabeth said, the light brightening around her hand as she spoke. "This is magic."

## Chapter Three

"I don't want to talk about it," Kayla said. Her eyes darted to the door out of the kitchen; she was certain that Elizabeth couldn't run as fast as she could, especially if Kayla had a head start. Maybe she could get out of this house and away from this crazy woman, make it back to Hollywood before the police could catch up with her.

"You're not going to run anywhere, not in your current condition," the woman said, watching her closely. "I think you nearly killed yourself tonight, and it'll take time to recover from that."

"I didn't . . . how did you know about that?" Kayla demanded.

*:Trust me, child, I know.:*

Kayla stood up quickly, and her chair tilted and clattered to the floor. She backed to the door. "Stop that!" she shouted, her voice very loud in the small kitchen.

"I didn't say anything," Elizabeth said mildly. She glanced at her hands; as if an afterthought, the sparkling lights faded away. *:But you heard me, didn't you?:*

Kayla whirled, looking around the room for the source of the words. This time she was certain of it; Elizabeth's lips hadn't moved. "It's a trick, isn't it?" she said, her hand reaching behind her for the doorknob. "You're playing tricks with your voice."

*:You know I'm not. Why won't you listen to me?:*

"Get out of my head!" Kayla covered her face with her hands, unable to stop the tears and hating herself for crying. "Stop it!"

"I'm sorry, Kayla. I didn't mean to frighten you." Elizabeth's voice was gentle. "But I wanted to prove something to you."

"What's that?" She looked up angrily.

"That you still have a lot to learn."

Carlos breathed deeply of the cool early morning air outside the police station, smiling despite the taint of automobile exhaust and street garbage. "It's good to be out, Manny," he said.

His brother Manuel grinned at him. "I'm glad to see you outside the *carcel*. But it was a little expensive, paying for your three speeding tickets." His grin broadened. "Maybe next time I'll let you stay longer, until you learn to appreciate me more, eh?"

Carlos laughed and swatted cheerfully at Manuel. They walked together to the waiting car, Carlos' customized old Chevrolet. *At least the policia didn't take my car, he thought. That would've been much worse than spending a night in a jail cell next to a madman.*

Ramon was seated at the wheel, and he smiled and nodded respectfully to his eldest brother as Carlos slid into the seat behind him. "Mother will be glad to see you home," Ramon said by way of greeting. "She was very sad to hear that you'd been arrested again."

“Mama is saying that county jail is like your home away from home, Carlos,” Manuel joked.

“Heh, they haven't arrested me for at least a year!”

“Until last night,” Ramon observed from the front seat.

“Ramon doesn't mind, since he could make time with Roberta at the party last night.” Manuel smiled, then his smile faded at the cold look Carlos gave to Ramon.

“Is this true?”

The young man shook his head. “Roberta is your girl, Carlos, and everyone knows that. Maybe someday I'll meet a girl that I like, someone who isn't already in love with my handsome oldest brother.” He grinned. “Maybe she won't even like you! Wouldn't that be a wonderful joke!”

“Heh.” Carlos sat back in the seat, glancing out the window at the city. Ramon was driving carefully, even sedately, probably not wanting any more trouble than they'd already had. Soon they'd be on the 101 Freeway and out of Hollywood, which was good. He would never have admitted it to his brothers, but he had been afraid after being arrested in Hollywood. Outside of Van Nuys and the San Fernando Valley, and away from his own *barrio*, any other city gang boy could've tried to make points by cutting or killing him. That would've started a war, which he didn't want at this point—everything was -going too well for his homeboys, and he didn't want anything that could cause trouble now. -Especially not now, with what he'd heard from the madman in the jail.

“I have some work for you, Manuel,” he said. “There is a young girl I want to find. I only saw her for a few moments, and I don't know where she lives. . . .”

“Isn't Roberta enough for you, Carlos?” Manuel asked. “How many other women do you need?”

Carlos considered hitting his brother, then -decided against it. Manuel would always be a joker, no matter how many times Carlos bruised his fists against him. “This girl is different, Manny. She was at the jail and is staying with a black woman who might be a policewoman. The girl's first name is Kayla, I don't know her family name. The black woman's name is Elizabet Winters. You will find out where she lives today.”

“What, today?” Manuel's voice held surprise and a hint of laughter. “You'll give me one day to find this girl in the entire city of Los Angeles? That's very generous of you, brother!”

“Why do you want this girl so much?” Ramon wanted to know.

Carlos thought about it for a moment, then decided to tell them. They were his brothers, -after all, and there was no one in the world he could trust more than them. “She may be *abruja*, a witch,” he said at last. “At least, that is what a crazy man in jail told me. If we find her, I will be able to know for certain.” He smiled. “If she is a witch, she could be useful to me. To the homeboys. We've had trouble with those *bastardos* from the city, trying to take over the drug selling near our *barrio*. With *abruja*, maybe they would be more afraid of us.”

“I think Carlos just wants another woman, a girl who is *abruja* in bed,” Manuel said. “I can't wait to tell Roberta that she isn't enough for him anymore!”

“Carlos, what if this girl doesn't want you?” Ramon asked.

“What do you mean?” Carlos said, surprised by the question. “She'll come with us, whether she wants to or not. She's just a girl.”

“But that's—”

“That's what? Survival, that's what it is! Ramie, it's us against them, our family against the -T-Men, the *bastardos* that would ruin our business. You know that!”

Ramon glanced at him. “Carlos, I don't like this. You know I've never liked what we're -doing, but this is even worse. It's changing you, changing all of us, making us into . . . into something I don't like.”

“So, what else are you going to do?” Carlos asked. “The money's good, I know you like that. Are you going to work at McDonald's for a handful of dollars a day?”

Ramon shook his head, his eyes on the traffic ahead of them. “I . . . I talked to Luisa this morning. She says they might have work for me at the store. I could do that during the day, go back to school at night. . . .”

“Heh, you couldn't even finish high school!” Carlos laughed.

“I couldn't, because you made me quit! You made me quit and help you sell drugs!” Ramon said angrily.

Carlos glanced at Manuel, who was being very quiet in the seat next to him. He leaned forward, speaking quietly to Ramon. “Ramie, Ramie, I need you. We've built a business, but I can't hold it all alone. Not with those *bastardos* from downtown trying to cut into our territory. Do you forget, Rey's in the hospital because of them? They want our territory, and who knows what they might try next? No, you can't go back to school now, I need you too much. Our family needs you too much.”

“But you know, I want more than this. . . . I want to finish high school, become a lawyer. . . .”

“A lawyer, that's good!” Manuel laughed. “Then you can keep Carlos out of jail when they arrest him for selling rock!”

Carlos gave him a dirty look, then turned back to Ramon. “We'll go find this *bruja*, Ramie. If she's real, if she can do what that crazy man said, then she'll make the difference for us. Then you can do whatever you want, Ramie. You can go back to school, become a lawyer, do anything.”

Ramon didn't answer. Carlos thought about saying something more, trying to find other words to convince his baby brother, then decided against it. Today Ramon was saying that he didn't want to help, but he wouldn't walk away from the *familia*, Carlos knew that. And if Manuel didn't believe him about the *bruja*, that was fine, too. When they found the girl, his brothers would change their minds.

Because he'd seen the magic himself. Oh, he'd heard his mother's stories of *magia* and *tierra del las hadas*, the land of the faerie people, but he'd never believed them.

Until last night, when he'd seen the sparks of witchlight on the girl's hands, blue and bright in the harsh light of the jail cell. And the shirt with the bullet hole in it; he'd felt *something* when he touched it, a strange sensation he couldn't identify. He knew the crazy man's story was true, even if no one else believed it, not even the *policía*.



He would find the girl, the little *bruja*. Even in a city as large as Los Angeles, it was only a matter of time before they found her.

“It’s called magic,” Elizabet said, pouring -another cup of tea. “And you have enough for three, child. More than anyone I’ve ever met, to be honest.”

Kayla yawned again, and glanced at the kitchen clock. *Six A.M. I wonder if this lady ever goes to sleep?* “I don’t believe in magic,” Kayla said stubbornly. It was the third time she’d said that in the last five minutes, and she wasn’t really certain whether she believed it anymore. Especially after what had happened tonight.

“You keep saying that, but the evidence is -before your eyes. You healed the man in the jail cell . . . yes, I could tell that just by looking at him,” she said in response to Kayla’s wide-eyed look. “I expect you healed your hurt friend who was mentioned in the police report, though it seems you didn’t do a complete healing on him, since he’s in the hospital right now.”

“I’m not a healer. I don’t believe in magic,” Kayla repeated, rubbing her eyes.

*:How can you keep saying that, Kayla, when you know it isn't true?:*

“Stop that!” Kayla shouted, furious. “I hate it when you do that!”

Elizabet put her hand over her mouth, and a -moment later Kayla realized why: she was stifling her laughter.

“Don’t laugh at me!” Kayla yelled. “And stop saying things without opening your mouth. It isn’t natural,” she concluded.

“Who’s to say what’s natural and what isn’t?” Elizabet leaned forward across the table. “I -believe everyone has a touch of it, a little magic. But only a very few people ever develop it into anything useful and predictable. And I’ve never met anyone like you before.”

“I’m nothing special,” Kayla said, looking down at her hands. The same hands that had held that weird light . . .

“No. At the moment, I’d call you remarkably dangerous, not special.”

“Dangerous?”

“That man in the cell—you could’ve killed him, if you’d wanted to. Did you want to?” Elizabet was looking at her intently.

Kayla shook her head. “No. If I wanted him to die, I could’ve just let him bleed to death in the store. I just wanted him to let go of me. I don’t . . . I don’t want to kill anybody. Ever.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Elizabet folded her hands on the table, looking down. To Kayla, she looked suddenly nervous, which was very different from the impression she’d given all evening of a tough, self-confident lady. “I’m not quite certain how to say this, Kayla . . . but I want you to consider staying here. As my student.”

“What?” Kayla wasn't certain she'd heard her correctly.

“Oh, I'm sure I can find a foster home for you in this area. The local schools are fairly good, and I can arrange tutoring for you in academic subjects, if you need to make up for lost time. But what I'd like to do is teach you about magic. You're the first person I've met that has the potential to learn magic . . . no, more than just the potential to learn magic. You have the potential to easily surpass me and become someone who could make a major difference in this world, for many people.”

“You're kidding, right?”

“I've never been more serious about anything in my life. You need to learn how to use this magic. Because it's not going to go away, not now that you've used it once. And until you learn how to control it, your magic is incredibly dangerous, to you and everyone around you. -Believe me, it's true. You have to learn to control the magic, not let the magic control you.” Elizabet looked up at the kitchen clock. “My, look at the time. I forget that not everyone is used to working the night shift. We'll talk more about this after you've slept. I'll set you up in the guest bedroom.”

“Okay.” Getting some sleep did sound like a great idea. Maybe all of this would make more sense in the morning . . . or maybe she'd be lucky and it would all turn out to be an awful dream. That would be great, waking up in Suite 230 next to Billy and Liane; they'd all laugh about her weird dream and then go scrounge some breakfast on the street.

She was so tired, she didn't resist when Elizabet tucked her into bed after she'd changed into a granny nightgown that was four sizes too big for her. The bed was warm and soft, much nicer than sleeping on a pile of carpet padding in a drafty -office building. She was asleep a few seconds after Elizabet switched off the bedroom light.

Elizabet Winters walked quietly back to the kitchen and poured herself another cup of tea. *This child isn't quite what I expected in a student*, she thought wryly.

Her grandmother had been her own teacher, -after Elizabet had discovered her odd gifts. Gram, who'd been born only a few years before the end of the Civil War, a wrinkled old woman with a talent for making sure that her grandchildren never suffered from any illness for more than a day. One day she'd been ill with the influenza and *seen* Gram use that magic to help her. From that day onward, she'd learned everything she could from her grandmother.

After Gram had passed away when Elizabet was twenty years old, she'd continued studying on her own. Reading, researching, trying to learn everything she could. But never revealing her talents, no. -Because Gram had warned her about that above all else . . . that even if she could prove that her abilities were real, it was too dangerous to show them to the world. So she'd studied alone, always hoping to find others who understood.

And she'd hoped to find a student someday. Elizabet had watched her nieces and nephews closely, looking for any sign of the family gift. Eventually, she'd decided, one of the children would show the talent, and Elizabet would pass on the learning to a student the same way Gram had taught her.

She'd never dreamed that her student would be a scrawny, underfed, unwashed runaway white girl.

Well, she could live with it. Everything but the girl's ethnic background could be cured with good meals, rest, and a thorough scrubbing. And the fact that the child was white wasn't a problem for her, though Gram would probably have carried on for hours about how *her* lessons were meant for good, solid people of color, people who knew how to -respect an old woman's African wisdom and would use her teachings in the right way.

She hoped Kayla would use her teachings "in the right way." That was the danger. She didn't know how much of the street life had rubbed into the girl; was she a junkie? a whore? a thief or a dealer? Elizabeth would have to find this out, and soon.

*I should get some sleep as well. Tomorrow, I'll see what I can learn from this girl, before I begin to teach her anything.*

Kayla rolled over in bed, pulling the blankets over her head. It was too bright, too early . . .

"I've called the hospital. They'll have visiting hours later this afternoon. Do you want to go see your friend?"

"Uhn," Kayla said incoherently from under the blankets, then sat up slowly, rubbing her eyes at the light streaming in through the open window. "I mean, yes, I'd like to go see Billy." *This lady looks like she's been awake for hours. Doesn't she ever sleep?*

"I washed your clothes for you. They're folded over the chair. There's enough time for you to take a bath, if you'd like."

"Thank you." Kayla climbed out of bed and grabbed the handful of clothing from the chair. She remembered the location of the bathroom from the previous night and smiled at the sight of the large bathtub. *That* was something she'd missed, living in Suite 230—a chance to really get clean. Scrubbing down while standing next to the sink just didn't work that great. She found a bottle of nice-smelling herbal shampoo on the tiled counter and a towel that Elizabeth had left her, and got to the serious work of removing several weeks of built-up grime.

Clean clothes were a nice change, too. She combed her hair, struggling with the tangles, and smiled at her reflection in the mirror. This was a Kayla who looked very different, happy and well-rested and clean, no more smudge marks on her face or tangled and dirty hair.

A couple minutes later, she joined Elizabeth in the kitchen. "Breakfast?" the black woman asked, and Kayla nodded politely.

They ate in silence, until Kayla set down her fork to ask the question that had been bothering her all morning: "How do you do . . . that speaking thing?" she asked, tapping her forehead.

Elizabeth laughed. "I don't really know. My Gram could do it, and one day I was able to do it as well. We'll see if you can learn it, too."

"Sure beats using the telephone," Kayla said around a mouthful of scrambled eggs. "Once you get used to it," she added.

"You have to be discreet about that kind of thing, though," Elizabeth said. "Gram taught me that, telling

me a story about how some folks tried to burn her out of her house in Georgia, back in the thirties. That's the first thing I'd like to teach you, how to help people without them realizing it. So you can stay out of trouble, child."

"I'd—I'd like that," Kayla said hesitantly, and was rewarded by another of Elizabeth's warm smiles.

"Well, we'd better start moving," the woman said, standing up and carrying the dirty plates to the kitchen sink. "We have a lot to do today."

She wasn't kidding about that, as Kayla found out over the next few hours. The first stop was at a shopping mall in West Hollywood, where Elizabeth wielded a credit card like a medieval knight with a sword, buying Kayla a new pair of jeans, several -T-shirts and sweatshirts, underwear and socks, and a new pair of high-top sneakers. The new sneakers squeaked on the linoleum floor as they walked through the mall.

Kayla was uncertain how to react to all of this generosity on Elizabeth's part, but that didn't stop her from looking wistfully at a pair of silver hoop earrings in one window display. She had the plain steel stud earrings that the lady in the shop had used to pierce her ears last year, but she'd never owned another pair of earrings. Elizabeth only laughed, out came the credit card again, and Kayla left the shop with her stud earrings in her pocket and the new silver hoop earrings dangling from her ears.

Their next stop was Cedars Sinai Hospital, only a few blocks away from the shopping mall. Elizabeth parked the convertible in the garage. Kayla followed her into the lobby of the hospital, and stopped just inside the entrance as a wave of dizziness and nausea hit her like a fist. "Elizabeth—" she managed to say, as everything whirled around her. The older woman caught her as she nearly stumbled and helped her to a nearby chair.

"Take a few deep breaths, child," she said quietly.

Kayla buried her face in her hands, afraid she was going to faint. Beyond the dizziness, she thought she could hear voices: someone cursing in Spanish as a pain ripped through her, the wail of a newborn baby, a boy screaming as a doctor set his broken arm, the unending pain of an old man breathing through a respirator.

"I hadn't thought about this," Elizabeth murmured, chafing Kayla's hands with her own. "Just keep breathing and try to push all of that away from you—it's not happening to you, it's someone else's life, someone else's pain."

"I think—" Kayla said, gulping for air and wishing she hadn't eaten anything for breakfast "—I think I'm going to be sick." She pulled away from Elizabeth and ran for the women's bathroom, which fortunately was only twenty feet away.

Elizabeth was waiting for her in the bathroom, standing by the counter, when she emerged again. Kayla accepted the wet paper towel from her and wiped her face, then rinsed her mouth out with water from the sink.

"I think I'm okay now. It was just an awful shock, that's all." Kayla dried her face with -another paper towel. "I want to go see Billy."

The woman at the front desk directed them to Room 416 in the children's ward, where Billy was staying.

Walking through the children's ward was harder than she'd thought it would be, with sudden pain and shock pummeling at her from behind every closed door, striking without warning. She walked stiffly beside Elizabet, tense and wary, waiting for each new assault on her senses.

Elizabet placed her hand on Kayla's shoulder as they walked down the corridor, a warm touch. A wave of calm flowed over her, holding the shrieking pain at bay. Kayla stopped, looking up at Elizabet in surprise.

"It's an old trick," Elizabet said, and then she smiled. "I'll teach it to you sometime."

"I'll hold you to that promise," Kayla said as they stopped in front of Room 416. "Damn," she said without thinking about it.

"What?" Elizabet asked.

"He's asleep. We probably shouldn't wake him up." She pushed through the door anyhow, wanting to see how he looked.

Billy was lying on his back, breathing steadily. An IV needle ran to his left arm, clear fluid dripping into the plastic line. He looked very young, asleep and in a hospital gown, not at all like the tough guy that had taken care of Kayla and Liane for so many weeks.

Even from the door, she could sense the steady beating of his heart, the torn muscle slowly knitting itself back together in his leg. Kayla backed out of the room and closed the door quietly behind her. "He's okay," she said. "I'd like to come back here later, though, when he's awake. And I want to ask the nurses if Liane's been here. I haven't seen her since . . . since what happened last night, and she's probably scared out of her wits."

The nurse, when asked, only shook her head. No one other than Kayla and Elizabet had even called to check on Billy Johnson, except for an officer from the Detective Headquarters Division.

"Liane . . . that's your other friend, who ran away from the foster home with you and Billy?" Elizabet asked. "I think we should call the police to go pick her up, Kayla. It wasn't safe for the three of you, living on the streets together—it's far more dangerous for her, now that she's alone."

"You're right," Kayla admitted, and told her about Suite 230, the abandoned office building where they'd been living. She felt like a traitor, telling Elizabet about their secret hideaway, but just the thought of Liane alone, without Billy to protect her from people like Nick, was terrifying.

*I just hope she's okay. . . .*

Kayla was silent on the drive back to Elizabet's house, thinking about Liane and life on the streets. It had been so easy for her to get used to the idea of living in a house instead of a trashed office building, to hot showers and clean clothes and good food. Sure, they'd survived just fine on their own, but it wasn't anything she wanted to go back to. At least, not now.

Besides, she couldn't go back to what they'd been. She was different now, with this strange magic simmering inside her, twisting her mind with pain and power.

The sun was setting, turning the hills to shadowy outlines, as Elizabet drove into the driveway of her house. In the house, she went to the guest bedroom and sprawled out on the bed. In the other room, she

could hear Elizabeth dialing the telephone, talking to someone about Liane. Elizabeth walked in the bedroom and sat down on the bed next to Kayla, watching her thoughtfully. "Want to talk about it?" she asked at last.

Kayla clenched the blanket in her fingers. "I hate this," she said. "I feel sick all the time, and people keep calling me 'witch' and worse, and I wish it would all go away."

"You know it won't." Elizabeth shook her head. "No, all you can do now is learn how to live with this." She glanced at her watch. "I need to head off to work shortly, Kayla. You're welcome to go through my library while I'm gone, or watch tapes on the VCR. I'd suggest you call it an early night, though; you do still look -exhausted from everything that happened last night. Is there anything you might need?"

"More milk," Kayla said promptly. "I finished -almost all of it this morning."

Elizabeth smiled. "I'd better make a complete shopping run on my way home—you seem to be working hard to clean out my refrigerator."

"I—I can eat less," Kayla said, suddenly alarmed. *I don't want her to send me to Juvie!*

The woman laughed. "No, that's not a problem. I guess I'll see you in the morning, child."

"Good night," Kayla said awkwardly, watching as Elizabeth gathered up her blazer and briefcase and walked out to her car. She stood at the open door for a few minutes after Elizabeth's car disappeared down the hill, then closed the front door and turned back to look at the room. *She must really trust me, to leave me here all alone.*

*If I really wanted to, I could clean this place out before she gets back, be back in Hollywood in another two hours.*

Back in Suite 230, eating canned chili and stolen sodas, just her alone now, unless she could find Liane somehow. No Billy to take care of them, keep the slimeballs like Nick away . . .

*No. I don't want to do that.*

She wandered to the bookshelf and took down an old hardcover book, something about dragons. In the guest bedroom, she made a small nest of pillows and blankets and curled up inside, opening to the first page of the book.

"Carlos, she's leaving. Without the girl."

Carlos sat up and stretched, looking out the car window. The black woman drove past in her convertible, obviously alone. "Good. Go tell the others, Ramon. We're going up to the house."

Kayla looked up from the book, hearing the sound of breaking wood. There was a sudden crash from the hallway; she was off the bed and through the door a half-second later. The first thing she saw was one of the glass dolphins, -lying shattered on the floor. The fact that she was surrounded by a group of young men, all wearing jeans, plaid shirts, and bandannas, registered a split-second later.

“What's going on here?” she asked, and then she saw the switchblade in one man's hand. Kayla couldn't hear anything beyond the pounding of her own blood.

The man holding the knife smiled at her. He was very handsome, Kayla thought as he moved toward her. A dark-haired, dark-eyed Hispanic man, maybe twenty years old, very handsome and completely terrifying. “This is the girl, the *bruja*,” he said to the others, gazing into her eyes.

*Kayla backed up toward the window, into the arms of one of the other young men. She twisted to look at him, the youngest of all of the strange men. He held her by the shoulders, but she could feel the nervousness in him, the tension in his hands.*

“How do you know that she's for real?” one of the other young men asked.

*“I'll prove it to you, Ramie,” the handsome man said, standing very close to Kayla. The knife glittered in his hand; she watched that hand, afraid to breathe. There was a strange small smile on his face. Then he lowered his hand, and Kayla breathed a sigh of relief.*

*The pain hit her an instant later, a shock that took her breath away. She thought she heard someone shout, but she wasn't certain—everything was happening too fast. She saw the man pull the switchblade free, wiping the blood off on his jeans, and then she was falling, the world going white around her, everything blurry and very bright.*

“*Madre de Dios*, Carlos, you didn't have to do that!” someone said from above her.

“She'll heal herself,” the handsome man said, and she could hear the laughter behind his voice. “Or she won't, in which case she doesn't matter to us.”

*Bastard*, she thought, the wooden floor rough against her cheek. The pain was falling on her in waves, each wave higher than the last. Kayla closed her eyes, feeling the warm blood against her skin, and wondered what dying would be like.

Through her closed eyes, she saw the light brightening. Her hands, and then her entire body, now felt like they were on fire, burning from within. She opened her eyes to see all of the men staring at her, at the patterns of blue light that coursed over her body.

She caught at the light in her hands, holding it against her middle, aiming it at the pain. The light poured into the emptiness of the knife wound, drawing out the pain and closing it back up again. A moment later the light was gone, -except for a few bright sparks that flickered over her hands before finally fading away to nothingness.

Everyone was still staring at her.

The man they'd called Carlos knelt beside her. She tried to pull away, but was too weak and -exhausted to move. He lifted her shirt, looking for the knife wound. A moment later he stood up, a satisfied look on his face.

“Ramon, carry her to the car,” he directed. The youngest man nodded, easily lifting her up and moving toward the door. Kayla tried to pull free, struggling weakly. *No, this can't be happening to me!*

Kayla's last glimpse was of the shards of the broken glass dolphin on the floor, as the door closed

behind them.

## Chapter Four

Elizabet turned on the Volkswagen's radio, listening to the light jazz that was playing on KWAV. The traffic wasn't bad at all, as she headed down Laurel Canyon into Hollywood. At 9 A.M. on a weekday morning, it would've been another story, with cars backed up all the way to Van Nuys. But now, it was quiet enough that Elizabet could let her mind drift as she drove down the narrow, winding road.

*Kayla.* She was still uncertain about the girl, very uncertain whether she'd still be at the house when Elizabet returned after work. It wouldn't surprise her to find that the child had left and taken all the valuables she could carry. She hoped the girl had better sense than that; Kayla was a danger to herself and everyone around her right now, with that bright pool of magic simmering inside her. Serious magic, more than Elizabet had ever seen in one person -before, and of course the child had no idea how to use or control it. . . .

Thinking about Kayla's magic, it was several seconds before she noticed the sensation of power in the hills behind her, a magical flare that was suddenly too bright to ignore.

“KAYLA!”

The girl was doing something with her magic, Elizabet couldn't quite tell what. In half a second, she made a snap decision and yanked the steering wheel hard, the Volkswagen skidding in a sharp 180-degree spin. Car horns blared, and she thought she could hear someone shouting at her, as she floored the accelerator and drove at top speed back toward her house.

She could feel the rising levels of power and a sense of desperation. *Something's wrong . . . something's very wrong.* . . . Elizabet hit the brakes as she came up behind a large truck, moving slowly up the road. She wanted to scream in frustration, but instead watched carefully for a break in the traffic on the other side of the road and made a quick -illegal crossover of the double yellow line to get ahead of the truck. But that had wasted valuable seconds, and -already she could feel the magical power fading, dying away. . . .

They shoved her into the back seat of one of their cars. She lay on the seat, trying to catch her breath and pull free from the dizziness that made it impossible for her to think straight, let alone run or fight. To make things worse, her head was pounding again, the same awful headache.

When she could sit up, they were already driving over the top of the crest of Laurel Canyon. In the last moments of fading sunlight, the lights of the San Fernando Valley were flickering into life, like a million bright jewels scattered over the valley and surrounding hills. She leaned her head against the window, wincing every time the car bounced over one of the many potholes in the road.

“Are you all right?” a soft Chicano-accented voice asked, startling her enough that she opened her eyes. “Are you still in pain?”

It was the young man now driving the car. In her dizziness and pain, she hadn't noticed who was in the



vehicle with her. She shook her head, not wanting to answer. The young man spoke again, saying something in Spanish to the man in the front seat next to him. They talked for a few minutes in that musical language, then it was silent in the car again.

They drove down from the last hill, into the flat urban maze of the San Fernando Valley. Kayla thought about leaping out of the car and making a run for it as the Chevy paused at a stop light, then thought better of it. *I don't think I can walk real well right now, let alone outrun these guys. I'll have to wait, find a better opportunity to run like hell. . . .*

*God, why are they doing this? Kidnaping me. I can't believe this nightmare is really happening to me, I can't believe it. . . .*

The young man parked the car in front of an old apartment building, on a quiet street with young children playing among the dead cars and garbage cans. The other man had to pull her from the car; her legs didn't seem to be working right yet, and she would've fallen but for his hands holding her up. Leaning on his arm, she managed to stay on her feet. The two men walked her into the apartment building and up three flights of stairs.

Kayla was certain she was going to die by the time they reached the top of the stairs; her -insides felt like they were on fire, every movement ripping pain through her. The young man unlocked the door of an apartment and helped her walk through.

Inside, the living room was sparsely furnished with an old sofa and kitchen table, rock star posters on the walls, a television on a low table across the room. Someone had left a radio on, playing Spanish pop songs.

Down a short hallway was a bedroom. The men let her fall onto the large bed in the corner of the room. She just lay there for a few minutes amid the rumpled sheets and blankets, remembering what it felt like to breathe without pain. Several minutes later, she felt like she could sit up again without -dying. She still felt awful, but at least it wasn't as bad as it had been.

The young man was standing at the doorway, watching her. *Why did they bring me here, what do they want with me?* She stared at her feet, not speaking, then glanced up at him.

He was still standing there, just looking at her. He wasn't as handsome as the older guy, who was breathtaking in a Hollywood star kind of way, like a twenty-year-old Richard Gere with wavy black hair. *And a real bastard, too.* This younger guy's black hair was very curly, looking like he'd never really succeeded in combing it down. His dark eyes were thoughtful when he spoke. "Rest now, *querida*. Carlos and the others will be here soon."

He started for the door, then stopped. Walking across the room, he unplugged the telephone on the wooden dresser and took it with him, closing the door behind him. Kayla lay back on the bed, thinking: *I don't want to rest. I want to get the hell out of here. . . .* Her eyes closed, and she drifted off to sleep to the sound of the Spanish music playing from the other room.

The Volkswagen's brakes squealed as Elizabet pulled up in the driveway. She was out of the car a split-second later, heading for the front door.

The door was slightly ajar, and Elizabet saw the ripped wood where someone had forced the lock and

felt a chill run through her. Very quietly, she slowly pushed the door open.

She listened, hearing nothing but the faint sound of traffic from down the hill, and stepped into the room. The first thing she saw was the broken glass sculpture on the floor. She skirted it carefully, looking around the living room.

There was no sign of Kayla.

She walked to the open guest bedroom door and saw the pile of pillows and blankets, and the abandoned book. She turned back to the living room and saw the blood on the floor near the window.

Fighting the impulse to panic, Elizabet knelt beside the pool of wet blood. Someone had been badly hurt here, or possibly died; she tried to hold back the terror, forcing herself to concentrate. She held her hands out over the blood staining the wooden floor and closed her eyes.

Another person's emotions flickered through her mind, flashes of pain and terror. Kayla, lying here on the floor, her life bleeding away. Then the bright fire of magic and more terror. Images of faces, a darkly handsome man in his twenties, and being lifted, carried away somewhere.

*She's survived it, Elizabet thought with a wave of relief. Whatever they did to her, she survived it. And then they—whoever “they” are—they took her away.*

She straightened and crossed to the phone, -dialing with shaking hands. “Detective Cable, please.” She waited for an endless several seconds, until she heard the police officer's voice answer on the other end of the connection. “Nichelle, this is Elizabet. Someone's kidnaped Kayla. I don't know exactly what's happened but she's gone. . . .”

*She was standing in a park with Elizabet, in a meadow bright with early morning sunlight and colorfully costumed people. All of the people were strange, wearing glistening metal armor and odd clothing. And there was something else about them, something she knew but couldn't quite remember, about who they were and what they were doing here. It was something important, she knew that, she just couldn't remember exactly what it was. . . .*

*A group of musicians were standing together on the damp grass, playing strange melodies. It was a kind of music she'd never heard before, wild and haunting.*

*Elizabet was with her, which meant that everything was all right, she was supposed to be here.*

*:Of course we're supposed to be here,: Elizabet said silently. :It's what the An Caillach Beara told us, that we needed to be here. That we needed to meet these people at the Whoopie Donuts shop at precisely 7:15 A.M. That if we weren't here, something awful was going to happen to all of Los Angeles. That it might happen anyhow, but if we were here, there was a better chance that it wouldn't.:*

*:Why can't people read the future as something more concrete than a lot of “What ifs?”: Kayla asked. :I mean, you'd think that the ogress would be able to read the future like the Sunday L.A. Times sports page, wouldn't you? I hate all that mystical bullshit.:*

“Shhh, child,” Elizabet said aloud. “They're starting now.”

*Something really strange was happening, that was for sure. She could feel it, the gathering of power like a rising wind, a hurricane building from a -deceptive calm—and the long-haired guy with the flute, he was the center of all of it, silently calling the forces of nature to this spot. She could see it reaching from him, touching all the magic around them and drawing it in, creating something from nothingness, a focus point of simmering magic. . . .*

“Carlos, I don't want her here!”

The loud female voice broke through Kayla's dream, startling her awake. She opened her eyes sleepily to see two people standing in the doorway. One was a young woman with long dark hair and full red lips accented by bright lipstick. Those lips pouted as she looked at Kayla. The other was the handsome guy, Carlos. *The guy who tried to kill me*, she remembered.

The young man spoke in a placating tone, but Kayla could hear the steel underneath it. “Roberta, *querida*, she has to stay somewhere. It's only for a few days, until we find a permanent place for her.”

“But there's no room for her! You have to take her somewhere else. . . .”

They were ignoring her. They were standing right in front of her, arguing, and it was like she wasn't there at all. Kayla's initial terror gave way to anger. “Look, I don't know who you are, but—” she began.

Both the man and the woman continued to -ignore her completely. “Roberta,” Carlos said, “No more arguing about this, please. She stays here for tonight, and that's final. I'll try to find another place for her tomorrow.” The man glanced at Kayla for the first time. “If you're hungry, Luisa is cooking dinner for everyone.”

The two walked away, the woman still trying to argue. Kayla looked out the window, wondering whether she ought to jump. *Better to wait until I can get out of here without risking breaking my neck*, she thought, and realized with a start that she *was* hungry. And her head wasn't hurting anymore, though her gut still ached—a faint reminder of the knife wound. What she did feel was exhausted, with every muscle in her body aching like someone had pounded on her for several hours with a brick. And hungry. Very hungry. The smell of hot food wafted through the open door, enough to make her want to -ignore her fear of these people, and whatever it was that they were going to do with her, enough to brave the world outside the bedroom.

She stood up a little unsteadily, then walked out to the living room, now overflowing with men and women and loud rock music. Most of them were helping themselves to the plates of food laid out on the counter, while a couple of the younger kids sat playing video games in front of the television. She felt like a stranger at a wedding, surrounded by people she didn't know, in a place she didn't want to be. Most of them seemed to be ignoring her, too—maybe she could just go to the door and walk right out of this place? She glanced at the door, where a big man in a plaid shirt and green bandanna, dressed like so many of the other guys, was standing guard. He met her gaze squarely. No, she wasn't going to be able to walk past that guy, at least, not very easily. . . .

*But I'm tough, I can handle this. These guys won't see me cry, that's for sure. I've been in bad situations before, like a couple of those awful foster homes. And I survived on the street just fine; no bastards made me cry then. So now these crazy people have kidnaped me, I don't know why. But I'll survive it. I'll get out of this, they'll see.*

“Are you hungry?” a voice asked from beside her.

She turned to see the young man, the driver who had brought her to this awful place. She looked down at her sneakers and nodded.

“I’ll get you some dinner.” He elbowed his way past a couple of the others and quickly filled a plate with a large burrito and several tamales. Some of the people were looking at her strangely; the young man said something fast in Spanish. Kayla caught the word “brooha” mixed in with other words too fast and foreign to understand.

“Here.” He handed the plate to her. “Do you want a soda? Maybe a beer?” He tilted his head to look at her, and a grin flashed across his face, like a burst of sunlight from behind a cloud. “You *can* talk, can’t you?”

“I can talk,” she said, not looking up at him.

“How old are you, *querida*?”

“Fifteen,” she said, surprised by the question.

“I’m seventeen,” he said. “I didn’t think Carlos’ *bruja* would be so young.”

“What—what’s a brooha?” she asked.

He smiled. “A witch, a magician. Someone who can do what you did tonight.” He shook his head, as though he still couldn’t believe what he’d seen. “I never dreamed that could be possible, until I saw the magic in your hands. Carlos was right, we need you here.” He gestured at her with the glass in his hand. “So, what do you want to drink?”

“Soda’s fine, thanks,” Kayla whispered, glancing at the door. Everyone seemed to be ignoring her—except this kid and the guy at the door; maybe she could take a seat by the door and just slip out when the door guard was getting his dinner or something. It would take her a while to steal some money for bus fare, but eventually she’d be back at Elizabet’s. . . .

“Who’s this, Ramon, your new girlfriend?” a short boy with greased black hair asked.

To Kayla’s surprise, the young man blushed. “No, Carlos found her—she’s the *bruja* he was talking about. Her name is . . .” He stopped and looked at her, smiling a little. “I’m afraid I don’t know your name, *querida*. ”

“Kayla,” she said. “Kayla Smith.”

“Ah. A pretty name, Kayla. I’m Ramon Hernandez. That’s Carlos over there, my brother. Roberta’s his girlfriend, she and her sister Luisa live here, and two of their cousins . . .” He continued on a mind-numbing list of names, rattling off information about everyone in the apartment. She bit into one of the tamales and pretended to listen, keeping an eye on the front door. Maybe later she’d have a chance. . . .

The tamale was hot, spicy, and very oily. Kayla took one bite and decided she wasn’t that hungry after all and set the plate down on the closest table. The young man watched her with an odd expression in his eyes. He seemed about to say something, then turned away to talk in rapid-fire Spanish with one of the other men.

“Roberta, please, I don't want to argue this anymore. . . .”

*Don't those two ever stop?* Kayla wondered, as Carlos and Roberta's argument increased in volume to the point where she could hear it over the other conversation in the room. The two of them were walking toward her. Kayla looked around quickly for a place to hide.

“Just let her stay here a few days, and I promise I'll do anything you want, buy you some new clothes, jewelry, whatever.” They stopped in front of Kayla, who felt all the eyes in the room moving to her.

Roberta gave Kayla a long, hate-filled look, then suddenly smiled. Kayla decided instantly that she didn't like that smile at all.

“I want her earrings,” Roberta said.

Kayla stared at her in shock. She had to be kidding—the earrings were hers, Elizabeth had bought them for her just a few hours ago. It wasn't like they were expensive, or even unusual. And they were *hers*. “Berta, you have lots of jewelry; I buy you more all the time. . . .” Carlos said.

“I want her earrings, Carlos,” the woman -insisted.

Carlos glanced at Kayla. “Take off your earrings, girl,” he said.

Anger overrode the terror that had haunted her since these people had forced their way into Elizabeth's house, stabbed her, and then carried her off like a piece of meat. “Like hell, you bastard!”

The man's hand clamped down painfully on her arm. “Take off the earrings. Now.”

Kayla started to protest and then saw the look in his eyes. It reminded her of the look he'd had at Elizabeth's house, the same tiny smile that had been on his face . . . just before he tried to kill her. It was a smile that said that he was -enjoying this, and whatever was going to happen next.

Her hands shaking, Kayla removed the silver earrings. She held them in her hand for a -moment, then tossed them onto the floor. They rattled on the worn linoleum. “Here, take 'em, they're yours,” she said tightly.

Carlos' eyes narrowed even more dangerously. “Pick them up and give them to Roberta.”

“The little bitch can pick them up herself—”

“Pick them up and give them to Roberta,” he said in a voice like ice.

Kayla knelt and picked up the silver loops, handing them to Roberta. With all the dignity she could muster, she walked down the hall to the bedroom.

She sprawled facedown on the bed, trying not to cry. She couldn't stop the first few tears and angrily wiped them away. *I don't know what's going on here, I don't know what they're going to do with me, but I'll be damned before I let them see me cry!*

“Kayla?”

She rolled over to see Ramon at the doorway. "What do you want? I don't have any more jewelry to give away, sorry . . . how 'bout my sneakers? They're new too, Elizabet just bought them for me. . . ." She saw that he was holding the plate that she'd left on the living room table. "Go away, I'm not hungry."

He sat down at the end of the bed, setting the plate down next to her; Kayla edged back, closer to the wall. "I know it's difficult for you," he said awkwardly. "I know you don't want to be here. But you'll see, it'll get better. You'll be happy here, one of the homegirls. You have to understand, it's hard for Carlos and the rest of us, too. We're not used to anything like this, bringing someone like you here to our *barrio* . . ."

"You mean, you don't go around kidnaping people all the time?"

He smiled. "No, not usually. Though there is a great family tradition of kidnaping our brides . . . of course Carlos is so handsome, he'd never have to do that. The women just fall at his feet, all the time." He looked down at his hands, clenched in his lap, then back up at her with those dark eyes. "We need you, *querida*. We need you to help us with your magic. Carlos should have told you why we need you, then you'd understand. It's a matter of life and death for us: if we lose, they'll kill us all. That's why we brought you here."

"Carlos should have told me this, instead of trying to kill me! He stabbed me, remember? I could've died!" Kayla's gut twisted, remembering. It still ached where the knife wound had been, a dull counterpoint to the exhaustion and secret terrors.

She saw the troubled look in his eyes before he hid it behind a smile. "But you healed yourself, didn't you? Carlos just wanted to prove that you could do it. You're fine now, it didn't do any real harm to you . . ."

"What if he'd been wrong? What if he'd picked the wrong house, stabbed the wrong kid?"

"But that didn't happen." Ramon shook his head. "It all worked out fine."

"Listen, please, I just want to go home, all I want to do is go home . . . can't you let me go?" She felt the tears threatening again, and bit her lip to hold them back. *I just want to be gone, be out of here, go back to Elizabet's. . . .*

"What, you don't want to be here with all of these handsome homeboys? Like me, Ramon, the handsomest of them all?" He brushed back his hair with one hand, giving her his most -appealing look. In spite of herself, Kayla smiled.

"It'll be all right, *querida*, " Ramon said reassuringly. "You'll see, everything will be all right." He picked up the plate of food and held it out to her. Reluctantly, she took it from him. "Eat some dinner, you'll feel better," he said. "Maybe tomorrow Carlos will let me take you out into *mi barrio* , show you our home. And I'll explain why we need you here."

He left the room, and Kayla lay staring at the ceiling for a long time. Her thoughts were moving too fast, racing through her mind, all the words blurring together.

They were going to keep her here, maybe forever. That thought hurt more than everything else. They'd keep her a prisoner here for the rest of her life, if they thought they could get away with it.

She crossed to the door and listened. It was -silent in the hallway beyond. Maybe everyone had left the

apartment, and she could just sneak out, get to a telephone and call Elizabet. . . .

Quietly, she opened the door. A man she didn't recognize was seated on a folding chair by the bedroom door. He watched her silently as she walked to the bathroom. Inside, she checked the window. It was the same situation as the bedroom, no way to climb down and too far to jump. She splashed some cold water on her face and walked past him again into the bedroom.

With the door carefully closed against the watchful eyes of the man in the hallway, she lay down on the bed and wondered how in the hell she was -going to get herself out of this situation.

*I want to go back to Elizabet's, she thought. I want to go home, I want to go home . . .*

*:Kayla, can you hear me? Kayla, child, where are you?:*

She sat upright in bed. "Elizabet?"

*:Where are you? Tell me where you are . . . :*

The words tumbled from her, she didn't care if anyone outside the bedroom could hear. "Elizabet, they've locked me up in an apartment, I'm somewhere in the Valley, please, you have to get me out of here!"

*:Kayla, where are you? Can you hear me?:*

"Yes, I can! Please, Elizabet, they're going to keep me here forever, you have to help me! I can't get out, they won't let me leave, I'm locked in here—"

*:Kayla, can you hear me? Kayla . . . :*

Elizabet's voice was fainter now, moving further away.

"No! Elizabet, I'm here, please, help me! Don't go, don't leave me here! Elizabet!"

*:Kayla, where are you—:*

Elizabet's voice faded to silence, too distant to hear. Kayla curled up on the bed, one fist pressed against her mouth to keep her from sobbing out loud. "Elizabet, please, don't leave me here, please . . ."

The bedroom door opened, her impassive guard looking at her silently before closing the door again. She thought about trying to get past him and -escape, maybe hit him with something and make a break for the door.

*The first step, she thought, is to get organized. Make a plan.* She angrily brushed the tears out of her eyes and began exploring the bedroom, opening every drawer in the dresser to look for anything useful. The top drawer was filled with pretty lingerie, all lace and silk. Beneath that were two drawers with jeans and folded blouses. Nothing useful.

The fourth drawer wasn't much better. It mostly held women's shoes: one pair of fancy heels and a couple pairs of cheap woven leather shoes. The jackpot was inside one of the shoe boxes: no shoes, just a small mirror, several razor blades, and a small bag of white powder. Kayla carefully picked up one of the razor blades, -replacing everything else exactly the way it had been.

*It's not much, but now I have a weapon,* she thought, hiding it under the mattress of the bed. She checked the closet next, riffling through the dresses on plastic hangers and several cardboard boxes. She was hoping to find some extra bedsheets, envisioning herself tying sheets together to climb down from the window like a movie heroine. But the boxes only had some towels and notebooks written in Spanish inside. The sheets that were already on the bed wouldn't get her very far, though maybe if she ripped them into strips and braided a rope out of that . . .

*Tomorrow. I'll do it tomorrow.* She was tired, even after taking the nap earlier. Too tired to deal with anything right now. All of this craziness, and getting hurt, it felt like it had taken something -major out of her. Kayla took the plainest nightgown she could find out of the dresser and changed out of her clothes.

In the bed, she tried to imagine a handsome hero arriving to rescue her—some handsome, blond guy with a flashy smile and lots of dimples. Wasn't that what all fairy-tale heroes were supposed to look like? And a white horse, he needed a white horse. He'd show up below her tower window—in this case, a third story apartment window—and climb up to rescue her. That's the way the stories always worked.

*This time, I think I'll have to rescue myself.*

*I'll do it,* she thought, drifting off to sleep again. *I'm tougher and smarter than they are. I'll figure a way out of this. They won't keep me here forever, no way. . . .*

## Chapter Five

“Carlos, she's wearing one of my nightgowns!”

*Oh God,* Kayla thought, burying her face in the pillows. *It's the Dragon Lady again.* It was too late to pretend to be asleep, and besides, no one could sleep with that lady's shrill voice screaming in their ear. She sat up, pulling the covers more tightly around her.

Roberta was still going on about the *puta* who was wearing her clothes, with Carlos standing there taking it all in. She wondered why he put up with her. Sure, the woman was pretty, but that voice!

“Why are you wearing her nightgown, girl?” Carlos asked mildly, as Roberta paused to inhale between sentences.

“Because I don't have anything of my own!” Kayla said furiously. “And what I've got is covered with blood!” It was true; her jeans, draped over a chair, looked like someone had painted them with blood. *Her* blood.

“Ramon!” Carlos called through the open bedroom door. The younger man appeared a few seconds later. He was wearing a black leather jacket over yet another plaid shirt, which Kayla thought looked rather good on him.

“I want you to take the girl to buy some clothes,” Carlos continued, taking a large wad of money from his pocket and peeling off several bills. “Get her anything she needs. Roberta, we can't let her go out wearing her own clothes now, there's too much blood on them. The *policía* might see her, then there'd be trouble. Let her wear something of yours just for today, all right?”

Roberta gave Kayla a sullen look and said something fast in Spanish. From the expression on her face,



Kayla decided she was glad she didn't understand that particular phrase. Carlos gave her a very sharp look, and Roberta visibly flinched. "She can wear my clothes to go shopping," she said in a flat voice.

Carlos handed Ramon a handful of bills. -Ramon looked at the money, then at his brother. "I don't know, Carlos, she doesn't have any clothes at all, and this isn't very much money. . . ." Ramon gave Kayla a wink. Carlos hesitated, then fished in his pocket for more money. Kayla blinked as Carlos gave Ramon several hundred-dollar bills. "Just try to bring back some change, heh?" Carlos grumbled. "I hope you're worth it, girl," he said, giving a direct look.

"Well, you could just let me leave, then I wouldn't cost you anything at all," she retorted.<T>

He laughed and clapped her on the shoulder. "I think I'll like having you around, after a few weeks of getting used to it," he said, then glanced at Roberta's sour face. "Maybe it'll take longer than a few weeks," he added morosely. Carlos walked -toward the door. "Get dressed now, and Ramon will take you shopping. Make him buy you a hamburger or something, too. He said you didn't eat any dinner last night."

Kayla watched silently as the three left the room. It didn't make any sense. Were Carlos and Ramon trying to be . . . nice? . . . to her? Kidnapers weren't supposed to *benice* to the people they kidnaped. They were supposed to treat them awfully, threatening to kill them, maybe starving them or keeping them tied up. At least, that's the way it was in the movies.

What they *never* did was offer to take you out for shopping and a hamburger.

It just didn't make sense.

She turned to the closet and dresser and thought about which of Roberta's clothes she was going to borrow for the day. The best, she -decided. She found a lovely matching black skirt and blouse, decorated with red ribbons. It looked a little odd with her sneakers, but Roberta's shoes didn't fit her feet—they were too small. She found a hairbrush on the dresser and brushed her hair until it crackled against her fingers.

Ramon was waiting for her in the living room. There was no sign of Carlos or Roberta, which Kayla thought was unfortunate, since she really wanted to see the look on Roberta's face when she saw Kayla wearing her nicest clothes. Two dark-haired young women were in the kitchen, talking to each other in Spanish.

"You look very pretty, *querida*," Ramon said, opening the front door for her.

"Thanks, I guess," she said, as they walked down the stairs. Two of the young men she recognized from last night were waiting for them, leaning against a car. "Don't you guys wear anything but plaid shirts?" she asked.

Ramon laughed and said something in Spanish to the two men. They smiled at her. Kayla smiled back, but wished she knew why they thought what she'd said was funny.

She climbed into the back seat of the car next to Ramon and sat silently as they drove away from the apartment building. She looked out the window, trying to memorize the route in case she had a chance to run away later. A few minutes later, they parked in a lot on Van Nuys Boulevard. The street was already busy, with slow-moving cars driving past the stores and the Van Nuys courthouse and police station.

*The police station!*

Kayla glanced longingly down the street at the large white building, wondering if she ought to take a chance and run for it now. If she could just get close enough to call for help . . .

Ramon took her arm, leading her down the street. The two other guys walked beside them. The taller of the two hitched up his jacket, and Kayla glimpsed a small handgun tucked into the back of his jeans.

“Ramon, he's—”

“Shhh, Kayla, I know.” Ramon glanced around nervously. “Jose is just being careful,” he said. “We've had some trouble here lately; we have to be very careful now.”

They walked past one of those inexpensive haircutting shops, and Kayla saw a glimpse of herself in the store window, the long curly brown hair falling over her shoulders and into her eyes. She caught Ramon's hand. “Can I get a haircut?”

He looked at her curiously. “But your hair is very pretty. Why do you want to cut it?”

“Come on, Carlos gave you lots of bucks. Can't I get a haircut, too?”

She walked into the store, before he could say no, and up to the counter.

“So, what would you like? A trim?” The blond young woman behind the counter looked very bored.

“Shampoo and haircut,” Kayla said, as Ramon and the two guys joined her at the counter. The blonde took her back to the sinks where she scrubbed Kayla's hair with some strange fruit-scented shampoo, then sat her down in one of the barber's chairs.

“How much do you want me to take off?”

Kayla thought about it for a moment. “How 'bout everything?” she asked.

“What?”

“I want it real short. Like, a couple inches in the front, kinda shaved along the sides. All punked out. You know, something really different.”

“Hey, it's your life, sweetheart,” the blonde said, and started cutting. Ramon and their two silent -escorts sat down by the door to wait. Twenty minutes later, after a long one-sided conversation in which the woman talked about her ambition to work as a hairdresser for an undertaker, because the money was good and the clients never complained about her work, the haircut was finished. Kayla looked at herself in the mirror and grinned.

“I don't like it,” Ramon said as he paid the woman and they left the shop. “Too short. A woman should have long hair.”

“Well, *this* one doesn't,” Kayla said, feeling better than she had since this entire awful experience had started. *I look like Annie Lennox now*, she thought with glee. *Except that she's blond. Well, maybe I can try that next.* “How 'bout a pair of leather pants?” she asked Ramon as they walked past a store with mannequins in skintight black and red leather in the window. “It would look great with my haircut.”

“Absolutely not,” Ramon said in a tone that didn't allow room for arguing.

“Oh, you're no fun,” she said, still looking at the clothing in the window. A heavy weight landed on her shoulders, and she saw that -Ramon had draped his black leather jacket over her. “What?”

“For you, *vida mia*, since you want some leather clothes.” As Kayla stared at the jacket in shock, -Ramon turned away quickly and started walking down the street.

Jose said something in Spanish, and the other man laughed. Kayla followed Ramon down the street, wishing the men had spoken in English so she could understand them.

*Then again, maybe I'm better off not knowing what these guys are saying about me. . . .*

She caught up with Ramon in front of a -department store. “Hey, take your jacket back, I don't want it!”

“You don't?” He looked at her, surprised. “But I thought you wanted a leather jacket.”

“Yes, but . . . but I can't accept this from you!” She held it out to him.

“Why not?”

“Because . . .” She found herself blushing, and willed herself to stop. “Because I don't know what you want in exchange for it.”

He stared at her blankly, then grinned. “Oh, I see. No, not to worry . . . you're too young for me. I like older women, like Roberta. The jacket is a gift, nothing more. Like the rest of the clothes we'll buy for you today.” He pointed at a pretty white blouse in the window. “Would you like one of those, Kayla? It would look very nice on you, I think.”

“Yeah, sure,” she said, feeling strangely shy. “Thanks for the jacket, Ramon.”

He smiled, not looking at her. “I'm glad you like it. Come on, we need to buy you some more clothes.”

*All I seem to be doing this week is nearly getting killed and buying clothes,* Kayla thought as she looked through the racks of women's clothes in the store. Jose took up a position by the door, glancing out at the street every few seconds, as Ramon and the other man—Fernando, his name was—took clothes down from the racks and shelves and held them out for Kayla to inspect.

Ramon was weighted down with an armful of clothing by the time they were finished and ready to pay for it all. Kayla stood looking at a display of earrings by the cash register as they waited for the clerk to tally up their purchases. Now she was wearing a pair of new jeans, a skin-tight black shirt sewn with silvery threads, and the leather jacket.

“You should buy some new earrings,” Ramon said, watching her look at the earrings.

Kayla contemplated her reflection in a small mirror. “No, I don't think so.” She picked up two metal safety pins from the shop counter, and fastened them in her ears. “There. That looks better with the leather jacket, I think.”

“Carlos won't like it,” Ramon said definitively.

“Well, that's another great reason to wear them,” Kayla said. “Anything that pisses off Carlos is fine in my book.” Ramon gave her a doubtful look, but didn't argue. “Hey, how 'bout some lunch?” she asked. “I didn't eat any breakfast, y'know. Or any dinner,” she added after a moment.

Ramon gestured to Fernando and said something quickly in Spanish. Fernando nodded, picked up the bags of Kayla's clothing, and headed for the door. “He'll meet us at Fastburger,” Ramon said.

As they walked down the street, Jose walking watchfully ahead of them, Kayla glanced again at where Jose's gun was hidden. “You didn't tell me why Jose is carrying a gun,” she said to Ramon, -quietly enough that none of the other pedestrians could hear them.

“It's because we've had some trouble here lately,” Ramon said after a long pause. “Bad trouble.”

“Is it with the police, or another street gang?”

“How did you know that we're a gang?”

“I figured it out for myself,” she said, a little sarcastically. “The bandannas and identical plaid shirts kinda give it away, you know.

“We don't think of ourselves like that,” Ramon said. “I mean, I'm a homeboy, and this *ismi barrio*. We all hang out together, go to parties and all that, maybe make a little money together, but we're not really a gang. It's those *bastardos* from the city, they're the real gang. The T-Men. They're trying to move in here and sell drugs, take our money away from us.”

“You sell drugs?” Kayla asked.

He shrugged. “They want our neighborhood. They already did this to another gang, the guys that live over by Fulton Street. Killed maybe ten of their guys; the rest are too scared to even go out on the street now. They just got started with us, a few weeks ago. So far, they've hurt one of our guys real bad. Reynaldo is still in the hospital. We got even, Carlos stabbed one of their guys, so now it's a war.”

“Carlos is really good at stabbing people,” Kayla said, rubbing her gut, which still ached a little as she walked. “Did he study how to do that in high school or what?”

“You could make a real difference,” Ramon continued, as if she hadn't spoken. “*Abruja*, a real witch, to use against them . . . maybe you could change them all into frogs or something, eh?”

“If I could, I'd start with your brother,” Kayla said under her breath.

“What did you say?” Ramon wanted to know.

“I doubt I can change anybody into a frog,” Kayla said, a little louder. “I don't think it -exactly works that way. I mean, I don't know how it works, this is all as weird to me as it is to you. I never knew that magic was real until two days ago.”

“I didn't believe in it, until I saw you—” -Ramon grabbed her suddenly by the arm, looking back at the street. Kayla twisted to see what he was looking at; a white Mercedes convertible was driving very slowly along the street, maybe thirty feet away. Inside were four young black men wearing blue sweatshirts and baseball caps, all watching Ramon, Kayla, and Jose.

Ramon pushed Kayla ahead of him. "Walk faster," he said quietly. The white convertible -accelerated past them, one of the guys turning to look back at Kayla and Ramon. The car disappeared around the corner. Ramon spoke quickly to Jose in Spanish; the other man nodded and took off at a run in the -direction of the parking lot.

"Keep walking," Ramon said. "The Fastburger is up ahead, another block or so. Just keep walking."

*This is my best chance, she suddenly realized. Jose and Fernando aren't here, Ramon doesn't have a gun—I think—now it's just the two of us walking along the street . . .* "Ramon, look!" she said, pointing across the street.

"What?" he asked.

Kayla shoved him, hard enough that he fell against a trash can, and took off running. The police station was only two blocks away . . . she could make it, she knew she could make it. . . .

She risked a glance backward to see Ramon staggering to his feet, then starting to run after her. "Kayla!"

She felt like she was flying, her feet barely touching the pavement. Her gut hurt, but she -ignored it, concentrating on running as fast as she could. Another block, only another block . . . she could see the glass doors of the courthouse, the men and women in business suits walking in and out of the building . . . almost there, almost there . . .

A car screamed to a stop on the street next to her. The white convertible.

*Oh, shit!*

Kayla dived for the closest doorway, a bookstore. The startled proprietor stepped back as she ran past him, going straight for the back door. A moment later, she was out in the back alley, looking up and down the narrow street. *Which way to go, which way . . . ?* She could see the street off to her left—another left turn, run across the intersection, and she'd be in front of the police station. Her gut began aching again as she gasped for breath, putting everything she had into running.

The white convertible turned into the alley ahead of her, blocking her path. She stumbled to a stop, looking for another direction to run. She yanked at the back door of the closest store, but it was locked. Before she could run to another door, the young men were out of the car and surrounding her. She tried to dive past them; someone caught her by the arm and spun her around. She fell against the wall, sliding in the garbage and mud. She saw the pistol in one guy's hand, saw him pull back the hammer with his thumb.

*Oh God, he's going to kill me, he's going to—*

Fernando's car screamed to a stop at the end of the alley. Jose was leaning halfway through the window, firing his pistol. The other guys dived for cover, pulling out handguns and shooting wildly. Kayla crouched with her back pressed against the wall as Fernando's car crashed into the front of the Mercedes with a sickening crunch of metal, shoving it backward.

Ramon leaped out of the car, grabbing Kayla by the arm and yanking her back toward Fernando's car. The car's engine shrieked with the strain as Fernando reversed direction, accelerating backwards out of

the alley. Ramon pushed her into the back seat of the moving car, pulling himself in after her. “Go, go!” Ramon shouted, shoving Kayla down and firing his handgun through the open car window. The car skidded backwards into the street, then raced forward in a hard turn, leaving the Mercedes behind in the alley.

At the next intersection, Fernando turned left, driving very fast through the residential streets. Ramon stared out through the back window for several blocks, then turned to Kayla. “Are you all right?”

She nodded, too scared to speak. A hot pain hit her; every nerve in her arm was screaming at her, as the blood dripped down over her fingers. She looked at her own arms in shock; no, it wasn't her, she wasn't hurt at all.

“Jose, *mi hermano!*” Ramon's horrified voice startled her. She looked up to see Jose pressing a handkerchief to his arm. The cloth was already bright with blood, a widening stain of red.

Jose said something in Spanish, his voice weak. His lips were tight, and he was very pale. Kayla fought the impulse to touch him—she knew he must be in incredible pain already, and her touch couldn't help . . . wouldn't help . . .

A blue spark flickered over her palm, then -another. Her hands moved forward as if by themselves, drawn to that pain that she could feel, the pain that was calling out to her. Her hands brushed against Jose's face, his skin cold and damp to her touch. She could feel the magic welling inside her like an irresistible tide, higher and higher . . . she closed her eyes, caught up in something she couldn't understand. Beneath her hands, she could feel the magic coursing into him, flowing down to the source of the pain and washing it away.

She opened her eyes to see Ramon staring at her. His dark eyes were wide with surprise and something she didn't understand. He raised his hand to touch her face. . . .

His hand paused, a fingertip's distance from her cheek, but close enough that she could feel the warmth of it. She felt as though she was within his thoughts, caught up in his astonishment and delight. She couldn't tell her thoughts from his, everything was too close and strange and tinted with the bright glow of the magic.

:¿*Querida, que tipo de magica es eso?*:he asked silently, and she could feel his joy like a tangible thing, singing inside her mind. It was overwhelming, too many thoughts and emotions that weren't hers, catching her up and spinning her around faster and faster until she couldn't think or feel for herself. She felt like she was falling, lost within his mind and the magic.

“Oh my,” she said, and fainted.

Someone was carrying her. That was her first thought. Her second thought was that everything hurt. She shivered, pulling closer to whoever it was who was carrying her.

There were voices above her, speaking quickly in Spanish and English. One loud voice overrode the others. She recognized Carlos' strident tones without even needing to open her eyes. “What happened, Ramon?” he demanded.

Ramon's voice. “I don't know. Jose was hurt and she helped him, and then she fainted—”

“Is she going to die?”

*No, I'm not going to die, I just want to,* Kayla thought, feeling as though every inch of her was on fire. Then she was lying on something soft; she felt someone gently take off her sneakers and leather jacket. She opened her eyes to see Roberta, a concerned look in her dark eyes, pulling a blanket over her. To her annoyance, Kayla saw that Roberta was wearing the silver hoop earrings.

*Bitch,* Kayla thought, and would have said that aloud to her, but for some reason her voice wasn't working quite right. “She's awake,” Roberta said to someone out of her sight.

Carlos' face appeared above her. “What -happened?”

She could feel the intensity of his thoughts, his love for his brother mixed in with terror over their near escape. There was something else, a distant memory of believing that Ramon was -going to die, and the furious frustration of being able to do nothing to stop it. She saw herself through his eyes, a fear of losing something of value, something that he desperately needed. Not a person, but *athing*, something to be guarded and used carefully.

Kayla tried to push it all away, not wanting to know any more, but she could still sense Carlos, the heat of his thoughts only a few feet away. And Roberta, a seething pool of different emotions: love, hatred, fear, and even concern for the girl lying on the bed in front of her.

And beyond both of them, a sensation of a dark pool, a place of warm emotion that lifted her up and sang within the confusion of her mind. She saw herself through Ramon's eyes, a beautiful girl with bright green eyes and the magic coiling and dancing around her hands.

*No, I don't want this,* she thought fuzzily, trying to focus on Ramon's face, which was too blurry for her to see. *I don't want you to care about me, I want to hate you, I just want to get away, run a thousand miles from here.*

*Somebody, please, get me out of here!*

Elizabet blinked, trying to keep her eyes open. She'd been at the police station for too many hours, waiting to hear the lab reports from what they'd found at her house. Too many hours without sleep, ever since she'd come home and found the pool of wet blood on her living room floor. . . .

Searching with the police, they'd found some physical evidence, but there was no way to know anything until the lab reports returned. Searching magically, she had found nothing. Kayla had vanished into the city without a trace.

Something brushed against her thoughts, a distant sense of magic. Then she heard the echo of a young girl's voice, a cry of desperation and pain: “Somebody, please, get me out of here!”

*Kayla!*

She closed her eyes, hoping that no one else in the police station would notice her odd behavior, and cast her mind out in widening circles, searching.

There! She found it almost immediately, the residue of major magic, somewhere in the San Fernando Valley; traces of magic fading away even as she reached out to track it, disappearing into the eddying, drifting thoughts of one million Valley residents. Damn!

“Elizabeth?”

She opened her eyes, startled out of her near-trance. Nichelle Cable was standing by her desk, a folder tucked under her arm. “Are you okay?”

Elizabeth nodded. “Just . . . just very tired. Do you have anything new?”

Nichelle shook her head. “Fibers and prints came up negative, except for that print on the broken dolphin which is, unfortunately, a match to your left thumb. I’m sorry, Elizabeth.”

“Anything new on a connection between the double homicide and this kidnaping?” Elizabeth asked.

“William Kennison III is a nutcase. Long history of mental instability. He was fired from his job earlier that day, apparently went home and loaded his assault rifle, then went hunting for his boss. Couldn’t find the boss, so he went after those people in the convenience store. He doesn’t have any connection to the kidnaping that we can find; he’s just a dead end.” The homicide detective smiled grimly. “At least we got a full confession out of him this morning, so even if your missing kid never turns up, we have this guy nailed down tight.”

“But he has no connection to Kayla’s kidnaping.” Elizabeth clenched her fists in her lap.

“Maybe your kid will turn up on her own,” Nichelle said. “I mean, we don’t have much evidence that this was a kidnaping, except for the fact that there was blood on your living room floor. Maybe the blood was from an accident of some kind, and she called her friends to help her out. Maybe she just went off with friends. If she ends up back on the street, we’ll find her again eventually.”

*I know that Kayla was taken against her will, Nichelle, but if I tell you how I know that, you’ll think I’m insane.* Elizabeth unclenched her fists and said, “Thank you for your help on this, Nichelle. I appreciate it.”

“I’m sorry it turned out this way,” Nichelle said. “I’ll let you know if anything else turns up. Here’s the lab folder, by the way. If any of this gives you ideas, let me know. The rest of us are drawing a blank right now.”

Elizabeth opened the folder and leafed through the printed pages. The blood was Type A Positive, which matched Kayla’s medical records. No sign of the weapon that had caused the wounds; the perpetrators must have taken it with them. Some mud on the floor corresponded to a partial footprint in the flowerbed beside Elizabeth’s front door. Not enough to make any identification, though, or even a guess as to shoe size. Some hairs that were identified as Elizabeth’s.

In short, nothing.

She left the folder on Nichelle’s desk and slowly walked out to her car. There was nothing in that folder that the police could use to track down the kidnapers. If anyone was going to find Kayla, it would be by luck or magic.

*I’ll keep trying, Elizabeth thought. Every time she uses magic, it leaves a trace that I can follow. I’ll*



*keep searching until I find her.*

*She's out there somewhere . . . I know she is. . . .*

An awful thought occurred to her then, chilling her blood: *I can sense her, know what she's doing, that she's out there somewhere . . .*

*What if someone else is tracking her?*

## Chapter Six

“Are you certain of it?” Nataniel asked.

The dark-haired young woman, dressed in a black mini-skirt and silk blouse, who looked to be maybe twenty years old but was closer to two hundred, nodded seriously. “As certain as I can be. There's a new magic in Los Angeles. I felt it two days ago, and again, yesterday afternoon. It's young, strong, and glows like the lights on the Strip.”

“Are you sure it's not one of the local elves?”

“They're all dead or Dreaming, even Prince Terenil. No, this one's human. Not a Bard, but still dangerous. I say we kill it before it becomes a genuine danger to us.”

“You would say that, Shari.” Nataniel turned away from her, looking out of the window at the lights below, at the brightness that turned night into day on the Las Vegas Strip. Even here, in his office on the top floor of the hotel, he could feel the -vibrancy of life from the street below, the heat of human emotions. He savored the taste of it; this was his realm, this high tower and all within it. But it was not enough, it would never be enough. He always wanted more, always. “No. You won't kill it, Shari. You'll track it, report what you find, and then we'll make arrangements to capture it and bring it here.”

“Why?” Sharanya's fine, dark eyebrows drew together in puzzlement.

He kept the hint of irritation out of his voice. “Because it could be useful to us, Shari. Because I want it. Isn't that enough?”

“Of course, my lord.” She bowed elegantly, but not before he saw the anger in her blue eyes. *Have I deprived you of a choice Hunt, my dear? he wondered. Is that what you wanted, to hunt down this human mage and kill it?*

“What of Perenor, the Seelie Lord? If he finds it first, you know he'll kill it.”

A good question. He considered it thoughtfully. “Perenor is not of our Court, but he has been a valuable ally to us. I would dislike seeing our business relationship damaged because of this. Does he know of this new source of magic?”

Shari shrugged. “He's not blind or stupid. This one burns like a flare in the sky. He's probably hunting for it already. He might kill it before we can track it down.”

Nataniel steeped his fingers together. "That would be unfortunate. So . . . we'll recruit him to our side. I have other coin to pay him with, other than a human mage's blood. Do you think he'll be able to track it that quickly?"

She shook her head. "It will take him some time. A human Bard, as you know, is obvious all of the time. This talent, however, seems to come and go. I can only follow the human when it is using magic, which makes finding it a rather difficult proposition."

"Then you'd best get started. You still have time to catch the 2:15 flight to Los Angeles . . . call me tonight with your report." He smiled slightly as he saw her face go pale; flying in a jet aircraft, while not physically dangerous to their kind, was close enough proximity to a great deal of Cold Iron to make for a very uncomfortable trip. From the look on Shari's face, Nataniel could see she knew this was her punishment, but also that she wouldn't dare to defy him on this. *At least, not yet.*

She bowed again and left the office. Nataniel sat back in his leather chair, propping his feet on his desk. This was an unexpected but marvelous opportunity. He'd had a notion for some time about using a human mage for an unusual experiment. A young, untrained mage would be perfect. It was not that he needed any more magical power . . . after all, he was already the most talented mage he knew, short of that drunken and Dreaming wreck of a Prince, Terenil, in Los Angeles. He suspected that he could take even Lord Perenor in a fight, though that opportunity had never presented itself. But eventually, when Perenor was no longer useful to him . . .

You could never have too much, that was Nataniel's philosophy. True, he was the Prince of this Unseelie Court, as well as a very rich owner of some of the best businesses and property in Las Vegas. Not to mention a powerful mage and skilled swordsman, with more human money and political influence than he could spend. But you could -always want more. Always.

*She was standing on a grassy hillside, seeing the stars above, the moonlight shining down upon her. Someone stood beside her, a guy with long dark hair and wild eyes. To her eyes, he glowed like a torch, bright with life and power. Around them swirled the creatures of night, living shadows that flickered and laughed silently. She held back a scream, feeling their hatred and their hunger. They wanted her, and the guy, in a way that chilled her blood. It took everything she had just to stand there, when she could feel them drifting closer and closer to her, reaching out to rip her apart . . .*

She opened her eyes, sweating and shaking. It was too warm in the apartment, even though all she was wearing was a nightgown and sleeping under a single sheet. She remembered Roberta helping her change into the nightgown, after . . . after . . . She remembered Ramon carrying her up the stairs, and Roberta . . . Roberta sitting next to her. Vague -images flitted through her mind: a damp washcloth on her sweating face, Roberta rinsing the washcloth in a bowl of water. The taste of warm soup in her mouth, as Roberta held another spoonful to Kayla's lips, urging her to eat.

And the nightmares: dreams of awful shadowy winged monsters that chased her through a deserted city, a man with cold blue eyes who walked toward her with a glittering sword—a sword?—in his hands and raised the weapon to strike . . .

*Maybe I've been a little sick,* she thought, looking around the room. Someone had left a carved wooden cross on the table next to the bed, and there was an old black telephone next to it.

*A telephone!*

Kayla sat up too quickly; everything whirled around her, too bright and too fast. She fell back, closing her eyes and hoping that she wasn't going to throw up.

After a few seconds, she tried sitting up again, this time very slowly. She picked up the phone receiver and dialed 411 for Information.

“What city, please?”

“I'd like a home phone number,” she said to the operator. “Elizabeth Winters . . . she lives on Laurel Canyon, it's either Hollywood or maybe Van Nuys, I don't know. . . .”

“Please hold for the number.”

“Yeah, thanks.” Kayla listened to the mechanical voice reciting the phone number and repeated it to herself over and over as she dialed. *Come on, Elizabeth, answer the phone, answer the . . .*

“Hello?”

Kayla wanted to cry with relief. “Oh God, Elizabeth, it's me, please, you have to help me . . .”

“Kayla!” Elizabeth's voice was sharp. “Tell me where you are. The street address, if you have it.”

“I don't know, I'm somewhere in Van Nuys, an apartment building, maybe a couple miles from the courthouse. Wait, they wrote the phone number on the phone—it's area code eight-one-eight, seven-six-one . . .”

A hand reached past her and pulled the plastic plug from the telephone, breaking the connection. Kayla looked up with a sick feeling in her stomach. It was one of the nameless guys in plaid shirts. He took the phone receiver from her nerveless hand and left the room with the telephone under his arm.

Kayla lay back on the bed, hot tears of frustration stinging at her eyes. She had to get out of here, somehow. Somehow . . .

\* \* \*

She awakened again to darkness and the smell of smoke. A few feet away, she saw the glow of a burning cigarette, just bright enough to illuminate Carlos' face. He was sitting on a folding chair and watching her.

She stared back at him as he slowly bent to crush the cigarette in a metal ashtray on the floor. “Are you well, girl?” he asked.

Kayla's throat was too dry; her voice squeaked on her reply. “I'm okay.”

He shook his head. “You were very sick, and no one knew why. Do you know why you were sick?”

“I—I don't know.”

“Mmmm.” He gazed at her. “Why did you heal Jose?” he asked suddenly.

Kayla pulled the sheet tighter over her. "He was hurt. I didn't want to see him hurting."

"But he's one of us. One of the people who are making you stay here."

Kayla shook her head. "He was in pain. I couldn't help but feel it. So I had to—had to—"

"Good." Carlos smiled. "So you have to heal someone in pain, whether or not you like them? That's good." He stood up and walked to the door. "Get well, *littlebruja*," he said, his hand on the doorknob. "Already we need your help. Ramon was hurt last night in a fight. He's out in the living room right now."

"Ramon? But—"

Carlos smiled at her, a flash of whiteness in the darkened room, and closed the bedroom door -behind him. Kayla sat quietly for a long moment, then got out of the bed. Her legs wobbled slightly, and she grabbed the night table for support.

When her legs steadied, she began searching the room for something to wear. After a few minutes, she found the bag of clothes that -Ramon had bought for her, lying on the floor near the foot of the bed. She dressed quickly in a pair of jeans and the white blouse, then left the bedroom.

In the living room, she saw Carlos and Ramon sitting on the couch, talking in Spanish. Ramon looked up as she walked into the room and smiled. "Good morning, *querida*."

"Carlos said you were hurt," she said. "What -happened?"

Ramon shrugged. "I didn't move fast enough, so one of those city boys cut my shoulder with a knife. It's nothing."

"Take off your shirt and I'll see what I can do about it," she said.

Carlos stood up and walked to the door. "I have to meet Roberta at the pharmacy," he said with an odd little smile. "I will call you later, Ramon."

Kayla helped Ramon remove his long-sleeved shirt, and winced at the sight of the long cut across his shoulder. She went to the bathroom to search for anything she could use, and returned a moment later with a plastic bottle and several washcloths in her hands.

"It's nothing, *querida*, only a scratch . . ."

"Hold still, this won't hurt," she said, tilting the bottle of medicinal alcohol to dampen the wadded washcloth. She put the cap back on the bottle and set it to one side, looking thoughtfully at Ramon's shoulder. Ramon watched her with a look of trepidation in his eyes, especially as she put on her best "soap opera physician" look and said, "Don't worry, I know what I'm doing."

She wiped his bared shoulder, and the long, shallow cut, with the wet washcloth. It really wasn't a bad cut, but it needed to be tended properly. . . .

"*Madre de Dios!*" Ramon leaped up, knocking her and the bottle of alcohol onto the floor. "That hurts!"

"Don't do that, you'll just make it worse!" Kayla protested as he grabbed his shirt off the back of the

couch and rubbed his shoulder with it.

“But it hurts!”

“Okay, I'll just wash it with soap and water,” she said. She walked a little unsteadily to the sink and squeezed some dishwashing soap onto a washcloth, wetting it under the faucet.

“Are you okay, *querida* ?” Ramon asked, a -concerned look in his eyes.

“Just a little dizzy.” She leaned against the sink for a couple seconds, until her head cleared. “I've only been out of bed for less than ten minutes, so I'm doing okay, I guess.”

“You were very sick,” Ramon observed, as she walked back with the wet washcloth. “I wanted to take you to the hospital, but Carlos said that we couldn't. I'm glad you're okay now.”

She carefully dabbed at the wound with the corner of the soapy towel, then wiped it dry with another cloth. “There. It's clean now. I'll see if I can do anything more for it. . . .”

She had never *called* the magic to her before—it had always happened on its own, never by her will. She thought about how to do that now, imagining the hot fire running over her hands, the bright blue sparks dancing.

Nothing happened.

She concentrated then, focusing on the cut on Ramon's muscular shoulder, marring his tanned skin. She could feel it, the dull ache of pain, and reached to it. . . .

Everything went white for a long moment, and she felt like she was falling, falling . . .

She blinked, looking up into Ramon's eyes. He was holding her . . . how had she ended up half-sprawled across his lap? She blinked again.

“Are you okay?” Ramon asked, concerned. “I saw the magic fire in your hands, then it faded away and you fainted.”

“I feel awful,” Kayla said from her awkward position in his lap.

“Maybe it's the magic? Maybe that's what happened, the magic is making you sick?”

“Let me up,” Kayla said, trying to sit up and falling back onto his lap. She was acutely aware of his bare arms holding her. All she was wearing was a light cotton blouse and jeans, but it suddenly was too warm in the small living room.

“Rest for a moment, *querida*, until the sickness passes,” he said gently.

“I'm okay, really!” She gave up trying to sit up; he wouldn't let her, so she just let herself lie back against him. “Ramon, I never—” she began awkwardly, then started again. “Listen, you saved my life, back there in the alley. I just wanted to say thank you for that.”

“You're welcome,” he said gravely, then grinned. “Though I have to admit, I was thinking more of how Carlos was going to kill me when I came home, if anything had happened to you. I'm glad you weren't

hurt.”

“Yeah, me too.” She shifted slightly, so she could look at him better. He was very handsome, she -decided, though not as handsome as Carlos. Then again, he wasn't a bastard like Carlos, either. There was a funny little scar on his cheek, an old cut mark. Impulsively, she leaned forward and kissed him there.

Ramon jerked back as if he'd been burned. “Kayla!”

She laughed at the shocked expression on his face. “Ramon, I was just saying thank you,” she said. “I mean, if I really wanted to kiss you, I'd do this . . .” She leaned forward again, kissing him on the mouth.

His arms suddenly tightened around her, pulling her closer against him. Then he pushed her away abruptly. “No, it's too soon, we can't . . . *Madre de Dios* , this isn't fair!” he wailed, looking upward.

Kayla caught his hand with hers, holding it against her cheek. “Why not?” she asked.

“Because . . . because . . .”

The sound of running footsteps on the stairs -outside the apartment made them both look up. Carlos burst back into the room, the apartment door banging loudly against the wall.

Carlos asked something in Spanish, and Ramon looked quickly from Kayla to his brother, his eyes wild. He answered in Spanish and pulled his hand free from Kayla's. They spoke in rapid-fire Spanish for another few seconds, then Ramon turned to her and spoke quietly. “Kayla, Carlos wants to know . . . are you a virgin?”

“What?” She felt herself blushing. “What does he care?” *And why does he want to know?* Sudden fear tightened around her throat. *My God, what's he planning to do?*

“He says it's important. Are you a virgin?”

Kayla bit her lip, looking down at her bare feet, and decided that maybe truth was the best answer right now. *I hope.* “Well . . . yes.”

Carlos said something in Spanish to Ramon, who stood up and replied angrily in the same language. For a moment, Kayla thought Ramon was about to punch Carlos. Then he sat back down again, his hands clenched into fists.

Carlos gave Kayla a stern look. “Listen to me, girl,” he said in tones like ice. “I was talking with my grandmother. She said that in the legends, sex and magic are very closely linked. If you really are a virgin, we're going to make sure that you stay that way. I will make sure there are always two people with you, to protect you and your . . .”

Carlos looked away briefly, and Kayla thought she saw him flush slightly with embarrassment. “Jose is married, he would be good for this,” Carlos continued, picking up the telephone receiver. He dialed the phone and spoke into it in Spanish. Every few seconds, his eyes flickered to Ramon, who was now seated stiffly on the couch, as far away from Kayla as he could be.

*Damn,* Kayla thought. *Damn, damn, damn . . .*

*That evening, Kayla sat at the edge of a circle of chattering women in the living room of Roberta's apartment, feeling about as miserable as she could. No one seemed to speak anything but Spanish, and while she was learning to pick out a few words here and there, she didn't understand most of what was being said. She knew they were talking about one of the women's little baby, though, just by the way everyone kept pointing and gesturing at the kid. The baby was cute, a little round-faced kid with tufts of black hair who made all these funny cooing and giggling noises. She would've enjoyed playing with the kid, but the women had given her cold looks when she tried to get closer to the baby.*

*Ramon had left the apartment, a few minutes -after that awful scene with Carlos. Carlos had waited until Jose and another equally silent young man had shown up, then left as well. Jose and the other guy had sat around reading the newspaper and talking between themselves in Spanish, while Kayla sat in the bedroom, slowly going stir-crazy. Then Roberta and all of these women had shown up, filling the apartment with loud conversation and the smell of spicy hot chocolate. At least that had been good . . . thinking about it, Kayla went to the kitchen to refill her mug with the rich chocolate drink. And Jose had left after a few minutes, probably figuring that Kayla would be safe, surrounded by all of those older women and one sullen-faced young man sitting near the front door.*

*In the kitchen, Roberta and another girl were talking in Spanish. Kayla slipped past them to -ladle more chocolate into her mug. As she left the kitchen, she saw Roberta say something to the other girl, who laughed.*

*The hell with you,* Kayla thought. She sat down in her chair and leaned against the window, looking out. She could see the mountains in the distance, dusted with a light cap of snow. In the street below, some kids were playing with a football, tossing it back and forth.

“Kayla?”

She looked up as Roberta sat down next to her. “What do you want?” she asked.

“I wanted to give these back to you.” Her hand closed over Kayla's, dropping something into her palm. Kayla looked down to see her -silver earrings lying in her hand. “I'm sorry I was so angry. I thought you were Carlos' new girl, and I was very jealous. He explained everything to me, and I wanted to say something to you, but then you were so sick . . .”

“Th-thanks.” Kayla's fingers reached up to -unfasten the safety pins in her ears and replaced them with the silver rings. “Thanks a lot.”

“Why are you sitting here by yourself<W1%30><|><D%0>?” Roberta asked. “Don't you want to talk with anyone?”

Kayla shrugged. “I can't speak Spanish.”

A quick smile brightened Roberta's face, and for the first time, Kayla understood why Carlos might find this girl attractive. “And they don't speak any English. Well, there's someone here that doesn't speak any language yet at all. . . .” She gestured for one of the women to give her the baby, which she placed in Kayla's arms. “Do you like babies? I saw you looking at her earlier. Her name is Juanita, and she's two months old.”

Kayla gingerly held the baby in her arms. Juanita giggled and drooled on Kayla's shirt. “She's really

cute,” Kayla said, looking into the baby's large brown eyes. Those eyes looked back at her very solemnly, then her mouth curved into a big, toothless grin.

“She likes you,” Roberta said, smiling.

A shrill voice shouted in angry Spanish from across the room. Kayla looked up as the baby's mother hurried towards her. Roberta intercepted her, talking quickly in Spanish, with occasional glances and gestures at Kayla and the baby.

“What is she saying?” Kayla asked.

“She doesn't know who you are, so she doesn't want you holding the baby. I'm telling her that you're a *bruja*, and that you healed Jose's -gunshot wound. She doesn't believe me.”

More of the women joined into the argument, voices clamoring loudly in Spanish. Kayla shrank back in her chair, holding the baby close against her, as the argument became more and more heated. Roberta was able to yell louder than any of them, Kayla noticed.

As the argument continued, Kayla decided to play with the baby and pretend to ignore it all. Juanita had a good grip, she discovered, as the baby clutched at her fingers. Though she was best at drooling . . . *probably because she doesn't have any teeth yet*, Kayla thought.

“I'll take the baby now,” Roberta said, and Kayla realized that all the arguing had stopped, and that everyone was looking at her now, some with curiosity, others with distrust.

“Okay,” she said, lifting the baby into Roberta's arms. “She's a great kid.”

“She's my cousin,” Roberta said fondly, rubbing her finger against the baby's cheek. “You need to do some magic now,” she added.

“What?”

“I said that you'd show them some magic, show them how you healed Jose, so they'd see that I wasn't lying. You have to do magic now.”

“Roberta, I don't know if I can—”

“Just try, okay?”

It was getting easier, she realized, as she called the fire to her hands. There was no dizziness or headaches, only the sheer joy of it, feeling the tendrils of power weave around her fingertips. The blue light was very bright in the small living room. She let it die away a couple of seconds later.

There was a stunned silence in the room, then all of the women began talking at once. One of them, a quiet girl with long dark hair, hesitantly touched Kayla's hands, as if expecting them to burn her. -Another woman placed her hand on Kayla's chin and tilted her face upward, studying her eyes . . . for something? Kayla didn't know. Juanita's mother took her baby from Roberta and gave her back to Kayla to hold. Then she gestured for Kayla to sit next to her, in the circle of folding chairs. Kayla smiled and joined her there, listening to the musical flow of Spanish around her as Juanita did her best to eat Kayla's shirt.

One of the women addressed her directly in Spanish; Kayla smiled and shook her head. The woman



called to Roberta, who sat down next to them. “She wants to know if you can help her husband, the way you helped Jose,” Roberta translated for Kayla.

“What’s wrong with her husband?” Kayla asked.

“Cancer. He came home from the hospital three days ago, after another surgery. They don’t think he’s going to live much longer.”

“I don’t know,” Kayla said. “I mean, this is as new to me as all of you guys. A few days ago, I couldn’t do any of this at all. Maybe I can do it, maybe I can’t. I still have to learn how to do this. I just don’t know.”

Roberta spoke with the woman in Spanish, then in English to Kayla. “She says that any help would be good. She says that you’re still young, maybe you can learn quickly.”

“Maybe.” The naked hope in the woman’s face frightened Kayla, hurting her as much as someone’s physical pain. She looked down at the baby in her arms, not knowing what to say.

The telephone rang, a shrill sound from the kitchen. Roberta rose to answer it. A few seconds later, Roberta spoke quickly in Spanish to the young man at the door, who nodded and ran out of the apartment a moment later. Roberta spoke to Kayla in English. “Quickly, put your shoes on, we must go.”

“What’s going on?”

“Some of the boys have been hurt. Hurry, hurry!”

Kayla gave Juanita back to her mother and ran to the bedroom, pulling on her tennis shoes and grabbing her leather jacket. Roberta ran with her down to the street, where the young homeboy was already waiting with the car, engine running. “Come on, come on!” he urged them as they piled into the car.

“Who was hurt?” Kayla asked Roberta.

“I don’t know!” Roberta’s hands twisted in her lap. “Carlos didn’t say who, just that some of them had been hurt. I don’t know, I don’t know. . . .”

## Chapter Seven

The car pulled up in front of a row of warehouses, in an older, industrial area of Van Nuys. The street was deserted, dimly lit by distant streetlights, the shadows hiding everything but the outline of large buildings. The driver motioned at them to stay in the car and moved carefully toward one of the warehouse doors, drawing an automatic pistol from beneath his jacket. He glanced inside, then waved to them to join him.

Roberta was out of the car a split-second later, running to the door. Kayla followed her and stopped short at the entrance to the warehouse.

It was like a vision of hell. There was blood everywhere, unmoving bodies lying on the floor and across the wooden boxes, some wearing the bright blue of the black city boys, others in the plaid and

bandannas of the homeboys. Several homeboys moved among the dead and wounded. Carlos was on the other side of the warehouse, holding Roberta in his arms and speaking quietly to her. She didn't see Ramon among the wounded or dying, and a wave of relief went through her.

She stared at the carnage, and suddenly the smell of it hit her as hard as physical pain; she clutched at the doorpost for support, mentally trying to shove all that terror and agony away from her. It flooded down on her mind, threatening to crush her beneath the pain.

She held it back, fought to overcome it. As the pain receded enough for her to move, she went without thinking to the closest wounded young man. She recognized Fernando, lying sprawled across a wooden crate, blood trickling down from his mouth and chest. She placed her hands on his face, his blood wet and warm against her fingers, and called the magic to her.

She felt a fierce joy, feeling the power coursing through her, sliding down into Fernando's pain. She found the source of it, the bullet lodged in his lung, and drew it out with her thoughts, sealing up the wound behind it. She could feel the life returning to him, as the pain faded away from within her mind, to be replaced by dizziness and exhaustion.

Kayla paused long enough to catch her breath and forced herself to move to the next man, who was curled on the floor, clutching his leg and whimpering in pain. A bullet had shattered his leg, leaving white fragments of bone sticking out through the shredded denim of his blood-soaked jeans. He nodded weakly at her as she touched him, forcing the pain away from his mind. She coaxed the bone back into place, forcing the broken pieces to knit back together again.

Exhaustion burned through her mind and body when she was done, dragging her down into the shadows. She knelt by another man, -lying facedown on the floor, and carefully turned him over. It was Jose, a look of shocked horror on his face.

She stared at him, trying to touch him with her magic and finding . . . nothing. Only a dark emptiness, a nothingness where he had been. She bit her lip, unable to keep the tears from her eyes.

“Why aren't you helping him?” She turned to see Carlos standing close behind her. He was pale and shaking, a crying Roberta clinging to his arm. “Help him, *bruja* !”

“I can't. He's dead.”

“Heal him!” His face was streaked with tears as he shouted at her. “You little bitch, help him!”

“There's nothing there, he's gone, there's nothing left to help!”

Roberta tugged Carlos away from Jose's body, whispering something in Spanish to him. Kayla quickly turned to another wounded guy, a kid that looked younger than herself, one of the black boys. His eyes were wild with pain, but he smiled. “Hey, pretty lady,” he whispered.

“You'll be all right,” she whispered back. She saw where he'd been shot, one gaping wound in his chest, another in his shoulder. It was bad, but she knew she could heal him, it wasn't any worse than Fernando with the bullet in his lung. She set her hands, shaking with exhaustion, on his chest, and began to concentrate . . .

Someone grabbed her arm and yanked her up, just as she felt the first stirrings of the magic beginning within her. “No, not that one!” Carlos said roughly. His eyes burned with anger. “He's not one of ours.”

“I don't give a shit! He's hurt, I can help him!”

“You'll heal Miguel next, *bruja* !”

Kayla pulled her arm free of his grasp. “Like hell, you bastard!”

The force of his hand slapping her across the face knocked her to the floor. Stunned, she landed close to the hurt black kid, nearly on top of him.

The boy looked at her with pain-filled eyes as she wiped the blood from her mouth. “S'alright, pretty lady . . .” he whispered. The glow of his body, the sensation that he was alive and close to her, faded away a moment later. His eyes were still staring at her, but they were empty, no longer seeing her or anything else.

Kayla stared at the boy's lifeless body; she sobbed and turned on Carlos. “Damn you!” she screamed. “I could've saved him!” Her hand brushed against something cold, metallic: a semi-automatic pistol -lying next to the boy's body. She grabbed it and brought it up, aiming it at Carlos.

He stood very still, watching her.

She blinked back tears, trying to hold the pistol steady. Carlos didn't move. Kayla could see Roberta's horrified face beyond Carlos; one of the homeboys drawing a pistol, but hesitating, not certain whether to shoot her or not.

“So, are you going to kill me?” Carlos asked calmly, as if he was asking the time of day.

Her hands were shaking; she couldn't stop it. She thought about pulling the trigger, sending a bullet ripping through Carlos' chest, through his lungs or heart, shattering everything in its path. She saw him lying on the floor with the blood trickling from his mouth as he died. Another dead body, no life singing in it, nothing that she could touch. And it would be because of her, because she had done it to him.

Her finger tightened on the trigger.

And stopped.

She couldn't do it. She couldn't kill him.

She stood there, shaking, as Carlos moved -toward her. With a muttered curse, he took the gun out of her hand. He shoved it under his belt and hauled her to her feet. She was barely able to walk; he manhandled her across the floor and dropped her next to another wounded homeboy. Blinded with tears, she felt the magic reaching out to the guy, drawn to his pain. When she was finished healing him, Carlos shoved her to another fallen body, to heal -another wounded kid.

And another. And another.

It turned into an endless blur of pain. She was caught up in the magic, unable to stop or break free. Agony and exhaustion and terror pulled her down, and she felt as though her own life was draining out with each healing, leaving her unable to move or think. Through the haze of pain, she felt Carlos lifting her again, setting her down next to another hurt homeboy. Then the magic took her again, sending her into -another wave of pain as she healed again and again.

She lay on the floor, not aware of anything but the sensation of the cold concrete against her face, trying to keep breathing. It was more and more difficult, just breathing in and out. She could still feel the magic in her hands, but it was sputtering and dying, fading away. She felt her heart falter once, skipping a beat, and then another. Everything hurt, more pain than she had ever dreamed could exist, and all she wanted to do was let go of it all, slide down -beneath the shadows lurking around her. But there was someone else lying on the floor next to her, a young man. She couldn't remember his name, but he'd been one of her guards at Roberta's apartment. He'd been shot in the shoulder and was moaning quietly with the pain.

She reached out to help him, and someone grabbed her by the shoulders, pulling her away from him. Someone was arguing over her, loud voices in Spanish. She recognized the voices but couldn't remember who they were. She was so tired, so very tired. . . .

“Her hands are so cold. Sit up,*querida*, open your eyes.” She recognized Ramon's voice, and the sensation of him being close to her, the warmth of his thoughts around her. She reached for him like a dying person for water, somehow drawing on his strength in her desperation. She could feel her own heartbeat steadying, growing stronger with every second, and the electric sensation of power moving through her, wiping the exhaustion and dizziness away. Then she felt Ramon's arms sliding away from her, followed by a loud thump a moment later, a sound like a body hitting the floor.

She lay there for a moment, still just a little dizzy, then her head cleared suddenly and she opened her eyes.

Ramon was sprawled on the floor next to her, unconscious. She held his hand and tried to figure out what had happened.

“What did you do to him?”

It was Carlos, glaring down at her. “Nothing,” she said, glaring back at him. “I don't know what happened. He just passed out.”

Carlos crouched down beside his brother, touching Ramon's forehead and calling to him in Spanish. “He isn't waking up,” he said to Kayla, giving her another accusatory look.

“Look, I don't know why he passed out! But there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with him, he's just tired. I don't understand it, okay?” *He passed out, and I feel fine—no, I feel better than fine. I feel like I'm not totally exhausted for the first time in days. . . .*

“Carlos,*la policia!*” One of the other homeboys came running in through the warehouse door. “A patrol car just went by on Oxnard Street! I don't know if they're coming back here or not.”

“Don't panic, Luis. Tell the others that we have to leave now.” Carlos turned back to Kayla. “You'll heal Manuel as soon as we're out of here. Walk with me now to the car.” He lifted Ramon gently in his arms and started for the doorway.

Carlos set Ramon down on the back seat. -Ramon was a little pale, but otherwise looked to be fine. His heartbeat was strong; Carlos couldn't understand why he had fainted, but it probably had something to do with the *bruja*'s magic. The *bruja* herself, sitting next to Ramon, really looked awful, her face completely bloodless and soaked in sweat, but he assumed that her own magic would take care of her,

as it had before. If it didn't, that was unfortunate. None of them knew anything about sorceresses or magic, so she was on her own.

He called Luis and Juan to join him at the car. They were lucky that this warehouse was so far away from anything but a few other businesses, there was no one here to call *thepolicia*. There wasn't much else here; the reason they'd come here earlier in the evening was to move all of the supplies to another location. Luis worked at this place during the day and had found good places to hide the small crates of their drugs, the weed and crack that the homeboys used and sold in the *barrio*. When Luis said that a T-Men boy had followed him to work, Carlos had decided to move everything to another location. Which was why all the homeboys were in this place at one time, when the T-Men had shown up with their assault rifles and Uzis.

It wasn't as bad as it could have been. Jose was dead, but he was the only one. Manuel's shoulder was still bleeding, the *bruja* hadn't managed to do anything for him yet, but his brother was up and walking around, so it couldn't be too bad. It was Jose's death that made Carlos want to cry inside, but there were four dead T-Men lying on the floor, which made him feel a little better.

There would be more dead T-Men because of this, he knew. As soon as his people were ready for it, they'd go into the city and make them pay. The bastards would pay for Jose's death, for the fact that Carlos had to leave Jose lying there on the concrete like a dead dog, for *thepolicia* to find. They'd pay.

Sharanya sat quietly on the balcony of Nataniel's Santa Monica townhouse, listening to Lord Perenor's speech about the dangers of -human magic and trying not to look too bored. *This is so tedious*, she thought. *Are all High Court Seelie elves like this idiot, unable to get to the point in less than twenty minutes of conversation?*

*A lord of the Unseelie Court would have gutted this Seelie idiot before he was halfway through this speech.*

“. . . which is why we can't let any of them live. We should hunt this new mage down and kill him now.” Perenor concluded his speech and looked at her expectantly.

“Somehow, I can't understand your fears of human magic, my lord,” Shari said. “After all, isn't your own daughter half-human?”

The daughter in question was standing at the far edge of the balcony, gazing out at the darkened beach. It occurred to Shari that Ria Llewellyn was standing as far away as she could, and still be within hearing range of the conversation. Shari had disliked Ria Llewellyn from the moment they'd met, when the blond and elegant half-elven woman had looked at Shari like something she'd found under a rock. *I wonder how long you'd survive in the -Unseelie Court, darling?* Shari thought. *They'd probably have you for breakfast within ten minutes.*

Ria spoke without looking at Shari or Perenor. “My mother is human, yes. But I don't think the fact that this new mage is human or elven really matters at all. The question is whether or not he's a danger to us. And I think he's not.” She gave Shari a calculating look. “I can't imagine a human, even a mage, as a danger to any of us. Certainly the -Unseelie can handle any challenges, can't they?”

*Maybe you'll find that out for yourself someday, Ria.* “Of course we can,” Shari said, smiling. “But capturing this human without killing it might prove a little more difficult. Nataniel wants it alive; he believes

this human could be useful to us. If we need any assistance, it would be for that purpose.”

“You think you could use a human mage? But you can't trust humans at all, they're—” Perenor -began, and was interrupted by Ria.

“No, Father,” Ria said tartly. “I've learned that you can't trust *anyone*, humans or elves, and -especially the Unseelie. I didn't ask for this meeting with Sharanya, and I'm wondering if we're going to do anything but talk about some insignificant human mage tonight. You told me that the Unseelie wanted to discuss a business proposition with me. Something to do with a loan of over twenty million dollars? Chasing down a human mage isn't my idea of a multi-million dollar business proposition. If we have nothing else to discuss, then I have my own business to attend to, elsewhere.”

*My, what a prickly bitch. Maybe she would survive the Court after all. Better to play this carefully; we need that money. These Seelie fools can't know yet that Nataniel's being investigated for counterfeiting. I told him to be more careful with conjuring cash, but my lord didn't listen. Our next sources of financing must be impeccably clean, or the Feds will be onto us in an instant.* “Nataniel and I know what a successful businesswoman you are, Ria,” Shari said silkily. “That's why I asked Perenor to arrange this meeting—to discuss a joint venture with your Llewellyn Corporation.”

“What, dealing drugs? That's not an interest of mine.”

Shari bit back a quick retort, speaking in a quieter tone. “Don't tell me that you suffer from ethics? There's very good money in narcotics, and I'd heard that you were a smart businesswoman, -interested in making a good profit rather than any foolish human ethics.”

“Ethics?” Ria shook her head. “No, I don't have any problems with ethics. The question is risk versus benefit. I assume you've heard of RICO? The Racketeer-Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act? The one that allows the government to seize any assets that were acquired illegally? I have a multi-million-dollar, completely legal, business. Any legal difficulties with my -investment money would reflect back onto the Llewellyn Corporation and could result in a Federal seizure of assets. I won't risk it. Tell me about a profitable and legal investment, and I'll consider that. But not drugs, no thank you.”

Shari considered that for a moment. “We can -offer excellent terms for your legal risks and some good layering to separate your investment from your operations. Perhaps investing in a third-party venture? Such as an air cargo company?” *Damn her, we need the money to invest in the new aircraft fleet, or it'll be another year before we expand into Northern California. We'll lose our competitive edge to the local humans, which will mean a long battle to win it back, a lot of wasted effort, and spilled human blood. We need that money now.*

“Still too dangerous. Even if you hide the -direct ownership linkages, what happens to that air cargo company's profit line when the Feds confiscate the aircraft?” Ria said, then smiled suddenly. “Of course, Nataniel keeps his limited partnership ownership of that Las Vegas hotel entirely separate from his other businesses, doesn't he? Perhaps in exchange for a percentage in that business, I could be persuaded to invest in the hotel. That would free up some of your operating capital for these other . . . ventures.”

Shari pretended to consider that for a moment, but she was seething inside. *She's done her homework, this one. Nataniel was a fool for saying that we could control her easily, that she's just her -father's pawn. But this may be the only route we can go. If only my lord Nataniel hadn't told me that we need her aid, I'd teach this little human bitch some proper respect for the Unseelie Court.* . . . “I'll suggest it to him,” Shari said. “In the meantime, I think—” She stopped, listening intently. Not to any audible sound, but something far away, a distant echo that resonated in her bones. It was the noise of

magic, someone working a major sorcery. She recognized it instantly: it was the human mage.

*“I can sense it too, Shari. It's in the San Fernando Valley,” Ria said quietly. “Studio City, I think, or maybe Van Nuys.”*

*Shari stood up. “I'll need to go track it down -immediately. If you'll excuse me . . .” She saw the glint in Perenor's eyes, a thinly disguised hunger.*

*“Would you like my company, Sharanya?” Perenor said, but she could hear the eagerness beneath his cultured tones. “This could be dangerous for you. I know you have considerable talents, but you might want some extra protection.”*

*He enjoys killing them, she realized. It's like a game for him, more than anything else. This is -closest we have to the Great Hunt now that we live among the humans, chasing down these pitiful -human mages. Such a pity that Nataniel ordered me to bring this human back alive—I would enjoy killing it, if I could.*

*And Perenor is a handsome man, for a Seelie, as handsome as Nataniel. I wonder what he would be like, flushed in the success of a Great Hunt, glorying in his kill? Perhaps I'll find that out for myself, someday. “My lord, your company would be welcome, but I must caution you: Nataniel ordered me to capture this mage alive, and he would be very displeased if it were to die unexpectedly.”*

*“I understand,” Perenor said, though she could hear the frustration in his voice. Maybe I can channel that frustration into another arena, Shari thought with a silent laugh. We'll see how skilled you really are, my lord Perenor.*

*“Enjoy yourselves,” Ria Llewellyn said, reaching for her purse and silk jacket. “I have some real work to do, if you don't mind. I'm sure we'll talk later about these investments, Shari. Call me when you two are . . . finished.”*

*Shari flushed slightly, realizing that her thoughts must have been transparent as glass to the woman. Someday you'll learn respect for your betters, half-breed bitch, Shari thought, and smiled a cordial farewell to Ria Llewellyn. But until then, I suppose I'll have to amuse myself in other ways. . . . She extended her arm to Perenor, who gave her a courtly bow before escorting her from the townhouse.*

Elizabet hesitated at the warehouse door, looking around the deserted street before touching the half-open door. She could still feel the residue of magic within, now slowly fading. It had been enough magic to startle her from her preoccupation with a backlog of juvenile-related files and bring her here, to this industrial zone. She wasn't certain what she'd find inside, but guessed that she had better be careful. She pushed the door further open with her foot, not wanting to leave any fingerprints on the smooth metal doorknob.

“Oh, God!”

She stared in horror. The warehouse floor was splattered with blood and worse, bullet holes in the wooden boxes and walls. Five young men were lying motionless on the floor . . . she moved to the closest blood-spattered boy and searched for a pulse on his carotid artery.

He was dead.

So were the other boys. From the temperature of the first boy's skin, Elizabet knew it had happened at least an hour before, maybe longer. She leaned against one of the shattered crates, breathing deeply. These boys were dead . . . there was nothing more she could do for them. But from the magic she could still feel rippling through this place, she knew that Kayla had been here, and that the girl had healed someone, or more than one person. She cringed at the thought of Kayla doing a multiple healing. *The girl is powerful, true, a hundred times more than myself. But if laying hands on one person is enough to make me nearly faint, what would healing several people at one time do to Kayla?*

*First things first. Survey the damage, learn everything you can, and then draw your conclusions. Don't jump to conclusions; conclusions can be deadly. There's no margin for error here, not now.*

She walked through the warehouse, being careful not to disturb the blood marks on the floor. Yes, there had been more wounded people here, by the looks of it—at least a dozen, all told. And the traces of magic . . . six places where she could sense magic, still glowing faintly against the concrete of the floor.

*Six healings? That would've killed me for certain, and I don't think even Kayla could've survived that.*

No, she was sure that she would've known if Kayla had died here. There would have been *something*, some sign of it.

She heard the sound of a car pulling up outside the warehouse and moved quickly toward the office at the back of the building. Inside the darkened office, she saw another door leading to the outside. But she could hear footsteps on the concrete outside. She pressed herself back against the wall, out of sight of the large glass window that looked out onto the warehouse.

“My, what a mess.” The voice was feminine and distinctly sardonic.

“They're all dead,” a male voice said.

Elizabet risked a glance through the open glass window, wanting to see who was talking so cavalierly over the bodies of those dead boys.

The pair looked normal enough. An older silver-haired man in a gray business suit, and a young dark-haired woman in a black miniskirt, blouse, and fashionable jacket, talking calmly as they stood amid the bodies and blood. It was that calm that frightened Elizabet as she ducked back into hiding, and something else that took a minute to register.

Their ears. Their long, curved, *pointed* ears.

She knew what they were. Elves. The Faerie Folk. Even as the shock hit her, she knew that it was true. Gram had talked of them once, when she was already in the nursing home, about how she'd danced with elves on a warm Georgia summer night. Tall, graceful, inhumanly beautiful elves, who had whirled her around in a wild midnight dance before vanishing away again at sunrise. Elizabet hadn't thought anything of it at the time, thinking it was only a dying woman's fever dreams.

The elves Gram had met were happy, benevolent creatures. This pair was more alien than that, with their obvious indifference to the dead boys on the floor. She didn't know why they were here, but guessed that it wasn't a social call. If she could get out of here without them realizing that she was here at all. . . .



She edged as close as she could to the open window, listening intently.

“Any sign of the human mage?” Elizabet thought she could hear disappointment in that quiet male voice.

“Not unless the mage is one of these dead idiots on the floor, my dear Perenor,” the girl said. “No, I think our mage has fled again. It's been damn difficult to track that creature down. Once it stops using magic, I can't follow it at all. . . .”

*Kayla! They're hunting Kayla, these elves!*

“It's only a matter of time until you find it, Sharanya. I have complete confidence in you, m'lady.”

Elizabet glanced at the closed door and wondered if she could open it without the Fay noticing her. She could crawl to the door out of view of the window, that wasn't a problem, but then she'd have to stand up and unlock the door. . . .

She crouched down and crawled across the cluttered office, straightening very slowly when she reached the door. Now she was in full sight, though the office was dark enough, and she knew it would be difficult to see her. Her hand fumbled for the deadbolts on the door.

“Look at this, Shari. They're all wearing similarly colored shirts.”

“Yes, they are. . . .” Elizabet watched as the girl knelt by one of the dead bodies.

“Do you recognize him?” the man asked.

“No. But I recognize the color of that sweatshirt. He's a part of a gang, one that buys drugs from Nataniel. They're from the Inner City . . . I wonder why he's here, so far from home.”

The man extended a graceful hand to help the girl back to her feet. “A street gang war?”

*A street gang? That doesn't make any sense. Why would Kayla be involved with a street gang? Unless it's something the girl didn't tell me before, that she's a gangbanger. . . .*

“Quite possibly. That's something I can find out, easily enough. That'll be our next stop, I think . . . I'd like to find out who these children are, and why our little mage is involved with a street gang.” Her head cocked suddenly. “Perenor, did you hear something?”

Elizabet froze next to the door, not daring to move. *I'm not here*, she thought, imagining herself as invisible, part of the wall. *I'm not here, I'm not here . . .*

“Is there someone else in here?” the man asked. “I thought I heard something. . . .”

*They know I'm here!*

Elizabet took a deep breath, and another, and then flung the door open and leaped through.

There was a noise behind her, like a sudden thunderstorm, and the crackle of electricity. Elizabet slammed the warehouse door shut -behind her, letting go of the doorknob an instant before it melted into slag. There was the sound of a muffled curse a moment later, and the door rattled but didn't open. “The other door!” she heard the man's voice say, but she was already running for her car.

She fumbled with the keys, wasting a precious second or two to unlock the door, then slid into the driver's seat and jammed the key into the ignition. She accelerated away from the warehouse, glancing back in the mirror to see the two figures emerging from the far side of the building, staring after her as she drove away. Two minutes later, driving down Oxnard Street toward the 101 Freeway, she finally remembered to breathe again.

Elves who were looking for Kayla. Dead boys from a street gang. *What in the hell is that girl involved in?*

She had been afraid that someone other than herself was looking for Kayla.

Now she knew.

## Chapter Eight

Kayla sat silently in the back seat as Carlos drove the car through the city. They weren't -going back to Roberta's apartment—this was a different destination, somewhere further north. Ramon, still unconscious, lay close to her on the back seat. She held his hand, glancing out at the lights of the city as they drove past.

Manuel, the guy with the wounded shoulder, was in the front seat next to Carlos. Even from a few feet away, Kayla could tell that it hurt a great deal, though the bleeding had stopped beneath the shirt he'd wadded up against the wound, under his jacket. Some tiny part of her wanted to touch him and heal that pain, but she held herself back from it. *Not now*, she thought. *And not ever again, if I can manage that.* The image of the kid dying in front of her wouldn't leave her thoughts, burned into her mind. *I'm never doing anything for Carlos or his homeboys again, ever.*

*Except maybe Ramon.* Her hand brushed his curly hair back from his forehead. She thought he looked a little better now, less pale. It was hard to tell in the dim glow from the streetlights.

Carlos parked the car in front of an old house on a quiet street. "I'll be back in a minute for Ramon," he said to Kayla. He got out and walked to the passenger side of the car, helping the other guy out of the car.

Kayla thought about taking off at a run while Carlos walked the other guy to the door of the house. Then she thought about the pistol in Carlos' belt—would he hesitate to shoot her? Maybe, maybe not.

Carlos returned a minute later to sling Ramon over his shoulder and carry him out like a sack of potatoes. Kayla followed uncertainly.

Inside the house, a heavyset middle-aged woman was crying and talking angrily in Spanish as she looked under the improvised bandage on the guy's shoulder. She wailed even louder as Carlos set -Ramon down on the couch. He turned back to Kayla. "You can do your magic on him now, *bruja.*"

"No," Kayla said, hoping her voice didn't sound as scared as she was. "I won't."

He blinked, as if he thought he hadn't heard her correctly. "What?"

“I said, I'm not going to heal him.”

He nodded. “You must still be tired from everything you did earlier. That's all right, you can heal him later.”

“I'm not going to heal him at all.”

“You'll heal him, girl!”

“No, I won't!”

Carlos raised his hand, and Kayla was certain he was going to hit her again. “Carlos,” Ramon called weakly from the couch. “Carlos, how did we get here?”

Carlos let his hand fall as he smiled at Ramon, a look of caring and concern replacing the anger on his face. “You're all right, Ramie?”

“I think so, but everything still hurts,” Ramon said ruefully, and glanced at Kayla. “I remember that the *bruja* was doing a healing, and I thought something was wrong so I went to her, and then everything went black. I'm all right, Mama,” he said to the woman fussing over him in Spanish. “Manuel's the one who was hurt, not me.”

*Mama? This lady is Ramon's mother?*

Ramon turned to Kayla. “I heard what you said, Kayla. Will you heal my brother Manuel? Please? For me?” His face was still very pale; the whiteness made the small scar stand out on his cheek even more, contrasting with his dark eyes.

She nodded. “Sure,” she said.

Manuel took off his jacket and removed the wadded shirt from the wound. The wound wasn't bad, more bloody than anything else. The bullet had scraped through the upper muscle on his shoulder; Kayla didn't know the name of it, but she traced it with her magic beneath his skin, seeing how it connected to the other muscles . . . with a start, she pulled herself back to the matter at hand. This healing was easy, compared to what she had done before. Within half a minute it was done, Manuel gingerly touching the closed wound that had been open and bleeding a moment before.

“She obeys you, but not me,” Carlos observed from the side. <T>

“Thank you, *querida*,” Ramon said. Their mother was alternately staring at Kayla and Manuel's healed shoulder, then muttered something in Spanish and left the room.

“She says you must be the Devil's daughter,” Carlos said with a laugh.

Kayla considered hitting Carlos, then decided it would be more trouble than it was worth. She walked past him to the bathroom that she could see down the hallway. In the bathroom, she scrubbed the blood from her hands and tried to wash the blood marks from her shirt, without much success. Everything she owned seemed to be bloodstained now, or would be soon, the way things were going.

“We'll stay here tonight,” Carlos said to her, standing in the open bathroom doorway. “Mama has set up

the spare bedroom for you. You'll find everything you need.”

Kayla ignored him, concentrating on scrubbing her hands. There was blood under her fingernails which wouldn't come out. She reached for a washcloth to clean them.

Carlos moved closer to her; he caught her face in his hand and forced her to look at him. “What is wrong with you, *bruja* ? First you threaten to shoot me, now you won't talk to me. You did well tonight. You should be proud of yourself. So why are you angry at me?”

Kayla pulled away from him. “Because you let that kid die, you bastard!”

“But he was one of the T-Men,” Carlos said, as if that explained everything.

“He was a human being! He had a life, family and friends! I could've saved his life! He smiled at me before he died. . . .”

Carlos shook his head angrily. “He was one of those scum that are trying to kill us all! They started this, not us! And now Jose is dead because of them!”

“But you could stop it! It doesn't have to be this way. . . .”

“Is there any chance you two could stop arguing long enough for me to get some sleep, please?”  
-Ramon asked, leaning against the doorjamb.

“We'll talk later,” Carlos said, glancing at Kayla.

“No, I want to talk now!”

“Maybe we should, Carlos,” Ramon said. “I think there is a lot that needs to be said between us.” He walked unsteadily back to the couch and patted a place for Kayla next to him. Kayla sat down, watching Carlos warily. Manuel, sitting near the window, took one glance at the dark looks on everyone's faces and left the room quickly.

“She's angry at me because of the black boy who died,” Carlos said without preamble.

“Do you think that's the *only* reason I'm angry at you? Just because you kidnaped me, keep me locked up inside all the time, don't let me call anyone or go anywhere, and force me to do magic, that doesn't count for anything? Not to mention the fact that you stabbed me in Elizabet's house . . . that isn't anything to get angry about, is it?”

“I can understand that you would be angry about my cutting you that night, even though you healed yourself,” Carlos said slowly. “But the rest of this . . . we need you. Don't you understand that? Tonight you proved how much we need you, you and your magic. . . .”

Kayla pounded her fist against the couch. “God, I hate this! All of you treat me like a walking first aid kit instead of a human being! And the magic—I hate it, it makes me feel sick all the time. I hate it!”

“But you saved Fernando's life,” Carlos -protested. “And Luis, and Manny, and the others. Surely that's worth a little pain, isn't it?”

“Next time,” Kayla said, glaring at Carlos, “try calling 911. 'Cause I'm never doing anything for you,

ever again!” Carlos looked like he was about to say something foul, when Ramon interjected, “We owe her, brother. How many lives did she save -tonight? We owe her for that.”

Carlos nodded grudgingly. “So, what do you want?” he asked Kayla.

“I want to go home,” she said. *Home, back to Elizabet, please, that's all I want. . . .*

Carlos shook his head. “No.”

Kayla felt tears starting in her eyes. “Please, I just want to go home. Can't you let me do that? Please?”

“No, absolutely not.” Carlos' mouth was set in a firm line.

“Why not?” Ramon asked suddenly. “Hasn't she done enough for us already?”

“But what about next time?” Carlos said, standing up. He paced the room as he spoke. “Who will die because she isn't here to help them? No, she stays. We need her, now more than ever. Four of those *bastardos* died tonight, don't you remember? They'll be after us, even more than before.”

Ramon said something terse and short in Spanish.

Carlos' eyes widened; he answered in the same language. They argued in Spanish for -another few seconds, then Carlos turned to Kayla, speaking -angrily. “You've done this, you've turned my own brother against me!” He glared at Ramon. “And you! All you want is to sleep with the little *bruja* ! Do you care nothing about our people, our *barrio* ?” He added something else in Spanish, spitting out the words, and -Ramon suddenly lunged for him, hands reaching for his throat.

Kayla jumped back as the two men fell to the floor, Carlos trying to keep Ramon from strangling him. Ramon landed one solid punch on Carlos' face before Carlos shoved him away. The younger man fell back against the couch, started to get to his feet again, and fainted.

She had started toward Ramon when Carlos' voice stopped her. “Don't touch my brother, you little *puta*,” Carlos snarled. “Stay far away from him.”

Kayla backed away toward the hallway, frightened by the look in Carlos' eyes. When he turned away to lift Ramon back onto the couch, she fled down the hallway.

She found the spare bedroom, a pair of worn pajamas and a towel set out neatly upon on the bed. Kayla flung herself down on the bed, -unable to keep from crying. She heard the sound of Carlos' footsteps in the hallway, another bedroom door closing. It suddenly occurred to her that no one was watching her, no one was guarding her. She could get out of here, this might be her only chance. She should run, run fast and far . . .

She closed her eyes, desperately wanting to rest for just a moment, and then she would run, then she would . . .

“Wake up, *bruja*, time to go.” Carlos' hand shook her out of a pleasant dream, where she was walking with Elizabet along a pier, with the seagulls banking past overhead. . . . She blinked and sat up, rubbing her eyes. Carlos was already dressed, though it was still dark outside, not -really morning yet. “Mama's

cooking breakfast,” he added, leaving the room.

Kayla got up, wishing she could've changed out of her clothes before falling asleep, or at least taken off her shoes, and followed the smell of cooking food out to the kitchen. She tiptoed through the living room, where Ramon was still asleep on the couch, and into the kitchen where Ramon's mama was busy working at the stove.

The Hispanic woman glanced at Kayla and then filled a plate for her, gesturing at several glasses of orange juice on the counter and an open drawer of cutlery. Kayla didn't know the name of whatever it was that she was eating, but she didn't care. It tasted wonderful, made with potatoes and eggs and sausages, all mixed -together with salsa on flour tortillas. She finished the plate of food quickly and realized just how hungry she'd been. Not just hungry, but starving, as if she hadn't eaten in days. Maybe she could ransack the kitchen for something else . . . ?

The woman dumped another serving onto Kayla's plate and said something quietly in Spanish. Carlos, standing and eating on the other side of the kitchen, said, “She says thank you for healing Manuel last night.”

“What, I'm not the daughter of the Devil anymore?” Kayla said around a mouthful of eggs and sausage.  
<T>

Carlos laughed, and spoke to his mother in Spanish. The older woman gave Kayla a frowning look and another comment before turning back to the sizzling pan on the stove.

“She says what you did was a miracle, and God's work. But you still shouldn't make fun of the Devil. He could hear you.”

“I wouldn't be surprised, I think he's eating breakfast right next to me,” Kayla said under her breath. She shoveled more of the terrific food into her mouth, then set the empty plate in the sink and headed back to the bathroom. She wanted to wash her face, maybe brush her teeth . . .

Ramon was still asleep on the couch, curled up against the faded pillows. Like Kayla, he'd slept in his clothes, though someone had removed his shoes and set them on the floor beside the couch. Asleep, Ramon looked a little less like his brother Carlos.

She stood looking down at him for a long -moment before she realized that Carlos was standing next to her. “You like him, don't you?” he asked quietly.

“He treats me like a human being, which is more than you've ever done,” Kayla whispered.

“I'm . . . I'm sorry,” Carlos said after an awkward pause. “I don't know how to treat you at all. I want you to be happy, I want you to want to stay with us. Make your home with us, be one of us. But I don't know how to make you feel that way. And even if you're not happy, we need you too much. You saw what those *bastardos* did last night; it's a war between us now. . . .”

Kayla stared down at Ramon's sleeping face, not knowing what to say.

“I know you don't understand now, but maybe someday you will.” Carlos knelt next to Ramon, resting his hand on his shoulder. “Wake up, Ramie, it's time to go,” he said gently.

Ramon smiled sleepily at her and Carlos, and stretched. “*Buenos días,*” he said, yawning. Then his eyes

widened. "Carlos, your face!"

"What? What's wrong with my face?" Carlos asked.

Kayla looked closely at Carlos for the first time that morning and saw the darkened bruise around his left eye where Ramon had punched him. "Oh, my," she said weakly, as Ramon started to laugh. Carlos glared at them.

Manuel emerged from the bathroom, still toweling his hair dry, and looked at them curiously. Then, a moment later, asked: "Eh, Carlos, what's wrong with your face?"

Carlos gave the three of them a sour look and stomped away to the bathroom to look at his blackened eye. He muttered under his breath in Spanish for the entire drive back to Roberta's apartment, giving Kayla, Ramon, and Manuel foul looks every few minutes as he drove through the light early morning traffic.

Shari checked the address written in her notebook and considered the house in front of her. It was old, with peeling white paint and several cars parked out front. One car was a lovely white Mercedes convertible with custom leather seats, which also had a badly crunched front fender.

*That's Razz's car. This must be the place.* She glanced at her Rolex watch, a human affectation, to check the time. *I'm an hour early, it's not even 8 A.M. yet, but no matter. I want to be finished with this quickly and back in Las Vegas by tomorrow.*

She walked up to the front door, sidestepping the broken glass on the walkway, and rang the doorbell.

A young black man opened the door and glared at her. "What you want, mama?"

"I'm here to see Razz Johnson. Escort me to him, if you would be so kind." She glimpsed a handgun tucked into the waistband of his jeans, half-hidden by his blue sweatshirt. Even at this distance, the proximity of Cold Iron made her twitch. "Hurry up, boy, he's expecting me."

Another youth appeared behind the other, looking at her curiously. "Hey, it's Nate's babe. You here to get sky-ed? Like, bringin' us some more rock an' flake?" <T>

"I have a meeting with Razz," she repeated. "Would you please escort me to him?" *These fools know nothing of Courtly courtesy, or even common courtesy,* she thought, irritated. *Where does Nataniel find these children? At least they're good for generating income, Nataniel said that this one group sells nearly a million dollars a month of various pharmaceuticals. Not bad, for street thug amateurs.*

The youth opened the door for her, and she followed him past several boys playing at a green-clothed billiards table and others lounging around on the chairs, all watching her with -interest.

*Yes, look at me,* she thought. *Can any of you see what I am, beneath the glamour of magic that hides my elfin nature? No, all you see is a beautiful -human woman. Fools.*

They walked down a short hallway to an -improvised office. Razz was sprawled out on a couch, looking through a car magazine. He looked up as she entered the room. "Shari, right? Want some fresh rock?"

We got some hot shit here. Word.” He gestured at the table -between them, which had several pipes and filled plastic bags set out upon it.

“No, thank you.” She looked at the drugs with thinly concealed distaste. Most humans were annoying enough when they were sober; intoxicated, they were usually insufferable. She hoped that Razz had enough brain cells left intact for her to conduct the necessary business.

“It's the flake your man sells to us,” Razz added. “He's all right, my man, righteous. Not like some scrambling dealers, chalking their shit and acting all clocked out. So, mama, what can the Razzman do for you?”

“Nate sent me to Los Angeles on a particular -errand,” she said, choosing her words carefully. “I'm trying to find someone. And I think that person may be linked to what happened last night at a warehouse in Van Nuys, that involved some of your boys. Do you know what happened there?”

Razz sat up suddenly, giving her a narrowed look. “Damn straight I know what happened there, lady. Those bastard homies, they killed four of my guys. Those fucking Tyrone Street homeboys, Carlos Hernandez's gang. They all live in Van Nuys, been selling shit in *our* territory. We went out there to teach 'em a lesson last night.”

“Your territory? Isn't your territory entirely on this side of the hills?” Shari inquired.

“Used to be. We're expanding our business, y'know? Like a corporation, doing that hostile takeover shit. These guys wouldn't take a hint, so we went out there to reason with them, like. It didn't go down too well.” He gave her an odd look. “You didn't know that we were moving into other areas, mama? Nate was the man who suggested it, helped us scan the plan. He wants us to expand our turf so we can sell more rock for him. I bite his style, he's hot shit.”

*Oh, did he? That's something that dear Nataniel neglected to mention to me at all. I wonder why he's doing that? A little dangerous, I would think—the odds are high that these boys would get themselves killed, and then we'd have to find new buyers for our supplies. Interesting that Nataniel would consider that a worthwhile effort.*

*But he's right, if they succeed, it means a substantially larger profit for Nataniel. And why should we care if any of these worthless humans die in the effort?* “Did any of your boys see anything unusual there last night? Anything you couldn't explain?”

“Like what, mama?” Razz asked.

She thought about trying to explain magic to this human idiot and decided against it. “I need to go talk with these homeboys. I assume your people can direct me to their base of operations?”

“Lady, we took *out* their base last night. That warehouse was where they cut their rock and wash the shake. I can tell you where some of them live, though. We've been doing surveillance on them, y'know? Like a real military operation.”

*A real military operation. What an amusing thought.* “Good. Let's go, then.”

“What, right now?”

“Of course.” She stood, tapping her foot impatiently. “You said over the phone that you owe Nate for



everything he's done for you. This is a minor favor I'm asking of you, to take me into this gang's territory.”

Razz shook his head. “No way, mama. Not that I'm dissin' you, but no can do till you tell me what's going down. We wiped their asses last night—you think we're just gonna walk in there and smoke shit with them? They'll ice our asses.”

Shari thought about that for a moment. Razz couldn't use the information, couldn't even figure out who the mage was, probably. “All right, then. There's someone in the gang that I need to see. Someone unusual . . . someone who has the gift of magic.”

“Magic?” Razz grinned, showing two gold teeth. “You been smoking too much rock, mama. You sky-ed. No such shit as magic.”

“You don't need to believe me,” Shari said quietly. “But you'll take me there. You do owe Nate that much.”

Razz shrugged. “Yeah, I'm loyal to The Man, but we're not going in there without some serious firepower. I'll call the bros in for this.” He walked into the main room. Shari followed him, listening as he explained what they were going to do to the crowd near the pool table.

“Why are you listening to this white bitch, Razz?” one of his boys asked. “Who gives a shit what she wants us to do? She's not The Man, she's just his babe.”

Shari considered the problem from a tactical viewpoint. She couldn't damage Razz's control of his group, since a change of command could -endanger Nataniel's investments in this gang. Of course, an insult to her was also an insult to Nataniel, her liege lord. An interesting problem.

“I work for Nate,” she said, the human nickname feeling awkward on her tongue, “who has kept you supplied in drugs, guns, and bribe money for the police for the last two years. -Besides—”

She had learned about human physiology on Nataniel's orders, after he'd brought her here to this human world from the Unseelie Court. She chose the exact attack and moved quickly to strike with her foot. Yes, perfect. The idiot crumpled on the spot, falling to his knees, clutching himself and gasping in pain.

“—no one calls me a bitch.” She glanced at Razz, who was staring at her in shock. She smiled to herself; if she'd*really* wanted to impress this leader of fools, she would have used magic to incinerate him. This way, perhaps his follower had a chance to learn from his mistake.

“I assume we won't need this idiot for this trip into the Valley,” she said, pushing the semi-conscious boy out of her way with her foot. “Shall we leave, Razz?”

He nodded, ordering his followers out to their cars.

“Carlos, what happened to your eye?” Roberta asked as they walked into the apartment. Carlos gave her a sullen look and stalked past her, heading for the telephone. Kayla stifled a laugh.

“The entire *barrio* is talking about you now, after what happened last night,” Roberta said to Kayla. “I wanted to thank you for healing Fernando.”

“Fernando?”

“He's my brother,” Roberta said simply. “Every-one has been bringing gifts for you,” she added, a little shyly.

There was a pile of stuff on the table next to the couch. Kayla sat down to look at it: some chocolate and other candy, some cassette tapes, and a tall stack of paperback books.

Kayla picked up the book on the top of the stack, a fantasy novel with a horse on the cover, looking at it with interest. “Thanks.” She plunked herself down on the couch, glancing up occasionally as Carlos, Ramon, and Roberta discussed something in Spanish, and dove into the book.

The book was great fun, a story about a girl who ran away from home with the help of a magical white horse. Kayla smiled at that, wishing there had been a magical white horse to help her get away from the foster home. No, she and Billy and Liane had taken the RTD bus. A hell of a lot less romantic, and not nearly as much fun.

She didn't realize how caught up she was in the story until the next time she looked up, when she saw that she was alone in the room. No, there was someone seated by the door, one of the homeboys she didn't know or recognize. He was sitting quietly, just watching her.

She looked out the window, hearing the sound of someone banging a hammer against something metal. There was Fernando, half-invisible under the hood of his car, pounding on something inside the engine. *He must be doing fine*, she thought. *I guess I did a better job on fixing his busted chest than I thought.*

Roberta was talking with Fernando as he worked, carrying baby Juanita on her hip. Ramon was a few feet away, playing catch with some of the younger kids.

“Can I go downstairs?” she asked the man.

He said something in Spanish, smiling at her.

“Uh . . . go downstairs?” She pointed out the open window. “Can I?” She looked down again and thought her heart was going to stop: she saw the white Mercedes with the trashed front fender, followed closely by several other cars, gliding down the street toward the apartment building.

“RAMON!” she yelled at the top of her voice. He looked up, then turned in the direction she was pointing. A moment later he shouted something in Spanish and everyone, even the young children, all scattered for cover.

“Come on!” She ran for the door, not caring whether the homeboy understood or followed. Kayla vaulted down the three flights of stairs, hearing the clatter of her guard's footsteps -behind her. She was out of the apartment building a moment later, looking around the street to get her bearings.

The Mercedes and the rest of the convoy had parked across the street, and a woman was getting out of the back seat of the white Mercedes. Kayla blinked once, uncertain what she was seeing, then stared.

This woman was beautiful, dressed like a model from a magazine, dark-haired and with vivid blue eyes. No . . . inhumanly beautiful, that's what she was—no real person could look like that. And she was bright with magic, Kayla realized, brighter than anyone she'd ever seen, practically glowing around the edges with power. She couldn't be a real person, not and look like that. . . .

But no real person had ears like this lady. *Pointed* ears, right out of Star Trek or one of her nightmares. . .

And no real person had eyes like hers, either, blue as gemstones and slitted like a cat's.

The woman saw Kayla staring at her, and smiled.

*:Do you see me for what I am, girl?:* The cool feminine voice said within Kayla's mind. *:That's very good, because I can see you, as well. . . . :*

## Chapter Nine

Kayla looked around quickly for somewhere to run, but the only obvious direction was back up the stairs, which wouldn't get her very far.

*:Don't run, girl. I won't hurt you.:* The voice spoke quietly in her mind. *:Just stand still, be calm. Let me look at you.:* The woman with the pointed ears walked closer to her, looking at her curiously.

“You're younger than I would've expected,” the woman said aloud. “How old are you, girl . . . seventeen? Eighteen?”

“Fifteen,” Kayla tried to say, but her voice wasn't working quite right. For the first time in her life, she understood what the expression about someone's “throat being tight with fear” really meant—she couldn't quite manage to say the word out loud.

“Fifteen,” the woman repeated thoughtfully, as though Kayla had spoken. “That's very young, for one of your kind. I begin to see Nataniel's reasoning at last.” She smiled. “My name is Shari, girl. I've traveled a long way to meet you.”

Behind Shari, she could see the T-Men getting out of their cars. Some already had handguns ready, and one was carrying what looked like a submachine gun. Kayla swallowed awkwardly.

“We're not here for a fight,” Shari said loudly. “I need to talk with Carlos Hernandez. Where is he?”

“He's not here,” Ramon said. He walked forward from behind a parked van, matching gazes with the strange woman. Kayla wanted to scream. *No, Ramon, please, don't get yourself killed, not over me. . .*

“We need to talk,” Shari said. “Tell him that I work for Nate Shea. He probably will recognize the name—Nate is one of the major drug suppliers for downtown L.A. We don't supply the Tyrone Street Boys, but he should know the name. I need to talk to him . . .”—her eyes drifted to Kayla, who felt like a rabbit caught out in front of a hawk—“. . . and that child as well. We'll wait in the car until Carlos arrives.” She turned and walked back across the street, as elegant as a princess.

“Berta,” Ramon called quietly, and Roberta edged forward from the side of the building. She looked like she was close to tears, holding Juanita protectively in her arms. “Go upstairs and call Carlos,” Ramon instructed Roberta. “And don't come back down here, no matter what

happens.”

“Ramie, they might kill you!”

“I know, I know. Just go now, quickly. Kayla, you go with her.”

“I want to stay with you!” Kayla protested.

Ramon gave her a sad smile. “Please, *querida*. You are a brave girl, but you shouldn't be here. Go upstairs now, please.”

Kayla glanced at the woman—she could see her face, serene and inhuman, through the window of the white Mercedes. “Okay. Okay, I'll go up.” She walked with Roberta to the entrance of the -apartment building and up the three flights of stairs. Roberta set baby Juanita down on the couch and picked up the phone, dialing quickly. She spoke into it for a few minutes in Spanish, then hung up. As she picked up Juanita again, Kayla could see the tears in her eyes.

“Hey, it'll be okay,” Kayla said, wondering if her words sounded as empty to Roberta as they did to her.

Roberta held the baby very close to her, tears falling down her face and soaking into the baby's shirt. Kayla sat next to her on the couch, not certain what to do. Hesitantly, she put her arm around Roberta's shoulders. “It'll be all right, you'll see.”

The young woman shook her head, not answering.

The next half hour was the longest of Kayla's life, as she wondered who was going to come through the door next. Ramon and Carlos, to tell them that everything was okay? The woman and the T-Men, planning to kill them?

That woman, Shari . . . Kayla still couldn't -believe what she'd seen. She knew the woman wasn't a normal human being, but what else could she be? It didn't make any sense. There just weren't people with pointy ears walking around in Los Angeles—she couldn't be real. -Except that she was downstairs in the street right now, sitting in a white Mercedes.

She wanted to ask Roberta about it, but Roberta was obviously not interested in conversation. She sat nervously on the couch, waiting for something to happen.

Eventually there was a knock at the door, and when she saw that Roberta wasn't going to get up to answer it, Kayla walked over and opened the door. It was the homeboy who had been guarding Kayla. He spoke to Roberta in Spanish.

“You need to go with him,” she said. “Carlos is downstairs, talking with the woman, and they need you there as well.”

Kayla followed him down to the street. Carlos and Ramon were standing on the sidewalk, talking with the woman. “*Bruja*,” Carlos said, “this woman has questions for you.”

“Tell me about your magic, girl,” Shari said.

Feeling very self-conscious, Kayla explained what had happened to her in the last two weeks, ending with walking into the warehouse after the gunfight last night and what had happened there. The woman

nodded as she finished, and spoke quietly. "I believe I may have a solution to the problems between the T-Men and the -Tyrone Street Boys. Nate is interested in you, girl. I believe he could end this war by paying off the T-Men, convincing them to pursue other ventures . . . if you will agree to work for him. He could make this financially -lucrative for Carlos Hernandez and his Tyrone Street Boys, as well."

"I'd be willing to help both groups, anybody who needs it," Kayla said. "Just so they stop killing each other. That's all I'm asking." She glanced at Ramon. "I don't want anyone else to get killed, y'know?"

"We'll think about it, after you leave," Carlos said. His lips were very tight, and he was watching the guys in the parked cars very closely.

"That would be fine." The woman removed a business card from her purse. "Call me later -today, if you would. I'll talk to Nate immediately to work out the details."

Carlos took the card from her. She walked back to the white Mercedes. A few minutes later, the convoy of cars left, following the Mercedes. Carlos stood watching until the last car disappeared around the corner. "Upstairs," he said abruptly. "We have to talk about this now."

"Didn't you guys see it?" Kayla asked, running up the stairs behind Carlos and Ramon. "Didn't you see it?"

"See what, *querida*?" Ramon asked.

"That woman, Shari!"

"I've met Shari before," Carlos said grimly. "And her employer, Nate Shea. We are in worse trouble than we were before, Ramie."

"But doesn't she look just a little . . . weird . . . to you? I mean, you saw it, right? Her face? Her eyes? *Herears*?"

"Stop talking nonsense, girl," Carlos said. "Her ears are just like the rest of her. We have serious business to talk about now."

*They didn't see it, neither of them saw that she isn't human. Kayla stopped for a moment on the stairs, staring at Carlos and Ramon. How could they miss it? She's got bigger ears than Mister Spock! Maybe she got those eyes from a fancy pair of contact lenses, but those ears were real! Come on, guys, I know you're not blind!*

*Maybe there's something else going on here. She recognized me the minute she saw me, she knew what I can do. Maybe this is some kind of thing that most people can't see, something to do with magic. I can see her for what she is, but no one else can.*

*This is too weird for words!*

Kayla followed them back into the apartment. Roberta was all over Carlos a half-second later, crying and hugging him. He said something gentle to her in Spanish, and she went back to the couch, picking up little Juanita, who had started to roll -toward the edge of the sofa.

Carlos sat down heavily next to Roberta. For a moment, he played with baby Juanita, letting her tug on his fingers, before he spoke again. "I don't know what to do, Ramie. This is an impossible situation."

“What's so impossible about it?” Kayla spoke up. “Seems like it's the perfect solution, everything works out great for everyone.”

“It isn't that easy, *bruja*.”

“Why not?”

Ramon explained quietly, as Carlos stood and paced the room. “Nate Shea, that is why. He is a major drug supplier to most of Los Angeles, a very dangerous man. Our fight with the T-Men is bad, but not as bad as angering Nate would be. At least in the war with the T-Men, there's a chance we could win, or force them to quit.”

“But what she talked about was terrific! It could work!”

Carlos whirled to face her. “But what if it doesn't? Then we are in a war with not only the -T-Men but also Shea, who owns his own private army! We can't win!”

“But you don't have to fight!”

Carlos sat down on a chair across from her. “*Bruja*, you know that the T-Men are trying to kill all of us. I think they might kill you, or worse, if you go with them. We can't trust them. Perhaps we can trust Nate Shea, but I don't know. The -T-Men are a lot of business to Nate, millions of dollars a year, and he may decide to go along with what they want rather than lose their business. We're nothing beside that. And next to that, what are you?” He shook his head. “No. I won't risk it.”

“But don't you see, it could stop this war! I'm willing to take the risk,” Kayla said, trying to keep from getting angry.

“And why are you so willing to take this risk for us?” Carlos asked. “You're not one of us, you've said that yourself. Call 911, you said. Why have you changed your mind?”

Kayla flushed, and glanced at Ramon across the room. “I don't want anyone else to die. That's all. If I can make a difference, then I want to give it a try.”

“She has a point,” Ramon began. “I agree that it's dangerous, but it could be worth a try.”

“But how do we know?” Carlos paced to the window, looking out. “How do we know?”

“It's a leap of faith,” Kayla said. “There isn't any way to know. Ramon . . . Ramon could go with me, make sure that they don't do anything bad to me. They ought to agree to that.”

“Eh, I like that idea,” Ramon said, smiling at her.

“Be quiet!” Carlos snapped at him. “Can't you see that all of this could be a trick? They'll take the *bruja* away from us, and then there'll be nothing to stop them from killing all of us! Can't you think for once with something other than your *pene*?”

Ramon's face flushed suddenly. “At least I'm not afraid to admit that I care about someone,” he said, looking down at his shoes.

“No,” Carlos said. “And that's final. I'm going to call this Shari woman and tell her that there is no deal. And you, girl, go pack up your clothes. We're taking you to another house, a safer place. Roberta, you too. I want you to call Luisa and your cousins at work, tell them not to come home for a few days. The T-Men know that you live here, and I think they'll be back.”

*I don't know if we'll be safe, even here,* Carlos thought, walking with the *bruja* into Luis' home, an old house several miles away from Roberta's apartment. It was plainly furnished, but clean and neat. Luis and his wife showed Kayla to a small spare bedroom, as Carlos and half a dozen of his homeboys set up chairs in the living room, carrying in pizza boxes and six-packs of beer.

He tried not to think about it as they ate pizza for dinner, watching the football game on the television. Luis tried to make a joke about a bad football play, but no one laughed. Everyone was tense, even Ramon.

*They know that the T-Men are going to come after us, and maybe Shea's people, too. Did I do the right thing?* he asked himself, glancing at the *bruja* seated across the room from him, watching the game.

The girl excused herself after the game ended, disappearing into the spare bedroom down the hall. Carlos caught Ramon watching her as she walked away, and smiled to himself. Now *that* was a good way to keep the *bruja* with them and happy, if only he could be certain that it wouldn't affect her magic. He needed to talk with his grandmother again, to find out more about whether letting Ramon sleep with the girl would hurt her magic.

He yawned and stretched. It was too early to be sleepy, not even 10 P.M. yet. He drank from his beer and yawned again.

Luis was already asleep, sitting on the couch with his arm around his wife. Ramon, too, looked like he was about to nod off. It had been a long day, true, but he knew he needed to tell one of the boys to stay awake, keep a watch for the T-Men. . . . The empty beer can slid from his fingers onto the floor as he yawned again. . . .

Kayla tried to concentrate on reading the book about the magical white horses, but it was -impossible. *I can't believe Carlos is doing this. It'll never end now, not until everyone's dead . . . oh God, I don't want that to happen, I don't want to see -Ramon dead. . . .*

She stared at the open page of the book until the words blurred. Angrily, she brushed the tears away from her eyes. <T>

*It's not fair, it's not right. Maybe Carlos will change his mind, though I think there's a snowball's chance of that. But it's not too late. Hell, maybe I can convince Ramon to go over his head, call that Shari lady himself. Ramon understands, he knows we should do this. But he lets Carlos make the decisions.*

She didn't know when her mind had changed so much, from wanting to get away from Ramon and the homeboys to wanting to make sure that nothing bad happened to them. *I should get out of here while I still can, before it gets worse. Wait for the right opportunity, maybe later -tonight, and slip out of here when everyone's asleep. . . .*

Through the wall, she could hear Carlos and the other homeboys talking about something. *Don't think they're going to call it a night anytime soon.*

She yawned, covering her mouth with her hand. She didn't know why she was so tired, she'd slept late enough in the morning . . . it didn't make any sense, didn't . . .

Kayla rubbed her eyes and picked up the book again. Maybe she was still exhausted from everything that had happened, maybe this was her body's way of telling her to chill out and get some rest. Maybe . . . maybe . . .

The book slipped from her fingertips as she drifted off to sleep.

Sharanya stepped quietly into the house, past the sleeping figures in the living room. She paused in front of Carlos, deftly reaching into his shirt pocket to remove her business card. The card glowed slightly at her touch. No need to leave this behind, with its odd set of runes and glyphs disguised as a business logo. True, she might need to track down Carlos again, but better not to leave any clues -behind. There was always the risk that someone else among the -Tyrone Street Boys would have some magical talent and figure out how she had tracked them to this place.

She walked down the short hallway, following her magic sense to a closed door. She opened it silently. Inside, the young mage was asleep on the bed, a book fallen by her open hand.

Kayla dreamed of dancing. It was a warm moonlit night, and she was standing in an open meadow that was ringed with tiny mushrooms, watching the dancers. All those strange people with the pointed ears and delicate, inhuman faces, dressed in elegant flowing clothing, whirled and turned to the music. The women wore long gowns of bright colors, silver and blue and green and gold, and the men were in short jackets and odd-looking pants, laughing and speaking among themselves as they moved through the dance. Kayla could hear the melody but she couldn't see the musicians, the slow strings and soft flutes, the delicate sound of a harp, playing from somewhere unseen. So she watched the dancers, entranced, as the beautiful people moved in graceful patterns on the silver-edged grass.

Someone was calling to her, asking her to join them. She shook her head, terrified that she would ruin the beauty of the dance. She wasn't dressed for it, she didn't know how to dance . . . a silver-haired man smiled at her, and she saw that she was now dressed as they were, in a heavy gown of black velvet and pearls, swirling skirts that brushed against her bare feet.

Their hands reached to her, drawing her in. The silver-haired man bowed to her as he took her hand, leading her in the steps of the dance.

Everything blurred around her as she danced: the world seeming to fade away to nothing but this meadow and the dancers, their laughter and words blending in with the music. The lights of the city beyond the car window blended in as well, melting into the moonlight and the dancing figures.

Kayla came back to herself with a start. The dancers faded away, to be replaced with the smooth leather seats and dark interior of a BMW convertible. The dark-haired woman with the pointed ears—Shari?—was in the driver's seat next to her, watching Kayla with a small smile.



“Almost there,” Shari said. “Are you awake now?”

“Where?” Kayla tried to say, but her voice wasn't working right. She felt like she was still dancing, whirling and spinning in the patterns of the dance, with everything moving around her.

“I thought so,” the woman said. “That's good . . . you'll need to be awake. Nataniel wants to talk with you.”

*Nataniel?* Kayla wanted to ask, but decided against it. None of this made any sense. One minute she'd been asleep at the house, now she was halfway across the city in a car with the weirdest lady she'd ever seen, with no memory of how she'd gotten there.

*I have to get out of here!*

She casually moved her hand to the door handle, ready to shove the door open and jump. The car wasn't going too fast; she could roll out and probably be okay, nothing worse than bruises. Kayla tensed to shove the door, then felt her hand lift from the handle, drifting back to her lap of its own accord. She looked over at the odd woman in shock.

Shari smiled.

Kayla clenched her hands into fists, trying to keep from shaking. It was all too weird, too much for her to understand. She thought about hitting the woman or grabbing for the hand brake to stop the car . . . her hands froze in place, she couldn't feel them anymore, couldn't even wiggle her fingers. “Just another few minutes, girl,” Shari said without looking at her. “Sit there quietly, we'll be there soon.”<T>

*How can I sit here quietly when you're screwing with my brain?* Kayla wanted to scream at her, but her voice wasn't working any better than her hands. She sat quietly in the passenger seat of the car, -because she didn't have any choice in the matter.

She could still turn her head, though, so she looked out the window. They were driving down a residential street near the ocean; she could see the wide expanse of white beach beyond the houses.

Shari brought the car to a stop in front of a two-story house. “It's just a few stairs up to the door. You can walk, can't you?”

For an answer, Kayla felt her legs straighten and her hand push open the car door. She followed Shari up the steps and through the front door of the house, into the darkened hallway and back to an open patio door. Someone was outside, standing in the shadows on the deck, looking out at the bright moon on the blackness of the ocean.

“I've brought her, my lord,” Shari said, and Kayla was surprised to hear the respectful tone in her voice.

The man turned. He was tall, with pointed ears and short pale blond hair, wearing a long robe that looked Japanese . . . *and he has blue eyes, those same catlike blue eyes that she has. And those slitted eyes are looking at me like a piece of dead meat,* Kayla thought. *Even Shari looks friendlier than this guy.* Kayla wished she could run, just get anywhere away from these two, run away as fast as she could. . . .

With a start, she felt her legs unlock, and fell backwards into a deck chair with a thump.

“Sit down, girl,” Shari said unnecessarily.

“So, this is the new human mage,” the man said quietly, walking closer. “She doesn't look like much, Shari.”

“There's no way to know what she can do,” Shari said.

Kayla felt like a bug under a microscope, with the two strange people staring down at her. “Who are you, and what are you?” she asked, as calmly as she could. “And why can't other people see what you are?”

The man nodded. “Good questions. I suppose I'll answer them.” He pulled another deck chair closer and relaxed into it. “I am Nate Shea. Sharanya, you've met. To answer your second question: we are elven, the faerie folk.” He smiled as Kayla sat up straighter, staring at him. “Yes, all the old legends are true. The elf-folk who live under the hill, dancing in the faerie ring in the moonlight . . . all quite true. When times became difficult, many centuries ago, we left the Old Country and came to America.”

His voice tightened. “I was a lord of our Court, a Prince. But many years ago, I was banished from our court because of my . . . ambitions. I came to the human world to begin again, with my faithful Sharanya and other followers at my side.” Kayla saw Shari's mouth twist at those last words, looking down at her hands. *Not so faithful as all of that, Kayla thought. This guy's not so smart. Can't he see that Shari hates him?*

“And to answer your last question,” Nataniel continued. “The humans don't see us as what we are because we don't want them to. Surely you can -understand that, being what you are.”

*And what does he think I am?* Kayla wondered.

He smiled, as if knowing her thoughts. “A very frightened human child, who also knows the ways of magic.” He took her hands in his, looking into her eyes. She couldn't look away, couldn't pull away . . . the room tilted around her, strange colors and scents moving past her. She saw a blur of images: herself, standing next to the racks of potato chips with the fire burning over her hands; Billy's blood on her fingers, the wound slowly sealing itself as she watched; the crazy man in the jail, shouting at her.

*Devil's daughter! You're the Devil's daughter!*

The images faded as her hands burst into flame, cold blue fire flickering over her fingers. It illuminated the patio, the light reflected in Nataniel's and Shari's catlike eyes.

“As I thought,” Nataniel said, a note of satisfaction in his voice. He leaned back in his chair, watching her. “So, what shall we do with you, little girl?”

*He makes my skin crawl, Kayla thought. I don't know who this guy is, or what he wants with me, but I don't like the way he looks at me.*

“Do you think she's strong enough to go against Queen Lilith, my lord?” Shari asked quietly.

Nataniel's eyes never left Kayla's face. “Possibly. Quite possibly.” He steepled his fingers together. “I have a business proposition for you, girl. As I said, I am a banished prince, unjustly exiled from my homeland. If you're powerful enough, you could help me regain my position in the Unseelie Court. And

I'd reward you greatly. What do you wish for?" He spread his hands wide. "Cars, jewelry, money, property . . . anything could be yours. Is there a man that you want? We can make sure that he'll -always want you, that he'll never even think of anyone else."

Kayla thought about one particular man and his laughing dark eyes. She thought about how she'd feel if she knew that he'd never leave her, he'd -always love her . . .

*No. That's not right. They shouldn't do this to anyone. Playing with people's minds, treating them like they're toys—that's not right.*

"What—what if I don't want to?" she asked hesitantly. "What if I just want to go home?"

Nataniel shrugged. "Then you can leave, of course. We won't stop you."

"You mean it?" Kayla stared at him in surprise.

"Of course." He smiled. "I'm asking for your help, not demanding it. If you don't want to help me, you can leave, just walk out the door."

Shari and Nataniel exchanged silent looks. Kayla thought she could hear a whisper of sound in the silence, something quieter than the waves against the sand, but it was too faint to make out all of the words. . . .

*: . . . through the Door, my lord?:*

*:If she survives, then she's of value to me. If not, then it makes no difference . . . :*

Kayla decided she didn't like the look in their eyes at all. There was something in the way they were watching her, as if they were trying not to smile about a joke that she didn't know about.

"I'd like to go home and think about it," Kayla said at last. "If that's okay by you?"

"Just walk out the door, girl. We won't stop you," Nataniel said.

It sounded like the best idea yet. Maybe she could get some more information from Shari on the way home. . . .

Kayla started through the patio door to walk through the house, and stopped in mid-step.

Something was wrong. It was too quiet. It took her a half-second to realize that the sound of the ocean waves had suddenly stopped.

And it was too dark, as though the streetlights had suddenly gone out, too. She squinted, trying to see anything in the pitch darkness, and then realized what else was wrong as well.

She was standing on uneven ground, not on the carpeted floor.

Kayla concentrated hard, imagining the blue fire coiling over her outstretched hand, the lines of light rippling over her fingers. . . .

Her hand brightened with fire, enough to illuminate what was around her. She looked around quickly,

and blinked.

She wasn't standing in the house. It was too dark to see, but she knew that she was Somewhere Else. Somewhere that smelled of trees and dead leaves and another smell that she couldn't identify, a strangely foul but sweet smell, like something dead and rotting. And there was something squishy underfoot that she couldn't identify, either. She stood very still, too startled and scared to move.

The area brightened suddenly with another light, as the full moon emerged from behind the thick dark clouds overhead, illuminating the trees around with a silvery light.

*Trees!*

It was a forest, she could instantly see that much. Not a house in Los Angeles, but a forest. A dark, apparently endless, forest, surrounding her with trees for as far as she could see in the dim light.

*Toto, I don't think we're in Kansas anymore,* Kayla thought in shock, staring at the forest around her.

## Chapter Ten

Kayla stood in a clearing, the damp dark leaves squishing beneath the soles of her sneakers, with a faint whispering wind through the trees the only sound around her. All she could see was the faint outline of dead, barren trees in all directions, dripping with slimy-looking ivy and covered with ugly molds. And nothing else. This forest, whatever and wherever it was, was more desolate than anywhere she'd ever seen before.

She leaned against a tree trunk, not wanting to look at the gnarled, wiry shapes of the trees, with long, sinuous tendrils coiling around the lifeless branches.

*Maybe I should just sit down and cry,* she thought. *No, that won't help anything. I don't know where in the hell I am, but this sure isn't Los Angeles anymore.*

*I've read a lot of books, but none of them had any advice for what to do when some pointy-eared slimeball dumps you out in the middle of nowhere in the dark! This is probably his idea of a great joke.*

Something was watching her. She turned quickly, only to hear the rustle of branches and the cry of some forlorn bird, flying away. For a moment it was silhouetted against the moonlight, then she was alone again.

*Well, I can't stand here all night. Might as well pick a direction and start walking.*

After a few minutes, she was convinced that she'd picked the wrong direction. But nothing here looked at all familiar, or even like any other forest she'd heard of, for that matter. Most forests had trees that looked like they were alive, at least! This forest looked like it had been dead for a long, long time. *Dead and left to rot,* she decided.

And there was something else about it, something she couldn't quite put her finger on—a feeling that more was wrong here than just rotting wood, a feeling of malevolence, as though the trees were dead but

the forest was alive. As though there was something else here, hidden beneath the surface, watching her and laughing to itself.

*And it doesn't like me very much.*

She continued walking, just because there wasn't anything else she could do. She sure didn't want to sit down in the muck and wet leaves and stay here in this awful place.

The moon slid away again behind the dark clouds, and then she had to stop, just because there was no way to see where she was going in the pitch darkness.

As she waited for the moon to reappear, she heard a whisper of sound, something so faint she wasn't certain what it could be.

*I wish I could've spent some time in Girl Scouts instead of in detention at school, she thought. They could've taught me to make fire out of nothing but sticks and my shoelaces, probably. As it is, I don't know what I can do. There's nothing here.*

*This has to be a dream. I'll wake up and find myself somewhere else, anywhere else. Even Roberta's apartment would be better than this!*

*I just don't understand. Why did Shari and Nataniel do this to me? What kind of game are they playing?*

She heard the sound again, closer and more distinct, and with a chill touch of fear, knew what it was: the howling of wolves. She didn't know whether they could hear or smell her, all she knew was that she didn't want to be there when they arrived.

She picked a direction and started to run.

"The Hounds have scented prey," the Master of the Hunt said to Lady Catt, as he cantered easily on his horse. His eyes narrowed as he looked around the moonlit forest.

"Have they now?" she replied in an uninterested tone. She turned away from him, ignoring the way his eyes flashed angrily within his horned helmet. His face was hidden by the helmet's dark mask, the way his leather and armor-garbed body was hidden by his cloak, but she could sense his anger. And she didn't care.

There was nothing for them here. They had long since exhausted any interesting prey for the Wild Hunt, and even the Master of the Hunt admitted it. And there would not be any more prey, ever again. Unseelie sorcery had stripped this forest of its -native magic, killing the trees and every other living thing that needed some touch of magic to survive, and Unseelie hunters had destroyed the last of the animals. They had drained this land so much that their own sorceries were limited by it; only the Queen, of the entire Unseelie Court, could still work her wreakings with the Greater Magic. As for Catt, she could not even work enough magic to conjure up the lovely clothes that she had once worn to these Hunts or change magically -between those silken gowns into the heavy silver armor that she now wore.

But one of the ravens had said it had sighted something, perhaps a Seelie elf. A Seelie lord would be good sport. More than one would be a true battle, something none of them had seen in a long time. The

mere thought of it had been enough to rouse the lethargic Unseelie from their Court, make them put on armor and swords dusty from disuse, and send them out on Hunt.

Lady Catt thought the bird was insane, personally.

There was nothing in this wilderness, not a Seelie or anything else.

*So much for the grand entertainments of the -Unseelie Court, she thought wryly. Is this what we've come to, we who once hunted Seelie High Court elves like deer in this forest? Chasing the illusions of Seelie prey? Is this what we are now? Brave hunters of squirrels?*

“They've picked up a scent!” the Master said, pointing to where the Hounds eagerly sniffed the dark ground. One of the Hounds bayed, then another, a fierce sound, and the others took up the call. The Hounds surged forward, away from the Unseelie lords and ladies astride their horses.

“It's a human!” the Master shouted, bending low over the neck of his horse and spurring it into a gallop.

*A human? But there are none left alive here, only the slaves and servants . . . it's not possible!*

Catt raced after him, her own magic reaching out to find the source of the Hounds' eagerness. The other Unseelie lords followed them, no longer the disinterested, bored band of courtiers that had left the Queen's castle a few hours before.

“A human mage,” Catt called, sensing the lure of power like a beacon in front of her. She could feel the incandescent glow of magic, bright against the deadness of the surrounding land and trees. It moved quickly through the trees before them. She sensed the sudden taste of fear rippling through the human's magic.

“We'll take it alive,” she shouted, loud enough to be heard over the pummeling hooves of the horses on the damp ground. “A gift to our Queen!”

She was close enough to him that she could hear the snarl that transformed the Master's face beneath his horned helmet. “Do as I say,” she hissed, “or risk *Her* wrath!”

He nodded once, then spurred his horse to even greater speed. The elven horses strained beneath their riders to follow him, moving quickly through the shadowed forest.

Kayla slid down a slimy embankment, landing on her knees in the icy water of the stream. She lurched to her feet again, scrambling for a handhold on the opposite bank.

*Come on, run, they're closer, they're getting closer, they're—*

She grabbed for the low, glistening roots that extended out from the muddy bank above her head and screamed in sudden surprise as those roots came to life, wrapping themselves tightly around her hands and wrists. Kayla struggled to pull free, -unable to stop screaming.

She could feel the roots doing more than holding her fast; they were pulling at something inside her, feeding off the magic inside her. She tried even harder to pull free, then felt a surge of magic coursing through her hands from within, culminating in a bright flash of light. The roots fell away, shriveling and

dying instantly, and Kayla fell backwards into the water with a splash.

For a moment, she couldn't do anything but hold her hands to her face and cry.

*This place is so horrible, it's awful, please, somebody get me out of here!*

*Stop it! Got to keep running, keep running . . .*

The wolves were getting closer every second. -Regaining her feet, Kayla staggered down the streambed, sloshing through the cold water and -trying not to slip on the wet stones. She clambered up a sandy bank, carefully not touching any of the tree roots that dangled near her, and stopped for a moment at the top to catch her breath. She could hear the wolves howling frantically and eagerly.

Then, with an inhuman scream that echoed through the trees, a wolf burst from the cover of the trees on the opposite bank of the stream. In the split-second that it paused there, she saw it wasn't a wolf at all, but a black hound with yellow eyes, nearly as tall as she was. It howled once, triumphantly, and then leaped across the wide stream directly at her.

Kayla didn't even have enough time to scream as the gigantic hound knocked her to the ground. She tried to roll out from under it, but its jaws clamped down on her arm, painful but not breaking the skin, holding her fast. Her struggles sent them rolling off the bank and into the icy water, but the dog's teeth wouldn't let go.

Desperate, Kayla grabbed for the dog's nose, twisting it sharply. The huge dog yelped in surprise and let go of her. She staggered to her feet and then ran as fast as she could, splashing down the stream.

As she ran, she could hear the whimpers and whining of the hound behind her, joined by the barks and howling of the rest of the pack.

The stream widened suddenly into a still lake, quiet and dark beneath the moonlight, surrounded by a meadow of tall grasses. Kayla fell onto the sandy shore, too exhausted to go any further. She crawled into the thick grass and lay there for a -moment, trying to catch her breath.

*Please, just let me wake up now, make them go away, please please . . .*

The howls of the hounds were all around her now, and a new sound: the stomping of horses' hooves and the jangle of metal. She tried to get up, and something kicked her back down again, something heavy and hard as stone.

She rolled away and managed to get up onto her knees, and saw the milling crowd of riders on horseback and dogs surrounding her. Another pair of hooves kicked close to her, and she ducked back, falling against the legs of another horse.

Someone laughed, a cruel sound, as Kayla made a wild dash to get past one of the horses. Something tripped her and she fell again, landing hard.

"Enough." The woman's voice was quiet, but loud enough to be heard above the sounds of the horses and the snarling dogs.

Kayla got up slowly as a single rider moved to face her. She couldn't see much of the woman, just a glint of bright eyes, some kind of metal visible beneath her swirling long cloak. Her horse stamped angrily as it

moved toward Kayla at its rider's urging, one slow step at a time.

The woman spoke again. "Well, well, what do we have here?" Now that she was closer, Kayla could see that she wore metal armor under the cloak, the bright steel reflecting the moonlight. The woman's face was as emotionless and as finely chiseled as glass. She stared at Kayla, who could now see the tips of pointed ears beneath the hood of the woman's cloak.

*They're elves, they're all elves. . . .*

*This can't be real, it can't be happening to me!*

The other riders moved in, surrounding Kayla with stomping horses, the huge hounds circling her. The riders all wore silver and leather armor, which jangled with their laughter as they closed in around her. And in their faces, she saw hatred and cruel pleasure, malevolent smiles on their fine features, moonlight reflected in a dozen pairs of eyes, ice blue and green, pale violet and silver. None of those eyes looked even remotely friendly.

"Is it human?" a man's voice asked.

"It has magic!" another voice crowed exultantly.

"Can we kill it now?" a third voice asked, dry and dusty as death.

"I want to wake up now," Kayla said to no one in particular. "This is an awful nightmare, and I really want to wake up now."

She waited to see if anything would happen. The riders watched her in silence, the horses shifting and making odd snuffling sounds.

"It's only a human child," the woman said at last. "A little human girlchild with some magic. Nothing more than that."

*Maybe they'll be nice to me because I'm a kid?* Kayla thought hopefully.

"Tie it up and bring it along," the woman said.

Kayla was more exhausted than she'd thought was possible. It felt as though she'd been running behind the horses for hours, with the sweat dripping down her forehead and into her eyes. With her hands tied and the rope fastened to the saddle of the woman in the silver metal armor, there was no way she could even wipe her face.

*I'm sure I'm going to wake up any second now,* she thought, feeling the burning pain in her legs getting worse by the minute. *Any second now, I'll wake up and be somewhere else . . . any second now . . .*

The moon was higher now, illuminating the entire forest with silvery light, and it was by that moonlight that Kayla first saw the castle, rising from the hill like something out of legend. Tall spires of gray stone arched upward, covered with ivy and hung with tattered cloth banners. Maybe once it had been beautiful, but now it looked as dead as the surrounding forest, dead and decaying.



There was no sign of life as they rode slowly over a creaking wooden bridge through the castle gates. She had to walk carefully to keep from falling over the pieces of wood and stone lying on the ground. The group of riders stopped in the open courtyard.

“I must change into court clothes before I go -before Queen Lilith,” the woman in armor said, dismounting from her horse and taking the rope that held Kayla's hands. “Come with me, girl,” she said, tugging at the rope.

“Hey, I'm not a dog on a leash, lady!” Kayla snapped.

She saw the smile that drifted across the woman's face beneath her cloak hood. “No, you are not,” she agreed, and with a deft movement, drew the knife at her belt. Kayla flinched back, but the woman only cut the rope. Kayla rubbed at her sore wrists, which were red and raw from the chafing of the rope. Without even thinking about it, she let the magic simmering within her rise to the surface, sparks of pale blue flickering over her skin. The abrasions and pain disappeared a moment later.

“A healer!” someone murmured close to her, and the words were repeated by the others, gathering close around her. One of them reached for Kayla's hand with grasping long fingers, a broad-shouldered man wearing dark leathers and, oddly enough, a bright red cap on his head. She stepped back, not liking the look in his eyes.

“Don't touch her,” the woman said. “She's mine, not any of yours. Unless you wish to fight me for her?”

The elf wearing the red cap backed away a step.

“I thought not.” The woman pulled the hood of her cloak away from her face, staring at Kayla with an odd look in her green eyes. Without the hood, she looked much younger than Kayla had thought, short sandy-colored hair tousled around the fine features of her face and those long, pointed ears.<I>

“Come with me, girl,” she said, abruptly turning and walking away. Kayla wondered whether she should follow, then saw the guy in the red cap watching her with eyes that burned. She headed quickly down the hallway to catch up with the woman.

Silently, they walked up a crumbling stone staircase, down shadowed hallways. *What a dump*, Kayla thought. *This isn't how I imagined a faerie castle would look. I wonder why they've let it turn into this mess?*

“Once this was a lovely hall,” the woman said, as if answering Kayla's unspoken question. “Once this was one of the finest castles of the Unseelie, gold and silver and glittering with magic. Once I was Lady Catt of the Unseelie Court, the Queen's right-hand confidante, wearing fine silks and jewels in our moonlight dances, leading our Host to war against the Seelie. Now that is no more.”

*I'm surprised she's talking to me like I'm a real person!* Kayla thought. “What happened?” she asked.

Catt didn't answer. She shoved at a closed wooden door, which creaked open slowly. Inside was a small room, not much different from a prison cell. There was only a cot with blankets laid over it, what looked like a large rack for -armor, and a standing closet. Ignoring Kayla, Catt undressed quickly, dropping her cloak and pieces of armor on the floor.

Kayla bent to look at it curiously, then blinked. *It's not steel . . . it's solid silver!* She turned, to see Catt lifting a lovely blue and silver gown from the closet, slipping it over her thin shoulders. Her very thin

shoulders. *I'd think the lady was sick, she's so thin, but all these people look like that. . . .* “Hey, this is silver, isn't it? That's worth a lot.”

“Is it worth much in the human realms?” the elf-woman asked, lacing the front of the gown. “Silver is not very rare here in the Unseelie lands.” She fastened on the gown's long sleeves with ribbon ties, and Kayla saw that the gown wasn't as beautiful as she'd thought—it was faded, marked with old stains, obviously old and worn. “I've thought of visiting the human worlds,” Catt continued as she smoothed the heavy skirts of the dress. “To see the realm of folk who live without true sorcery, building their tall towers and mechanical magics.”

“Why don't you go there?” Kayla asked.

“Only those who are banished can go to the -human lands. That is by the Queen's command. But I am curious about them.” She shook her head. “Come. It is time to bring you before the Queen. I wish I could delay that longer, because I have many questions to ask about the human lands, but the Queen will already be impatient.”

“Hey, you can ask me those questions after I talk with her, right?”

Catt didn't answer.

*This doesn't sound very good,* Kayla thought, following Catt down the stairs and through the rabbit warren of twisty hallways. *I guess I could try to run away from her, get out of here, but where would I go? I don't know this place, don't know anything about how to get home from here. . . .*

As they walked down a last curved flight of narrow stairs, hands suddenly grabbed Kayla and pulled her away from Catt. Laughing, the -Unseelie courtiers, garbed in faded velvets and silks, dragged Kayla out into the huge hall. They spun and pushed her around, until all she could see was a blur of colors, red and blue and gold and green, and their laughing, cruel faces. As they shoved her forward, she had one glimpse of a huge room with vaulted stone ceilings and -giant fire pits along the sides of the room, filled with glowing coals. Stained and torn tapestries hung from the walls, which were black with soot and filth. Half-seen shadows flitted through the darkness of the hall behind the waiting crowd of brilliantly clothed elves.

The mass of people parted to admit her and her captors, revealing a silver-haired old woman with eyes the color of ice, seated upon a carved stone chair. A long velvet gown the color of blood draped her thin figure, and two silent guards stood on either side of her, so motionless that they could've been carved from stone.

“So what have you brought me, my dear Catt?” the old Queen asked in a thin voice, her eyes not wavering from Kayla.

Catt stepped forward and knelt gracefully. “A human child of magic, a gift to your Majesty,”

“Indeed,” the Unseelie Queen said thoughtfully. “And do you have nothing to say for yourself, human child?” she asked, gazing at Kayla with her colorless eyes. “Or are you so awed by the glory of the Unseelie Court that you have been struck dumb?”

The courtiers tittered at the remark, and Kayla agreed with them. This place was shabby, not anything like what she'd imagined a queen's court would be.

"I'm not dumb," Kayla said, "And besides, this is only a dream. I don't believe in you!"

The elves laughed.

"I'll wake up in another few minutes, I'll be back in bed, and I probably won't even remember that I dreamed about you!" Kayla said hotly.

"I want this one's blood," a chill voice said from behind her. She turned quickly, to see the broad-shouldered elven man dressed in leather, with the red cap perched on his head. "I want this one's blood to dye my cap!" he repeated, staring at Kayla with hungry eyes.

She felt a chill run down her back. "Okay, I -admit it," she said. "This isn't a dream, this is a nightmare. It's an awful nightmare, a real, genuine, honest-to-God nightmare, but I'm going to wake up from it, any minute now."

There was another titter of laughter from the crowd, and the Unseelie Queen smiled. "What you believe and what will happen are two different things, child," she said. "But, for the moment, you amuse me. So I will let you live, I think, at least for now."

"Look, lady," Kayla said, starting forward. The sound of a dozen swords being drawn stopped her in her tracks. She glanced around nervously and then stepped back from the Queen's throne.

"You amuse me, child, but don't push your luck," the Queen said dryly.

Kayla nodded, her mouth dry.

"Now, tell me, how did you come here?" the Queen asked. "Did you conjure a doorway with your own magics between the human lands and our own? You look too young and unskilled to accomplish such a feat."

*How do I explain what happened? And why in the hell should I explain anything to someone who's only part of a dream?*

"You may think this is only a dream," the Queen said, idly viewing the jeweled rings on her long, -tapered fingers. "But I assure you that it is quite real, and if you defy me, you'll discover the reality of it in a most painful and immediate way. So, -answer my question: how did you come here?"

"I don't know what you're talking about with doors and all of that," Kayla began. "All I know is one minute I was in Los Angeles—well, Santa Monica, I think, but I'm not certain about that—and then all of the sudden I'm out here. I bet Shari and Nataniel think this is some kind of a great joke. . . ."

As she said Nataniel's name, she felt a sudden chill run through the crowd, a tension as the smiles froze on the faces of those graceful figures.

"Let me kill it now!" the man with the red cap hissed.

"In a moment," the Queen murmured. "First, I would hear all of this one's story. So, you -admit that you are in league with Nataniel, who was banished many centuries ago to the human lands? I would have killed him for attempting to murder me," she added in an undertone, "but he had too many loyal followers, and a war would have destroyed the -Unseelie Court. Instead, I sent him and his followers to the human lands, where now, apparently, he is recruiting young humans to do his work for him."

“I'm not working with him at all!” Kayla protested. “Look, he kidnaped me, asked me if I wanted to work with him, I said no, and so he sent me here!”

“I see.” The Queen was silent for a long -moment, then spoke. “Despite your words of innocence, I cannot believe that Nataniel would have brought you here if you were not allied with him and somehow part of a plot to overthrow my rule. Therefore, my Lord Skullcleaver . . .” She gestured at an Unseelie in dark armor, who stepped forward with a sword raised, firelight glinting off the blade.

Kayla swallowed. *Even if this is a dream, this is getting way too real for me.* She glanced at the Queen, who was sipping dark red wine from a crystal goblet, and felt a shock run through her. Something was wrong about the Queen, she could feel something was very wrong, and as the Queen brought the glass again to her lips, she knew what it was.

“You've been poisoned,” Kayla said.

The swordsman stopped in mid-step.

The Queen stared at her. “What did you say?”

“You've been poisoned,” Kayla repeated. “And there's more of the poison in that glass. At least, I think it's poison. I don't know what it is, but I can see what it's doing to you, eating away at your mind and body. . . .”

The glass slipped from the Queen's hand and shattered on the stone floor.

“And how did you know this?” the Queen asked, all traces of amusement gone from her voice. A sudden silence had fallen over the crowd.

“She's a healer,” Catt whispered from behind her. “We saw her heal herself only a short while ago.”

“Is that true?” the Queen asked Kayla.

She nodded. “It's what I do. I guess it's what you'd call my magic. There's something wrong with that goblet, I can't tell exactly what, but when you drank from it, I could see the poison affecting you.”

The Queen rose unsteadily from her throne, and the crowd parted instantly before her. She strode across the hall, toward an arched doorway on the far wall. “Bring the girl, Lady Catt,” she said without looking back.

Catt pushed Kayla ahead of her, walking quickly. “Say nothing unless she speaks to you, if you value your life,” the woman said tersely to Kayla.

*Not a problem, I don't want to get in that lady's way, not when she's got that “To hell with patience, I'm going to kill someone” look in her eyes!*

A moment later they were in the kitchen, walking past the greasy wooden tables and cowering servants dressed in rags who were kneeling on the straw--covered stone floor.

“Who poured my glass of wine?” the Queen -demanded, glancing around furiously at the terrified servants.

No one moved or spoke.

The Queen walked forward, her eyes moving over the servants' faces, and stopped in front of a kneeling woman. *She's human like me*, Kayla realized, seeing the woman's normal ears showing beneath her tangled mop of dark hair.

"I know what you did," the Queen said dangerously. "What did you put in my wine?"

"It wasn't me, milady," the woman wheezed, her face pale white beneath the grime. Impatiently, the Queen shoved her out of the way, searching through the items piled on the wooden table next to her, bowls and platters clattering haphazardly onto the floor. A moment later she straightened, something small and white clenched within her hand.

"What is this?" she said, turning quickly to Kayla. "This is not of my realm. Do you know what this is?"

*No-Doz? What is a bottle of No-Doz doing here?*

"Uh, it's pills, Your Majesty," Kayla said, looking at the white plastic bottle. "No-Doz. They're caffeine pills."

The Queen's fingers whitened on the plastic bottle, and Catt made an odd choking sound. "Caffeine!" the Queen said in a voice like ice. "Heads will roll over this," she whispered. "Heads will roll!" She turned quickly to Kayla. "Can you counter the poison, healer?"

"I think so," Kayla said uncertainly. "I mean, you didn't drink very much of it, so there's only a little in your system. . . ."

"Even small amounts of pure caffeine is deadly to our kind," the Queen said. "Work your magic, child. Heal me of this poison."

Hesitantly, Kayla touched the Queen's pale white hands. In that instant, fire welled up from within her, blossoming around her. Suddenly she could see beneath that pale skin, the swirling patterns of power and lifeblood, and the darkening stain of shadow that was moving through her body. She could see the deadly effect of the caffeine upon the Queen, and before she could blink, the magic caught her up and plunged her into the healing.

She coaxed the poison out of the Queen's blood, changing it to something harmless that drifted away. It was more difficult than anything she'd ever done before, tracing those tiny molecules of death through the Queen's body and changing each one. When she finished, she realized that Catt was holding her up, keeping her from falling onto the stone floor. The Queen was standing silently, sparks of blue fire still flickering over her skin.

"Thank you," the Queen said stiffly. Kayla thought that maybe she'd never said those two words before. "Thank you, child." The Queen glided away without another word, walking back through the kitchen. -After a moment, Kayla felt strong enough to follow her. In the throne room, the Queen, calm and -expressionless, seated herself without a word. The gathered courtiers watched her nervously.

"It is true, what the human child said," the Queen said at last. "I was poisoned."

The Queen's eyes traveled through the crowd, glancing at one elven lord and then another, -until they

fixed upon an elderly, gray-haired elven man garbed in black velvet, who was watching her with a composed face but terror in his eyes. His lips twitched once, and before he could smooth his features into another mask of impassiveness, the Queen pointed at him.

“He is responsible!” the Queen said, gesturing with a pale finger at the elderly elf. “Take him outside and make him pay for his treachery!”

*How . . . how did she know?*

The silent swordsman and the Redcap moved to the old elf. They had taken him by the arms and dragged him halfway across the hall before he reacted, shouting protestations of innocence and begging for mercy. The heavy twin doors of the hall shut upon his wild pleadings.

*They're going to—they're going to kill that old man!*

“Wait . . .” Kayla began, then saw the look in the Queen's eyes, intense hatred mixed with a cruel satisfaction, and knew that she couldn't say anything that would save the old man's life.

“Well, that's that,” the Queen said, rubbing her hands together. She glanced at Kayla, who realized she was standing with her mouth open. “You have a question in your eyes, human child,” she observed. “What is it?”

*I don't want to say anything to this lady, I don't want to be here, I don't want to know what they're doing to that old man . . . how can she sit there, smiling, having just ordered those people to kill him?*

Kayla felt sick to her stomach, thinking of the look on the old man's face. *How can she be so cruel?*

*She's looking at me. I'd better say something, anything, before she gets angry at me. . . .*

*Oh God, I hope this is a dream . . . this can't be real, it can't . . .*

“How . . . how did you know that he was the one who tried to murder you?” Kayla asked, hoping her voice wasn't trembling as much as she was.

The Queen shrugged. “I didn't. But I had to punish one of them. That particular lord had no loyalty among the others, none who would fight for him. And it certainly impressed the rest of these useless traitors.” She gestured at the elven courtiers, who were casually but obviously making their exits from the hall. Only Kayla and the wordless guards remained close to the Queen, and Catt, who stood near the Queen, watching Kayla silently. “So, human child, the question -remains of what I shall do with you,” the elf queen continued.

Kayla thought about the elf lord who had just been dragged off to his execution and decided that maybe, just this one time, she wouldn't make any wise-ass remarks. “Well, uh . . .” she started awkwardly.

“Set your fears at rest, human child,” the elf queen said, smiling indulgently. “I owe you a debt, and I would repay it. What do you wish for? Gold, jewels, fine clothes?”

*These elves tend to think alike, Kayla thought, remembering a similar list that Nataniel had offered her. I wonder if she's going to offer me a Mercedes next?*

“Actually, Your . . . Your Majesty, I'd really just like to go home. I didn't want to come here in the first place—I mean, not that this is a bad place or anything, I kinda like the dead trees and the moldy castle and all, and it's sure been . . . been interesting, but I'd really like to go home. You don't need to give me anything else, that'd be more than enough.”

The Queen nodded. “A wish that is easily granted,” she said. “Though I am surprised that you do not wish for anything more than that. I will draw a Doorway that will take you home.” The Queen closed her eyes, her fingers moving in an odd pattern. Pure white light began to -appear around her fingers, lines and angles growing brighter and brighter.

“Thanks. Thanks a lot.” *Except, what's home for me now? Not Suite 230—no, that really had never been home, and it sure wasn't now, not -after everything that had happened. . . .*

*Maybe Elizabeth's would be home someday, but I never spent much time there, not enough to make me feel like I belonged.*

Another thought came to mind; she thought about someone else, the young man with laughing dark eyes and unruly hair, the way he smiled at her, the way he made her feel so happy and safe. . . .

She yawned, feeling very sleepy. Not surprising after everything that'd happened, all she wanted now was a comfortable bed, someplace warm to curl up and go to sleep. . . .

The room was very bright as the Queen wove her magic spell, so bright that she had to close her eyes against the light. She stood in the light, feeling the warmth against her skin and seeing it through her closed eyes.

“Fare thee well, human child,” the Unseelie Queen said in a quiet voice, her words very faint, as though falling away. Kayla smiled and yawned again, pulling the blankets tighter around her. The bed was definitely warm enough, soft and comfortable. She snuggled up against the source of warmth, hearing an indistinct murmur in response. She smiled as she drifted off to sleep.

Something awakened her suddenly, someone shoving her away. Kayla yelled as she felt herself sliding out of the bed, unceremoniously dumped onto the floor. The light switched on suddenly, and she saw Ramon, a blanket clutched desperately around his naked body, staring down at her in surprise.

*“Madre de Dios!”*

## Chapter Eleven

“Ramon, what's wrong?” someone called from outside the bedroom, then the door was flung open. Roberta stood in the doorway, looking down at Kayla on the floor, and Ramon, wrapped in a blanket, on the bed. She began to laugh.

“It's not funny, Berta,” Ramon began indignantly. Carlos appeared in the doorway, looking over Roberta's shoulder, his hair still dripping from the shower and a towel wrapped around his midriff.

His eyes darkened when he saw Kayla, and she felt a shiver run down her back. *This is -going to be bad. He's furious, I can tell by his eyes.*

“Where did you find her?” Carlos demanded of Ramon.

“I don't know, she just appeared, I woke up and she was here.”

Carlos crossed the room, reaching down to grab Kayla by the shoulders and hauling her to her feet. “Where have you been, all this week? How did you get out of Luis' house?”

Kayla shook her head. Carlos' eyes narrowed, and he raised one hand. “You will talk to me, girl! You'll—”

“Carlos, stop it!” Roberta caught Carlos' raised hand, held it tightly in her own. He glared at her; to Kayla's surprise, Roberta glared right back at him. “She came back, right? That's all that matters. She is here now.”

“But she's—”

“Carlos, you've dropped your towel,” Roberta -observed tartly, and Kayla quickly averted her eyes. “Go put on some clothes.”

With a last fierce look at Kayla, Carlos stalked away, slamming the bedroom door shut behind him.

“And you, Ramie!” Roberta turned on him. “What were you doing with this girl in your room?”

“Roberta, I didn't do anything!” Ramon protested.

*Yeah, that's the pity,* Kayla thought. *If he hadn't yelled so loudly . . .*

“You didn't do anything because you didn't have enough time to do anything!” Roberta countered.

“Berta, that's not—” Everything blurred around Kayla, dizziness suddenly overwhelming her. She leaned against the wall, shaking her head.

Roberta said something terse in Spanish to -Ramon, then to Kayla, “Girl, you're pale as a ghost. Come, I'll make you some hot chocolate, you'll feel better.”

“Just a second . . . I'm not feeling so great . . .” Everything was spinning too fast. She closed her eyes and swallowed, wishing it would all just go away. She heard the sound of the bedroom door opening; Carlos and Ramon's voices, speaking in quiet Spanish.

“Where has she been for the last week?” -Ramon asked in English.

“I want to know how she got into your room,” Roberta said, “when I know she didn't come through the front door. How did she get up to the third floor and get inside without opening a -window? The window's still locked, Ramie, from the inside.”

The dizziness cleared, slowly. Kayla straightened to meet Carlos' level gaze.

“She's *abruja*, she can do many things,” Carlos said, looking at her with expressionless dark eyes. “And now we have her back.”



Kayla sat next to the living room window, sipping from a steaming mug of spicy hot chocolate, listening to Ramon and Carlos arguing in Spanish across the room. Roberta sat near to her, watching her intently.

“Why did you come back?” the Hispanic girl asked suddenly.

Kayla looked down at her mug, not answering.

“I don't understand it. I know you don't like -Carlos . . .”

*That's the understatement of the century,* Kayla thought.

“ . . . and you never wanted to be here at all. So why did you come back?”

*I wish I knew. I must've wanted to come back here, or the Unseelie Queen would've sent me somewhere else. And what happens now?*

“It's settled,” Carlos said, standing up. “Ramie will take you to the apartment. You'll be safe there, safer than here. We'll need to keep some homeboys there to protect you all the time.”

“Listen . . .” Kayla began, then faltered, seeing the look in Carlos' eyes. She marshaled all the courage she had—*which isn't much*, she thought. “Carlos, can we . . . can we talk about this? I don't . . . I don't want to be a prisoner, locked up somewhere. I want to go home. Please. That's all I want.”

Carlos stood silently, looking at her with unreadable dark eyes.

Ramon broke the awkward silence. “You don't know what's happened in the last week, *querida*. The *bastardos* have been coming around here all the time. None of us can go out alone. It's very dangerous. I think Carlos is right, you should go to the safest place we know. There are many lives depending on you.”

*But I don't want these people depending on me!* she thought. *I just want to be what I was before, just plain, ordinary Kayla, no one special, no one that anyone cares about.*

“You're going to live in the apartment,” Carlos said in a tone that allowed no argument. “And Ramon will stay with you. He can watch over you. And Fernando will be there too,” Carlos added, as Ramon grinned at Kayla. “Just to watch over -Ramon!

“But first we'll stop at the hospital, where you will heal our people. It's too dangerous to leave them there; the *policia* won't let us guard them. There's no one to make sure that the bastards don't come after them. And there's no way we can leave them guns to defend themselves with. We'll go there and you'll heal Luis so he can leave the hospital, then take you to a safe place.”<T>

“But—”

“No more arguing,” Carlos said, cutting off Kayla's words. “That is what we're going to do.”

\* \* \*

In the bedroom, Kayla stuffed her other pair of jeans into the plastic shopping bag, throwing in some

socks after it.

*God, why did I come back here? I'm never going to get free of Carlos, ever. . . .*

*“Querida?”*

Kayla turned to glare at Ramon. “What do you want?”

“I wanted to see if you needed any help getting your things together. You sound like you're a little angry?”

“A little angry? Look, I don't want to talk to you about it! You're as bad as Carlos—you just think of me as a walking medical kit, not a person!”

He moved closer, taking the shopping bag from her hands. “You know I don't think of you as that. I'll take this to the car. By the way,” he said as he walked to the door, “your leather jacket is in the closet.”

Kayla opened the closet door. She yanked the jacket from the hanger and pulled it on. The warm smell of leather touched with a hint of Ramon's -aftershave surrounded her. *This is what I'm going to be*, she thought. *As tough as leather, as hard as the studs on this jacket. It's what I have to be.*

There were several safety pins on the dresser. She took out the silver hoops and dropped them into her jeans pocket. She fastened a safety pin in each of her ears, then followed Ramon downstairs to the car, where Carlos and Roberta were already waiting.

They were halfway up the steps to the hospital entrance when Kayla stopped, unable to walk any further.

“Come on, it's too dangerous to stand out here,” Carlos said impatiently, glaring at her.

The sensation of pain and fear emanating from the hospital crawled over her skin, tightening around her throat. She couldn't speak, almost couldn't breathe. “Ramie,” she whispered, “I don't want to go in there. It hurts too much.”

Ramon took her hand, his fingers tight around hers. “I don't like hospitals, either,” he said. “You can do it, *querida*. I know you can.”

“Come on,” Carlos urged, looking around nervously.

Holding onto Ramon's hand, Kayla walked through the hospital doors. The emotional noise hit her like a fist, and she nearly fell. Ramon's arm was around her shoulders, holding her upright.

She moved blindly, holding onto him with all her strength, unable to see or hear anything with the cacophony raging around her. Her vision cleared, and she saw that they were in a deserted corridor. There was a policeman seated on a folding chair outside the closest room, watching them with narrowed eyes.

“We're here to see Luis,” Carlos said to the policeman, not bothering to disguise the hatred in his voice.

The policeman glared back at Carlos. “No visitors, homeboy. Visiting hours won't start for another couple hours.”

“Please, he's our friend, can't we see him?” Roberta pleaded.

The cop's expression softened a little, looking at Roberta. “Okay, okay, but only for a few minutes. And only you two, the girls. The boys will have to wait outside.”

“But—” Ramon began. Carlos put his hand on Ramon's arm.

“That's fine,” he said quietly. “Kayla is the one who needs to see Luis, not us.” They sat down to wait outside, as Roberta and Kayla went into the room.

Inside the hospital room, Luis was asleep in his bed. A bandage covered him from his shoulder down to his waist, and a drip line was connected to his wrist, the IV bag hanging from a rack next to the bed.

Kayla touched him lightly, trying not to awaken him. She could feel the wound beneath the bandage, the track of the bullet that had shattered his collarbone. They'd fitted the pieces back together, but the bone would take months to heal.

*But I can change that. I can heal him.*

She closed her eyes and let the magic move through her.

She didn't know how long she stood there, lost in the magic. The world vanished around her, and all she could feel was the sensation of the magic coursing through her. She carefully knit the shattered pieces of bone back together, drawing the pain away from him as she worked. When she was done, she sat down abruptly, feeling all the power draining away from her and leaving her an exhausted, empty shell.

Luis opened his eyes and smiled at her and Roberta. “Berta, it doesn't hurt,” he murmured sleepily.

“Sleep for a few hours, Luis,” Roberta said gently. “When you have the chance, just walk out. Leave your door open so you can hear when the policeman goes to have a doughnut break, and just walk away.”

“I will, Berta,” Luis said. He smiled at Kayla again, closing his eyes to drift off to sleep.

“You did well, Kayla,” Roberta said, smiling. Kayla stood up unsteadily; Roberta held out her arm, and Kayla leaned on her gratefully.

They walked slowly from the room. In the hallway, Carlos looked at Roberta with an unspoken question in his eyes. She nodded.

“Now we'll take you to the apartment,” Carlos said, glancing at Kayla.

The street looked like a war zone, much worse than any neighborhood she'd ever seen before, with abandoned cars left like corpses on the pavement. Children played between the rusting hulks. The kids ran for the sidewalk as Ramon drove Carlos' car down the street. He parked the car in front of an

ancient-looking apartment building.

Fernando stepped out of the car first, scanning the street quickly, then gestured to Ramon and Kayla. Kayla picked up the shopping bag of her clothes and followed Ramon up the creaking flight of stairs, through a hallway littered with stinking trash and abandoned children's toys, to an unmarked door on the second floor.

"You'll like staying here," he said, and Kayla thought he sounded like he was trying to be cheerful and failing completely. "You'll have a room to yourself, you won't have to share with anyone. It's not as crowded as Roberta's."

"Yeah, but at least Roberta's place was clean," Kayla observed, stepping over some garbage on the landing.

Ramon shrugged. "No one really lives here. We keep this place only for selling . . . what we sell."

"Drugs, you mean?" Kayla asked.

He unlocked the door and they walked in, Fernando following them. She looked around -curiously. The living room was a little cleaner than the rest of the building, but completely without any furniture, except an old couch.

Ramon walked down the short hallway, glancing quickly in each of the rooms. He said something in Spanish to Fernando, who nodded. "No one has been here since we left," he added. "You will be safe here. If any other of the homeboys come here, stay out of the first bedroom—that's where they work. We don't sell drugs here, they do that downstairs. When someone wishes to buy, we lower baggies through the hole in the floor of the bathroom. That way, if the *policía* or someone else breaks through the downstairs door, there isn't anything around."

Ramon said something else in Spanish to Fernando; the other man smiled and left, closing the door behind him.

"Fernando's going to make sure everything's okay downstairs," Ramon said. "Later, he'll go get some groceries for you. I don't think there's anything but Coronas in the fridge."

"Great. I'm starving." She looked at the sofa, some of the springs poking through the fabric, and decided against trying to sit on it. *Doesn't matter, I'm not going to be here very long. -Ramon won't be that hard to get away from—a lot easier than Carlos. It's only about fifteen feet to the ground; I can jump out the window, that won't be tough at all. I'm not sticking around here, that's for sure. These guys can carry on their war without me.*

The silence was becoming awkward. "So, do you make a lot of money selling drugs?" Kayla asked.

Ramon turned away, moving to the fridge without answering. She watched as he popped the cap off a bottle of beer. "What, the money's not good? I don't believe that."

He turned to face her. In spite of herself, Kayla took a step backwards. "You don't understand!" he said angrily, then shook his head and repeated quietly, "You don't understand."

"No, I don't," Kayla said.

He gestured for her to sit on the couch; carefully, trying to avoid the deadly-looking metal springs, she sat down next to him. He took her hand in his, looking down at her grubby fingers. He glanced up at her and smiled. "You need a bath,*querida*."

"Thanks for reminding me," she said wryly.

"Fernando will bring back some towels when he goes to get groceries; you can bathe later. Just put a towel over the hole in the floor, otherwise the homies downstairs may play jokes on you. Kayla . . . what do you dream of<|>?"

"I—I don't understand," Kayla said, a little confused.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?"

"I don't know." Kayla looked down at her hands. "Before everything . . . went wrong, -before my parents disappeared, I wanted to be a doctor, I think. I don't remember."

Ramon nodded. "I've always dreamed of being someone who could make a difference. I wanted to be a lawyer, to change the way the law treats Hispanics. I studied hard in school, thinking that even though my family couldn't afford to send me to college, I'd get a scholarship and go.

"But what I didn't know as a kid is that the system, it doesn't let you do that. You go to school, but they can't teach you, not here in the *barrio*. They don't have enough teachers, or books, or anything. If you're lucky, you can stay in school through most of high school, like I did. Carlos wasn't so lucky, he had to quit school and work -after Papa left.

"All they can teach you is that nobody cares. Nobody really cares. What they teach is that you can't win, that if your name ends in Z, all you can hope for is a job at McDonald's. The teachers don't expect you to get through high school, let alone go on to college. Most of my friends can't speak English, they can barely read, even in Spanish, they can't hope for anything better than a job as a night watchman or a cook.

"And then there are the gangs. You have to stick with your own kind, otherwise you're dead. They'll find you alone somewhere and cut you up. I was ten years old when they started carrying knives and talking tough. Junior high is worse. By the time I got to high school, it was a war.

"I quit high school after the first time I was stabbed, walking to classes one morning. I wanted to go back, but Carlos made me quit then. He said that they knew I was his brother, and he couldn't protect me at the school. Next time, he said, they'd kill me.

"But one of my teachers visited me in the hospital." Ramon's eyes were distant as he smiled, remembering. "Mrs. Webster. Mrs. Jennifer Webster. She was beautiful, with long dark hair and blue eyes. Such pretty blue eyes, like I'd never seen -before.

"She knew I wanted to go to college, and she said to me: 'Ramie, you're bright enough, but you need to learn so much. You need to learn how to learn.' She convinced me to go back to high school. She'd spend an hour with me every day after her other classes, working with me, teaching me, helping me prepare for the SATs. She said that if I scored high enough, it wouldn't matter that I couldn't afford even the community college fees, that there would be scholarships to pay for my education.

"She was young and beautiful, and she cared about me. I think I was a little in love with her." His voice

fell to a whisper. "But then one of the Bloods attacked her in the hallway early one morning. He cut her face . . . here." Ramon's finger traced a line down Kayla's cheek. "She had the most beautiful face, with those pretty blue eyes.

"I wanted to visit her in the hospital, but they wouldn't let me into her room because they thought I was a homeboy. Mrs. Webster never came back to the high school after that, not even to say goodbye."

He shrugged. "Carlos needed my help, especially when the T-Men started coming after us. So I quit high school again, to work with my brother and hang with the homeboys. What else is there for me?"

He stood up suddenly and walked to the window, looking out at the street. "I need to go take care of other business," he said. "Fernando will stay here and watch over you. Don't leave the apartment, it's not safe. You look very tired, *querida*," he added. "Do you want to rest?"

"Yeah." She nodded. "I think that's a good idea."

She picked up her plastic bag of belongings and carried it into the bedroom. The bedroom was -almost as plain as the living room, with just a mattress and some blankets on the floor. She stretched out on the mattress and pulled the book about the magical white horses from the bag.

Through the open bedroom door, she could hear the clatter of a metal chain from the other room and Ramon's voice quietly calling to someone in the apartment below. *I'll just rest for a few minutes*, she thought. *Just a few minutes . . .*

*They were walking on the wet sand, the waves surging only a few feet away. Little tongues of water trying to reach their feet. Kayla held tightly to Ramon's hand, hearing Elizabet talking about something as she walked near them, but the words didn't register. Just the way that -Ramon was looking at her, that's all that mattered right now, his dark eyes glinting with hidden laughter, some kind of promise . . .* The sound of gunfire awakened her abruptly.

She half-rolled to the floor, sliding off the mattress and onto the cold linoleum. The sound erupted again, echoing from the street below. Kayla crawled to the open window, peering carefully over the sill, just enough to see.

There were several cars parked in front of the apartment building, including the white Mercedes convertible with the trashed fender. She ducked back out of sight, not certain what to do next. There was nothing here she could use as a weapon, and no way out except down the stairs, past whatever was going on down on the street.

The apartment door opened and slammed quickly shut, and she heard muffled voices from the living room, speaking in fast Spanish.

"*Querida?*" Ramon called softly, and she ran out into the living room. Fernando was standing at the side of the door, a pistol in his hand. -Ramon was reloading a small handgun, his eyes wild. "Go hide in the bedroom closet," he said to Kayla. "Stay low, don't get up for any reason.

"What's—" she began.

"They're trying to kill us all," Ramon said, his voice tight. With a start, Kayla realized that he'd been

crying, that there were smeared stains of tear-tracks on his face. “Roberta is dead. They shot her and Luisa half an hour ago. They were trying for Carlos, but he got away. Someone must have told them about the drugs here—I don’t think they know we’re up here. Quickly, now, go to the bedroom.”

Kayla nodded, too stunned to speak. She started for the bedroom, then all of them froze, hearing the sound of footsteps on the creaking stairs outside. Then the sound of a door being kicked in down the hall and a woman’s shrill scream, combined with a baby’s crying. “Shut the bitch up,” she heard someone say from the hallway, muffled by the closed door.

Her own breathing sounded very loud in the -silence, loud enough for someone to hear from miles away.

They could hear whispered words from beyond the closed door. Ramon pushed Kayla down behind the couch with one hand, his other hand bringing up the pistol to aim at the door.

The world exploded around her.

She screamed and huddled against the floor, as the room was filled with the noise of automatic gunfire. She couldn’t hear anything but the endless sound of bullets ripping through the air around her.

It was over as quickly as it had begun, a sudden shocking silence. There was no other sound, only her own breathing. She crouched against the floor, unable to do anything but breathe.

Someone grabbed her by the shoulder and yanked her up. Two young black men, one cradling a stubby machine pistol in his arms, were staring at her.

She looked down, and saw Ramon.

He lay several feet away, his hand still clutching the pistol. All around him was blood, staining his shirt and the floor. His eyes were open, staring blankly.

*Oh God . . . oh my God . . .*

Fernando was lying a few feet beyond him, a long smear of blood staining the wall where he’d been thrown by the impact of bullets, before sliding down to the floor.

She tried to pull away from the T-Men holding her. He was saying something, but she couldn’t understand the words, nothing made any sense.

He brought up his hand and slapped her across the face.

The sudden pain snapped something in her. Her shock and terror giving way to something else: hot, deadly anger.

*All right, you bastards . . .*

## **Chapter Twelve**

She grabbed his hand.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then the magic coursed down through her with a force that she'd never felt before, leaping between them. She touched his own magic, the light that was his life . . . took hold of it, and pulled.

He screamed and jumped back, staring at his hands, which were engulfed in blue fire. The skin of his hands shriveled, as though rotting in front of her. It crawled up his arms, moving up to his face. What staggered and fell to the floor wasn't a young man, but something wrinkled and bloodless, with bone showing through the tatters of skin of his hands. He twitched on the floor, making small whimpering sounds through what was left of his lips.

The other T-Man dropped his gun and ran.

Kayla didn't notice that for a few seconds, until the apartment door slammed shut; she was too busy throwing up. She couldn't stop shaking, her stomach heaving even though there was nothing left.

*Out of control, she thought, trembling. Like Elizabet said, out of control.*

*Got to get up. They'll come back and kill me.*

The T-Man was moving feebly on the floor, trying to crawl away from her. She could feel a little life left in him, barely enough for her to touch.

*I did that. I did that to him.*

*And it felt . . .*

She didn't want to think about how she felt, because right now she felt wonderful, as though every nerve ending in her body was singing. She'd never felt this good before, and it was a dizzying high, overwhelming her with giddiness.

*It's wrong . . . I shouldn't feel like this . . . I shouldn't . . .*

She turned away from the T-Man, looking to where Ramon lay on the floor. She felt tears burning her eyes. *He's dead. I didn't even see it happen. I didn't even have my eyes open to see it.*

She felt the magic stir within her, trying to reach out to him. She was next to him a split second later, kneeling; her hands touching the bloody wound.

*He's not dead, but . . .*

Her healing sense widened, brightened; blurring the rest of the room to invisibility until all she could see was the track of the bullet and how it had passed through skin and muscle to nick the -major artery that was pumping out his lifeblood with every second. She felt herself falling into the healing and stopped with a sudden thought.

*They're going to be back in a minute. I won't have time to do this and get away. I have to get out of here, I have to . . .*

*No. I won't let him die.*



She let the magic sweep through her, everything else fading away. She felt the electricity surge down through her hands, knitting the pieces of muscle back together, sealing up the rip in the artery, -closing the flesh around it.

The magic let her go suddenly and she fell forward. Her cheek lay against Ramon's chest and she could feel his breathing growing stronger, his heartbeat strengthening.

She came back to herself with a start, hearing voices through the open window. Fighting off the waves of exhaustion, she lifted Ramon and dragged him into the bedroom, setting him down in the closet and closing the door. She laid her hand briefly on his face, feeling the glowing light of his life becoming stronger and brighter with every passing second. <T>

*He'll be okay, she thought. I don't think they'll find him in here. Now I'd better get my ass out of here. . . .*

She paused in the bedroom long enough to grab her jacket and sneakers, yanking on the shoes and quickly knotting the laces. She ran back into the living room, heading for the shattered door.

“Please . . .”

Kayla stopped, looking down at the source of the whisper. The T-Man boy, sprawled on the dirty floor, staring up at her with terrified eyes. “Please, don't . . .” he whispered again, his voice failing.

“You would've killed me,” she whispered. “I'm sorry, I didn't want to hurt you that way, but . . . I need to get away from here, I can't . . . I can't . . .”

His dark eyes stared at her, filled with pain.

*I can't leave him like this. I can't.*

She knelt beside him and rested her hand on his forehead, closing her eyes. Her other vision kicked in a moment later, and she was horrified to see what she'd done to him—*pulling out the energy that his body needs, the energy of the cells themselves.*

She reached into herself, for the heat of magic within her, and poured it back into him. She could feel his body changing beneath her hand, grasping desperately for life, and willing itself to live. When she opened her eyes, he was unconscious, but alive.

*Now I'd definitely better get my ass out of here. . . .*

“There she is!”

“Oh, shit!” Kayla looked up at the three -T-Men in the broken doorway and saw the leader raise a pistol to fire. . . .

*She closed her eyes and called the magic.*

*Blinding light filled the room, light and a warmth that felt like sunlight on Kayla's face. It was too bright to see, so bright that the light imprinted itself on her closed eyes. Kayla blindly leaped for the doorway, crashing into someone who fell out of her way and half-falling, half-rolling down the stairs. On the landing, she managed to open her eyes, though the world was still filled with*

*glowing afterimages. She scrambled down the remaining stairs and paused at the bottom, listening closely, and then reaching out with that other sight.*

*She could feel the light of human lives around her: two just beyond the apartment wall that she was leaning against, close to a third life that was fading to nothingness even as she touched it. There were two others outside, beyond the building walls.*

*She took a deep breath and leaped out the door. The two T-Men standing at the car reacted a half second too late as she dashed past them and into the alley. She heard a gunshot ricochet off the wall just behind her, and a window just ahead of her shattered, splinters of glass flying past her.*

*“Stop her!” she heard someone yell from behind her. She ran without looking back, her legs pounding against the uneven pavement, her heart thudding in her chest.*

*She didn't bother to stop for traffic at the next street, just ran across the intersection and dodged the cars, which screeched to a halt around her. She heard another squeal of tires off to one side and glanced up to see the Mercedes tear around the corner, barely missing a collision with a truck. Kayla dashed into the next alley, too crowded with boxes and trash cans for a car to pass through, then around a corner and into a wide empty parking lot, next to a desolate-looking area of warehouse buildings and parked trucks.*

*Keep running . . . keep running . . .*

*I don't know what I'll do if they catch me. I can't do whatever it was that I did to that guy, not again. If they find me, I don't know what I'll do.*

She paused long enough to catch her breath, gasping as she leaned against a graffiti-covered wall. She thought for a moment that maybe she'd lost them, and then she saw the Mercedes turn into the parking lot ahead of her, moving silently like a gliding shark.

She ducked into the shadow of the closest building, but heard the roar of the Mercedes' engine accelerating and knew that they'd seen her. Kayla ran further into the shadows between the tall warehouses, plain flat walls without any place to hide, nowhere else to go.

Suddenly, ahead of her in the shadows, she saw a light glittering from a warehouse window. She ran for it, half-blinded with the sweat dripping in her eyes, her lungs aching.

Beside the lit window was a closed door. Kayla shoved at it; to her surprise, it opened, apparently unlocked.

She slipped inside and shut it quietly behind her. She looked around quickly to find a light switch, planning to hide herself in the darkness, and found herself face-to-face with a short, wrinkled old woman dressed in tattered, filthy rags, looking at her with an odd smile on her face.

“My, my,” the old woman murmured, in a voice thick with a foreign accent, “what have we here?”

“Two guys, chasing me,” Kayla gasped. “They're . . .”

“I know,” the old woman said. Kayla could recognize the accent now as Irish, but a heavy, slow Irish accent, not like what she'd always heard on television. “But they won't dare to enter here,” the old

woman added.

“B-but, they're . . . they're . . .”

The old woman smiled, showing several pointed, yellow teeth. “You're not very observant, for one who bubbles with magic like Bridget's Well,” the woman said. “Can't you see it? Can't you feel it?”

Kayla shook her head, wanting to explain to this nice old woman that they were in terrible danger, that they had to do something, call the cops, get the Feds, call in the U.S. Marines. . . .

*There was something else here, something that Kayla realized with a start. She's not . . . there's something very different about this bag lady. That odd face . . . the heavy cords of muscle beneath the rags, this lady could be a pro weightlifter without any training . . . the teeth, too long and pointed to belong to a human . . . the long fingernails, crusted with dirt . . . no, they're claws, sharp claws. She's not human, not anymore than the elves, she's something else, something completely different. . . .*

She felt more than saw the burst of magic, flowing from the old woman like dark water, racing toward Kayla . . . a shadow reaching out past her, moving through the door. She nearly fell, stepping away from it. She pressed against the wall, flinching where the dark light brushed against her, feeling a sharp pain as though she'd been cut and was bleeding . . . and sensed that it was delighting in that, enjoying her fear and pain.

There was a strangled sound from outside the closed door, and then the boneless thump of something heavy falling, and then again, a similar noise. Kayla listened, but she couldn't hear anything else, not a single sound.

“Well, that takes care of that,” the old woman said, a small satisfied look on her face. She turned to Kayla, who was still crouched against the wall. “They won't trouble us,” the woman said, “or interfere in any way. Now, come with me. I was about to set the table for dinner.” The old woman tottered away toward a lit doorway down the hall.

Kayla glanced at the closed door, sensing that hungry darkness still lingering outside, and -decided that maybe, just this once, she didn't want to look.

*She didn't really want to follow the old woman anywhere, either. Just what did she do? It felt like magic, but it wasn't any magic I'd ever seen before, nothing I'd want to know . . .*

*I'd better be polite, at least until I figure out who—or what—she is, and what's going on here. . . .*

“Coming, dearie?” the old woman asked, peering back at her.

“Uh . . . yeah,” Kayla said uneasily. “I'm coming along right now.”

The next room was dimly lit by several huge candles, their flickering light half-concealing the furniture draped with dark cloth and the odd object in the corner, a huge metal cauldron hanging over a pit of bright coals. The cauldron was blackened and old, and the old woman was now standing in front of it, adding seasonings from a small clay pot.

“Make yourself comfortable, dearie,” the old woman said, sniffing suspiciously at the open clay pot in her hand. Something leaped out of it and skittered across the floor. The old woman yelped, dropping the

pot.

Kayla gingerly sat down on the couch. "Can I help?" she asked hesitantly. *As long as I don't have to eat whatever she's cooking for dinner. I'm not into cockroaches, thanks.*

"Oh, possibly in a minute," the old woman said, reaching for another clay pot on the shelf above her. "For now, just make yourself comfortable."

"Uh, thanks," Kayla said. There was a low table, also draped in a dark sheet, directly in front of the couch. Several dozen pieces of paper were spread out upon it. Curious, Kayla picked up one of them.

It was covered with beautiful, twisty designs drawn in many colors: bright blues and reds and golds, all coiling together to form patterns. In the center, there was what looked like the image of a cow drawn out of a knotwork of twisty lines.

The paper was odd, too: a heavy, tanned -paper with darker lines running through it. "What is this?" she asked the old woman.

The old woman sighed. "That is a drawing I made from the *Book of Kells* ," she said, reaching for a wooden spoon with a long handle, maybe three feet long, and stirring the contents of the black cauldron furiously. "I've been drawing my own version for the last two hundred years or so."

"Two hundred years!" Kayla repeated in shock.

The woman laughed, an odd creaking sound. "I suppose I should be explaining to you who I am. An Caillach Beara, that was what they called me in the Old Country."

"An Caill . . . ?"

"Call me Beara, dearie, if you can't pronounce the Gaelic."

"Beara. Okay, I can handle that. What's the Old Country?"

"My, you're full of questions! I was born in Eire many years ago, what they now call Ireland. I came to America when foul times and famine befell the land. Not that I ever cared to eat -potatoes, mind you, but if the people were starving, so was I.

"And, to make it worse, they wouldn't believe in me anymore. Once they feared me and my magic, but now no one believes in me. Nobody believes in magic anymore, not even you; and you're so strong with it, it's skittering out around your edges even when you're not using it."

"I believe in magic," Kayla said, a little uncertainly.

"Do you now? Seems to me that all you've done is try to pretend that it isn't real, ever since the magic first touched you."

"How do you know that?" Kayla asked, bewildered.

"I wasn't born yesterday, dearie. I can read it in you, read you like a book. I understand power, and humans, and what you have simmering inside you. Some of us appreciate magic, believe me. It was quite a surprise, though, to have someone as talented as yourself come wandering across my doorstep.

Hmmm, I think this stock will need more salt, don't you?"

Kayla got up from the couch and walked over to her as Beara lifted the wooden spoon, dripping with broth, from the cauldron.

*This smells awful!* Kayla thought, as soon as she was within a couple feet. *I'm not going to try any of that, no way!* "Er, uh . . . I'm really not a good judge of cooking," she said quickly. "But it smells like it needs some salt, yeah."

"Why don't you stir it, while I get everything else ready?" the old woman asked, and immediately plunked the huge wooden spoon into Kayla's hand without waiting for an answer.

*Oh no, this means I have to stand next to this stuff and stir it!* "Ah, listen, it's nice to meet you and all that, but I really need to be getting out of here. It's getting dark outside, and I really want to get out of this neighborhood, y'know, and . . ."

"You can't leave before dinner, I won't hear of it," Beara said. She hobbled away to another table, picking up a large gleaming knife from a huge knife rack on the wall. She hummed an odd melody as she ran a honing stone over the long blade.

"Okay, sure," Kayla said, looking apprehensively at the knife. *I don't think I want to tick this lady off. She has some kind of weird, -dangerous magic, and she keeps really long knives around—lots of them.*

Absently, Kayla stirred the soup and wrinkled her nose as another blast of foul odors wafted up at her. *What's in this stuff? It smells worse than anything . . .*

She looked down at the thick, grayish soup and stared.

There was a human finger floating in the soup.

"YAAAAAAHH!"

Kayla leaped backwards, the spoon flying, soup spattering everywhere.

"Is something wrong, dearie?" the old woman asked, turning to look at her with the knife raised in her hand.

*Oh . . . oh, this is bad, this is really bad . . . Kayla, you've really done it to yourself this time.*

"Uh, no, not at all," Kayla said nervously, glancing from Beara's face to the sharp knife in her hand. *Probably the same knife that sliced the finger off of . . . whoever it is that's in the soup. Don't panic, don't panic, just get out of here. . . .* "There's just something . . . about the soup . . . it's . . . it's not . . . not what I was expecting."

"Ah, of course," the old woman said, nodding. She set down the knife and picked up another wooden spoon, hobbling back to the cauldron to stir it. "That's the problem nowadays: it's hard to find good meat. How can you make good stock from something like this?" She fished the floating finger out of the soup and tossed it into a trash can several feet away. Kayla flinched as she saw the large pile of white bones in the bin.

"I thought that young man looked so tasty," the old woman continued. "After all, he was very muscular. He broke into my house without even working up a sweat. You just can't tell with these things, though. It's terribly difficult to cook a -decent meal when you have to work with raw ingredients like that."

"Yeah, I can guess," Kayla said weakly, glad she didn't have anything left in her stomach that could come up. She glanced at the knife lying on the table. She could grab it, maybe threaten this lady long enough to get out of here. Then she remembered that flash of dark magic, the sound of two bodies hitting the floor in the alley.

*Come on, Kayla, think fast . . . think of something, anything . . .*

There was a sudden knock at the front door; the old woman looked up at the sound, startled.

"Would you like me to answer that?" Kayla asked hopefully, already imagining how quickly she could be out that door and running down the street.

"Oh, that's all right, dearie. I'll get it myself," the old woman said. "I'm just a little surprised. I wasn't expecting any other guests." She walked slowly to the door; Kayla took the opportunity to pick up the long-bladed knife from the table. She held it with one hand behind her back, hoping the old woman wouldn't see it.

"My, this is a surprise!" Beara said from the hallway. "Two guests for dinner! Come with me, come with me." She returned a moment later, followed by . . . *Elizabet* ?

Kayla blinked. It was Elizabet Winters, looking very calm, but with a simmering anger half-hidden in her eyes. "Elizabet," Kayla gasped, so overwhelmed with relief she thought she was about to fall over. "You . . . you can't guess how good it is to see you right now!"

Elizabet walked to her, resting her hands on Kayla's shoulders. Her dark eyes searched Kayla's. "Are you all right, child?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine, but listen, there's—"

"Later, child," Elizabet said, turning that glare on Beara. "All right, old woman, I want some answers from you. To start with, why are there two dead black boys lying on your doorstep?"

"Trespassers." The old woman shrugged. "Hoodlums. Thugs. Cheap stew meat."

"Elizabet," Kayla began, her voice squeaking a little. "She's a, uh . . . she's a . . ."

"Ogress," Elizabet said firmly. "And a cannibal, from the looks of her kitchen," she said, glancing around and wrinkling her nose. "And what else are you?"

"I am An Caillach Beara, The Hag of Beara," the old woman said, straightening slightly from her bent-over position. "I came here from Ireland hundreds of years ago, like many of the Wee Folk and the Tuatha De Danaan. And who are you who comes so boldly into my parlor?"

"I'm Elizabet Winters," the black woman said quietly. "I'm a witch and a healer and guardian of this young girl. I've spent weeks chasing down any trace of magic in the city, trying to find her."

"But I've spent time and magic on her as well," the old woman said, smiling. "It was my magic that called

her here, reaching out to her across the city. Who, then, has the greater right?"

"Uh, can I . . . I mean, I didn't . . ." Kayla could feel the currents of power rising between the two women, like the smell of rain before a storm. "Listen, Elizabet . . ."

"Be silent, child," Elizabet said, not unkindly. Her eyes never wavered from Beara. "So, old woman? What will it be? You may be a powerful Irish ogress, but there are two of us, and we can't be discounted that easily."

The old woman stared back at her. "For five hundred years, no one has dared threaten me."

"Get used to it, lady." Elizabet's voice was tight.

"I'm really not that much of a villainess," Beara said, looking away. "Yes, I feast upon the mortals, but only the worst of them—the thieves and muggers and punks who would prey upon a helpless old woman. The predators, the ones who laugh at me and my magic. They chased me out of Ireland, those ones, and so I came to this New World. The land of the free, the home of the brave. Even here, they hound me." She sighed. "It's just as well, I suppose . . . one still has to eat. Still, if I let you go, then I'll have to deal with the police. . . ."

"I'll make you a deal," Elizabet said quietly. "Let us leave now, unharmed, and we won't -interfere with what you do."

"What?" Kayla said, and stopped as Elizabet put her hand on her shoulder, holding her back. *What's she saying? This lady is a murderer, a cannibal, an ogre, God knows what else! We can't just walk out of here and let her keep -doing this!*

"So, old woman, what do you say?"

"We are alike in many ways, you know," the ogress said. "You've learned what it took me many years to understand: any woman with power is to be feared and hunted. At least we should not hunt each other, eh?"

"They don't burn witches these days, but they sure don't invite them to join the P.T.A., either," Elizabet said with a faint smile.

*I don't understand this. She's acting friendly with this—this thing!* "Elizabet—" Kayla began.

"Shush, child," Elizabet said without glancing at her. Kayla realized that Elizabet's gaze had never wavered from the ogress for a moment, not even when she was smiling.

"I would enjoy speaking with you again, Elizabet," the hag said. "You are a woman after my own heart, reminding me of my long-lost sisters."

"As long as you're not after my heart," Elizabet said. "I don't think I'd like to come over for dinner, thank you very much."

"Oh no, we'll have high tea with scones and crumpets," the hag said with a chuckle. The old woman's smile faded. "I have a small truth to confess. I knew I couldn't harm this girl from the moment I saw her. Even though I was very tempted, when she picked up one of my knives. . . ."

Kayla suddenly remembered the knife in her hand. A little self-consciously, aware of the raised-eyebrow look that Elizabeth was giving her, Kayla put it back on the counter.

“But there is a danger for all of us on the horizon: a black cloud on our future, a danger to the magic in this place and all who need that magic to live,” the hag said. “In six moons' time,” she continued. “Whatever is going to happen, it will happen in six moons' time. You have that long to prepare this young one to help counter it.” She pointed at Kayla. “Her skills will be needed. You have six months to teach her what she needs to know.”

“I don't want to think about six months from now,” Elizabeth said wryly. “I'm just worried about getting Kayla through the next two weeks.”

“Gee, thanks a lot,” Kayla muttered.

“Nothing happens by accident, young healer,” the hag said, gazing directly at Kayla. She looked down, not wanting to see the dangerous power that burned behind the old woman's eyes. “Not magic, not this meeting, not you wandering across my doorstep.” Beara turned away, hobbling back toward the other room. “You should go now. I still need to put supper on the table, and there are more of those young thugs on their way here.”

“We'll leave,” Elizabeth said.

“No problem,” Kayla said under her breath. “I've been ready to get out of this place since the minute I walked in.”

“Quietly, child,” Elizabeth said in a low whisper. “We'll talk more when we're safely out of here.” Elizabeth waited until the hag had left the hallway, then quickly pushed Kayla out the door. Kayla flinched back on the doorstep, seeing the lifeless face of a young man, his eyes dimly lit by the light from the window, his body lying on the pavement a few feet away from her. Another boy lay facedown several feet further away.

“Walk, Kayla,” Elizabeth murmured behind her. “Start walking. We have to get out of here.”

Kayla didn't need any encouragement. Walking quickly, they left the shadowed alley, stepping out into the bright, welcoming light of the streetlights.

## Chapter Thirteen

*It feels like it's been years instead of days since I was here,* Kayla thought, sprawling out onto the comfortable couch in Elizabeth's living room. “Elizabeth, I didn't say it before, but . . . thanks for getting me out of there. I thought I was a goner.”

“You probably were, despite what the ogress said about the magic being endangered in this area,” Elizabeth said, wearily pulling off her boots.

“I still can't believe you said we wouldn't do anything about her,” Kayla said. “I mean, we should call the cops to go stop her. Or maybe the Feds . . .”



“I’m surprised you don’t understand.”

“ . . . or the National Guard? Maybe we should call in the Marines?” Kayla shivered, thinking about what was brewing in that cauldron. “That’s one nasty lady.” She glanced at Elizabet. “What do you mean, you’re surprised that I don’t understand?”

Elizabet leaned back against the couch with a sigh of pure exhaustion. “Well, what do you think would have happened if we’d had to fight our way out of there?” she asked. “Who do you think would have won?”

*Good question. That old lady looked pretty mean. Then again, Elizabet’s a tough cookie, too. . . .* “I don’t know,” Kayla said.

“That’s why,” Elizabet said. “Don’t ever take on a fight unless you think there’s a good chance you can win, child. Not unless the stakes are very high.” She yawned. “Well, I’m for some hot chocolate, and then it’s probably time for bed. Would you like some?”

Kayla consulted her stomach, which was still a little queasy but seemed to be settling down at last. “Yeah, some hot chocolate would be great.”

She followed Elizabet into the kitchen, sitting down at the table as the older woman began hunting for the ingredients. *In a way, it feels like none of that really happened, she thought. Maybe it’s all been a dream, and it’s the same night when Billy got hurt. Elizabet’s making me another cup of chocolate, and then . . .* Elizabet reached for a small box of Mexican chocolate and broke off several pieces, setting them in the pot to melt.

*That yellow and red box . . . Roberta . . .*

Kayla felt something tighten inside her, and tears blurred her vision. She rubbed at her eyes, which only made it worse, as she thought about Roberta and Luisa, and Fernando, and Jose . . .

Elizabet turned. “Kayla? What’s wrong?”

“It’s, it’s just . . . that’s the same chocolate that Roberta made for me. Roberta, she’s dead now. . . . I thought she was such a bitch, but she was nice to me, and they killed her, she’s dead now. . . .” It was hitting her all at once, all the shock and anger and terrors of the last few days, falling down on her like a wave. She couldn’t keep from sobbing. “And Ramon, they tried to kill him, they shot Fernando right in front of me, I couldn’t do anything to help him . . .”

Elizabet knelt next to Kayla, putting her arms around her. Kayla felt her tears soaking into Elizabet’s blouse. Elizabet didn’t say anything, only held her.

“I’m . . . I’m okay,” Kayla said, after a few minutes. “Really, I’m okay.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Kayla thought about everything that had happened and nodded. She told Elizabet what had happened from the moment that Carlos and his friends had broken into Elizabet’s house to get her, and what had happened to her with the homeboys. And the strangeness of the Unseelie’s world, and how she’d saved the life of their Queen—though, thinking about it, she wasn’t certain that anybody except the Queen herself was going to benefit from that. And how the T-Men had come after them at the apartment, and . . .

*I should tell her. I should just tell her what happened.*

“What is it, child?” Elizabet asked, as though reading her thoughts—which *she probably was*, Kayla reflected wryly.

“Something happened tonight,” Kayla began hesitantly. “Something really awful.”

Elizabet listened as Kayla told her what had happened earlier that night at the apartment. She felt her stomach turn over and took several deep breaths as she described what she had done to the young man, the T-Man who had nearly died.

Elizabet was silent for a long time after Kayla finished the story. “I should be saying I told you so,” she said, “but you know that already, don't you? The magic within you doesn't have a conscience of its own. You can hurt people or help them. You're the one who has to decide which.”

*Yes, but . . .* “But I couldn't stop it,” Kayla said. “I couldn't do anything about it.”

“You'll have to learn to control it,” Elizabet said. “The magic isn't going to go away. It's a part of you now, a part of what makes you yourself. Right now, your magic is as dangerous as a loaded shotgun in the hands of a three-year-old. But we can change that.” She glanced up quickly. “Oh Lord, the chocolate is burning!” Elizabet moved quickly to the stove, turning off the burner as the room filled with the smell of burnt chocolate.

“So much for the hot cocoa,” she said, returning to the table.

“What do you mean, we can change that?” Kayla asked, wrinkling her nose at the burnt smell. She yawned and rubbed at her eyes.

Elizabet smiled. “My grandmother, she was the one who taught me. Of course, my talent isn't anything compared to yours, but I should be able to teach you a few things that she taught me. Gram was an amazing lady. I wish you could have met her.” She looked up at the clock as Kayla yawned again. “It's definitely past your bedtime, though,” she said. “We'll talk more about this in the morning.”

Kayla hesitated for a moment at the open door to the spare bedroom. She stood there, toweling her hair dry and wiping the last of the water from her face. Looking into the bedroom, it really did feel as though the last few days hadn't happened at all. There was the bed, still slightly ruffled from when she'd been reading a book the night that Carlos and Ramon had come to the house. *In a way, it feels like a dream, she thought. Like I'm waking up from an awful nightmare. But now it's okay, I'm home.* She stopped short at that thought.

*Home? I guess that's what this is now. It feels like home. And Elizabet? I don't think she'll ever be like my mother. I don't think I'll ever feel she's my parent, but my friend, definitely my teacher. Someone who can help me figure all of this out and make sense from my life.*

She put on a pair of pajamas and, on an impulse, moved to the bookshelf that lined one wall of the small bedroom. Just as she'd hoped, there it was: the book about the dragons. Smiling, she took it back to bed with her, opening up to the page where she'd stopped reading before.

She awakened with a start at some noise she couldn't identify. The room was still dark, with only a hint of light filtering in through the closed curtains. She reached out, and her hand brushed against the novel on the pillow next to her, lying where she'd left it before she fell asleep. She heard another sound, a rustling of the bedsheets. Someone was in the room with her—no, someone was sitting on the edge of the bed. . .

She picked up the book and threw it hard in the direction of the noise.

She could see the person now, a dim outline in the faint light. The book flew through the air and then *through* the person, bouncing off the far wall.

*Oh no . . . it's something magical again, I know it, it's something magical . . . can't I even get a night's sleep without something weird happening around me?*

“That ain't very polite, girl,” the person said with a laugh, in a woman's low, rich voice, heavy with a Southern accent. “I would think that Elizabet might've taught you better manners. Then again, you ain't been Elizabet's ward for very long now, eh? Just a couple days?” She stood and moved closer. Kayla blinked.

The old woman, her wrinkled black face creased with a broad smile, was only an outline of pale blue light, nothing more than that. *I'm going crazy . . . that's it, it's all finally hit me and I'm going crazy . . . now I'm seeing ghosts.*

“You're . . . you're . . .” Kayla's voice wasn't working quite right.

“Elizabet's gram, that's right.”

“But you're . . . you're dead!”

Gram chuckled. “I think that's obvious, girl. Most normal folks don't go around floatin' through walls, y'know.”

“But you're dead!”

“Been that way for a few years, now.”

“But . . . you're . . .”

“Yes, I'm dead. Now shut up, girl, and let me talk.” Gram seated herself next to Kayla. “That's why I'm here, girl,” she said cheerfully in her slow Southern drawl. “Since Elizabet thought it was -important that we meet, I figured I'd go ahead and meet you. You ain't never seen no ghosts before?”

“Uh, no!” Kayla blurted.

“Ah, no wonder you're surprised. Some people just can't handle the concept too well. Elizabet now, I tried appearin' to her once, not too long after I left this world. She just couldn't handle it at all. Thought she was losin' her mind. You, on the other hand, look like you're doin' just fine, honey.” She stood up, stretching wearily. Her outlines thinned even more as she stretched; Kayla could see the walls through

her. "Now, girl, we have to talk with Elizabeth. . . ."

Elizabeth set down the sociology textbook she'd been reading and reached for the light switch next to the bed. Kayla's voice, muffled through the closed bedroom door, stopped her in mid-motion.

"Elizabeth, can we come in?" Kayla asked.

"Of course," Elizabeth said, then suddenly realized Kayla had said the word "we" instead of "I." "Kayla, is someone . . . ?"

The door opened and Kayla stepped in, followed by someone that Elizabeth had thought she would never see again, at least not in this lifetime. Her grandmother glided into the room, smiling wickedly, with her feet not quite touching the ground. She sat down at the foot of the bed. "Evenin', honeychild," Gram said.

Elizabeth just stared at her.

In the long silence Kayla finally piped up. "Uh, Elizabeth, she's your grandmother, you know? Your grandmother, the dead one."

"I know who she is," Elizabeth said. "What I'm wondering is what is she doing here? And why I'm dreaming about her."

"Ain't no dream, Elizabeth," Gram said. "You're in trouble, an' that's why I'm here. You are in one heap of serious trouble. I can't see exactly what, my sight isn't too good looking very far into the future, but something evil has set its sights upon you, and on this girl here, too."

*This must be a dream, Elizabeth thought. Or maybe I'm insane. That would explain this.*

"Shoot, girl, you're not crazy, any more than I am! Lordy, you believe in magic, right? Why so much trouble believing in ghosts?" Gram spoke in an aside to Kayla. "That's why I never showed up before now. I knew she wouldn't believe it."

"All right, then, I'll take this at face value," Elizabeth said. "What I don't understand is how you can be here."

"You don't have time to understand," her grandmother replied. "What you have to do is teach this child what she needs to know, and quickly. You don't have much time, granddaughter. Only six months."

As she spoke, Gram's translucent body was becoming even more faint. She faded away to a mere brightness, a hint of light in the air. "Teach her what she needs to know before it's too late."

The words lingered in the empty air where Gram had sat a moment before.

"Kayla, do you know what's going on?" Elizabeth asked.

Kayla shook her head. "It's not my fault," she said quickly.

"I know it's not your fault, child," Elizabeth said with a sigh. "Six months. I wonder what's going to happen in six months?"

“I wish I knew,” Kayla said.

“Well, we’ll find out when it gets here. Alternatively, we go ask Beara, since she obviously knows something about it as well. I’d just as soon not do that, though. It might be significantly harder to get out of her home a second time.”

“Yeah, that’s for sure.” *I don't want to go back there without the Marines, or maybe the -National Guard.*

“Now, go to bed, child,” Elizabet said. “We’ll start your lessons in earnest in the morning.”

“Okay,” Kayla said. “I’ll let you know if any more of your dead relatives show up to visit,” she said, grinning.

“You do that,” Elizabet said with a smile, and turned off the bedlight.

Back in her bedroom, Kayla picked up the fantasy novel from where she’d thrown it and set it down on the nightstand. “All of this is really just a little too weird for me,” she said aloud, thinking about the events of the last week.

“Well, it’s only going to get weirder, honeychild,” Gram said from behind her.

Kayla turned so quickly she nearly fell. “I thought you were gone,” she blurted.

“Naw, I was jus’ doin’ that for dramatic -effect,” Gram said, an impish grin across her wrinkled dark face. “I’ve always wanted to do that to Elizabet. She’s always been so unflappable, even as a child; I just couldn’t resist it.”

“So why are you still here?” Kayla asked.

“Because, honeychild, you an’ me have to talk. Let’s go for a walk, okay?”

Silently, Kayla followed the ghost of Elizabet’s grandmother through the darkened house to the front door. The ghost drifted effortlessly through the door, vanishing from view. Kayla followed, and barely stopped herself in time to avoid bashing her nose against the door. She opened the door very quietly, so Elizabet wouldn’t hear, and stepped outside.

Outside the house, the street was very quiet, with the faint echo of the late-night traffic on Laurel Canyon as a distant noise, sounding -almost like waves on a shore. Kayla followed Gram around the side of the house, along a winding trail that led to the top of the hill—or, rather, Kayla walked and Gram floated.

“Can you tell me a little bit about this ghost stuff?” Kayla asked, trying to catch her breath as they paused at the top of the hill. She looked out at the lights of the city, spread out like a glittering carpet of jewels around her. From this viewpoint, she could see the lights of Los Angeles to the south and the San Fernando Valley to the north.

“Oh, you’ll understand that eventually,” Gram said, also admiring the view. “There’s not much to it. The basics are simple. There are two kinds of ghosts: people with unfinished business, and ones like myself

who are too stubborn and meddlesome to leave. You want to watch out for those folks that don't have all their business taken care of, girl—they can be nasty. But we have more important things to talk about.” Gram sat down in midair as though on a chair, folding her legs under her. “I was born in 1860,” she said. “In Georgia, on a farm. You know anything about American history, girl?”

“A little.” Kayla nodded. “Wasn't that right around the time of the Civil War?”

“You're right. I was born into slavery, just like my folks, my grandma and grandpa, and my great-grandparents had been. When I was a little girl, they outlawed slavery, and suddenly we were free. Even as a child, I understood what that meant.

“But I'll never forget that for the first few years of my life, someone owned me. That's the choice you'll have to make, girl. There are people out there who want to own you. And the question you have to ask yourself is: will you let them? Right now you're surviving more by luck than anything else; luck and my granddaughter Elizabet watching over you. But this choice, this has to be yours. Elizabet can teach you the ways of magic, what you need to know to control your talent and not hurt the people around you. But me, born a slave in Georgia, I can teach you about freedom.”

“I don't want anybody to control my life,” Kayla began. “But how can I stop them? It's not like—”

Gram cut her off with a sharp gesture. “It's not a question of wanting, it's a question of whether you're willing to fight right down to your last breath to be a free woman. Are you? They may gild the cage for you, make it seem like a lovely place to be, but slavery is slavery. And not just for yourself, but others.”

“What do you mean?” Kayla asked.

Gram glanced at her quickly. “You're a part of more than you know, girl. Things, they're gonna be happening around here. You'll need to be ready for 'em.”

Kayla didn't know what to say to that. Gram pointed off to her right, away from the glittering carpet of lights of Los Angeles, across the dark hills between L.A. and the San Fernando Valley. “Can you feel it, girl?” she asked.

Kayla shook her head. “I don't understand. Feel what?”

“Look there, in the hills. Can't you feel it?”

Kayla squinted, trying to see what the old woman was talking about.

“No, no! Not with your eyes! With your heart,” Gram said in an annoyed voice.

Kayla closed her eyes and reached out her hand, trying to sense what the old woman was talking about. There was nothing there. . . . No, there was something. A faint glimmer of magic, very far away, a dim point that glittered in the night. As she looked more closely at it, she could feel a sense of power, drawing her toward it.

“That's the source,” Gram said. “That's the source of magic for all of Los Angeles. There are a lot of folks that need that to survive. Keep that in mind, girl, that folks' lives are depending on that little place.”

“What folks? I don't understand.”

“You’ll see,” Gram said, “you’ll see.” She glanced up at the sky, where the moon was setting behind the distant hills. “My, it’s time you were in bed. Go home, girl; go home and learn, and think about what we’ve talked about.”

Without another word, the old woman faded away.

Kayla stood on the hillside, looking down at the lights of the city. *I don't know that I'm strong enough, she thought. Gram can talk about freedom till she turns blue . . . well, she is blue, already! But I don't know that I can do it. Carlos terrifies me. I don't know how to stand up to him. And Nataniel and those other nasty elves . . .*

*No way. How am I supposed to do it? She's nuts; the old lady is just crazy.*

*But if I don't learn how to stand up to them . . . what then? I'll be hiding from them all my life. I don't want that, either.*

She turned away and started back down the hill, lost in her thoughts.

“Concentrate!” Elizabet said from somewhere -behind her.

“But you just told me *not* to concentrate!” Kayla protested from where she was sitting on the living room floor. Her eyes were tightly closed, but she wanted to open them and scream. *These “mental exercises” are making me crazy!*

“Well, you’re not getting it that way,” Elizabet said, “so we’ll try the other way. Since you’re having trouble relaxing enough to use your Sight, we’ll try this instead. We have to train you to where you can rely on your talent, not just have it happen -accidentally, uncontrolled. So concentrate on something, anything. Think about it as hard as you can.”

Kayla nodded. *There is, she decided, a hell of a lot going on in my life that I can think about. Magical powers, healers, killer elves, gateways into other worlds, an ancient ogress who likes to have muggers for dinner . . . literally. Yeah, there is quite a lot going on in my life lately, she concluded.*

“Think about something specific,” Elizabet said.

“Okay, okay, give me a break!”

“That is the one thing I won’t do,” Elizabet said, her voice tinged with humor.

*I'm getting tired of this bullshit!* Kayla thought. *There's Elizabet, standing right behind me and smiling. Oh yeah, I'm sure this is a lot of fun for you, too! She's—*

Kayla sat up straight, opening her eyes in shock. “I saw you! I really saw you! With my eyes closed!”

“See, you’re learning, child. It’s not *entirely* hopeless.” Elizabet smiled. “It only *looks* that way. Now, think of something, really concentrate on it.”

Kayla tried to think of something to concentrate on. It was a beautiful day outside, really great, not too

smoggy, a perfect day to go to a park. . . .

*That would be nice, she thought, smiling. To go to the park next to the house. . . .*

She thought about the park down the street from her house, the house where she'd lived with her parents before . . . before the Awful Day. She loved that park. Mom and Dad used to walk with her there in the evening, as the sun was setting through the tall trees. It was different from all the other parks she'd ever seen: a wild, untamed place where the gardeners and keepers seemed more interested in the little community gardening project at the back of the park rather than the park itself. The trees were left alone to grow into unruly shapes tangled with ivy and surrounded by shrubs. The paths through the park were hard to find and harder to follow, but that was something she loved. There was one tree that she loved best, a huge old oak tree with broad spreading branches which filled the sky. Dad said that the tree was at least two hundred years old. Sometimes Kayla had thought she could hear laughter from the tree, the flickering movement of someone climbing in the branches, but Dad always said that it was only the wind, there wasn't anyone there.

She'd run to that tree on the Awful Day, the day she'd come home from school and found the police cars in front of her house. Old Mrs. Liddy had called the cops after hearing gunshots from next door and seeing some cars leave fast. They wouldn't let her into the house, into her own house; she heard some of the cops talking about how they'd found blood, but no bodies.

She remembered running to the park, falling onto the thick moss under the tree and crying. That's where the cops had found her, hours later. She could feel the tears starting down her face, remembering.

“Are you all right, Kayla?” Elizabet asked, concern in her voice.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” she said. “I'm fine.”

“Kayla,” Elizabet said. “Keep your eyes closed. Can you see me?”

She could. There was a faint brightness against the inside of her eyes, a glow that moved as Elizabet walked around her, matching time with her quiet footsteps. “You're doing it, child,” Elizabet murmured. “You're doing it. Now, look at yourself.”

She felt herself moving away; no, she was sitting still, but somehow she was moving in that quiet darkness. She turned and looked back at herself. What she saw was fire, blue-white centered around a core of brilliance, with flowing tendrils of light flickering and dancing over the surface. Kayla opened her eyes suddenly, startled, and blinked. “What was that?” she asked.

Elizabet was sitting close to her; she laughed, little lines crinkling at the edges of her eyes. “Yes, that's you. That's why everyone can find you, because you look like a neon sign when you're -using your magic. But we're going to see if we can do something about that now. Close your eyes again. Now look at yourself and try to make the glow a little less bright. Dim it down. Not completely, but see if you can slowly fade it.”

Kayla concentrated, imagining that brightness fading away to nothingness.

*Make it go away . . . dim it down, like turning down a light. . . .*

A wave of dizziness hit her like a fist. She opened her eyes and grabbed for anything to hold onto, afraid she was going to faint. Elizabet caught her, keeping her from falling over.



“Not too much,” Elizabet repeated, “just a little bit. Carefully. Slowly.”

Kayla nodded, taking a few deep breaths. She closed her eyes and tried again. This time she could do it. She could bring that simmering pool of fire down to embers, glowing with restrained power. She concentrated, letting the fire slowly die down, dimming the light to a faint glow. “Did it work?” she asked.

“You did it just right,” Elizabet said. “Now, you're going to have to learn to keep it like this all the time. Otherwise, anyone that's looking for you will be able to find you easily, just by tracking your magic. Good work, child.”

“Are we done now?” Kayla asked.

“Not by a long shot. Lesson number two. This one will be a little tougher. We'll do this and then take a break. It's almost visiting time at the hospital where your friend Billy is staying. We can go over there and see him. I called the hospital while you were still asleep, and he'll be expecting us.”

“Great!” Kayla said, grinning. *It'll be terrific to see Billy. I've got so much to tell him. . . .*

*Except I can't, can I? He won't believe any of this. He'll think I'm crazy. My old friends . . . are they still going to be my friends? I don't know about that.* “Where's Liane? Do you know?” she asked.

Elizabet shook her head. “No, she's still missing. Though I'm hoping once you have a little bit of control over what you're doing, you might be able to find her yourself. The police haven't turned up any leads at all.” She reached into the pocket of her jeans, pulled out a small Swiss army knife, and sat down on the floor next to Kayla. “Now for the next lesson.” She opened out one of the blades and glanced up at Kayla. “What you're going to do now,” she said, “*is not* heal me.”

“I don't get it,” Kayla said. “What are you . . . ?”

Elizabet brought the razor-sharp knife down on the palm of her hand.

*Pain!* It echoed through Kayla like a shockwave. She felt the magic inside her answer that pain, welling up through her. Kayla reached out to where the blood was slowly pooling in Elizabet's palm.

“Stop it!” Elizabet said sharply, and Kayla drew back, startled. “You have to learn to control it, not let it control you.”

“Elizabet, I—”

“Just sit there, child,” Elizabet said. “Just sit there and control it.”

*That's easy for you to say,* Kayla thought resentfully, feeling the magic pulling at her like a riptide, trying to surge through her, reaching out to Elizabet.

Her hands were shaking. She clenched them into fists and closed her eyes. *I will control it,* she thought desperately. *I will!*

Slowly, like an ebbing tide, she felt the pressure easing. The electric touch of the magic fell away from her with each breath she took, slowly receding.

She opened her eyes to see Elizabeth smiling at her. “Not bad,” Elizabeth said, “not bad at all.”

Kayla smiled in relief. *Thank God this craziness is over*, she thought. *Now I'll just heal Elizabeth, and then we'll be done with this.*

“Very good,” Elizabeth continued. “We'll sit like this for the next forty-five minutes or so, until you think you've really got it down.”

Kayla stared at her. *She's got to be joking!*

“No, I'm not,” Elizabeth said, in a voice that didn't allow any argument.

Kayla sighed. It was going to be a very long forty-five minutes. . . .

## Chapter Fourteen

“I think that was a rotten trick, Elizabeth,” Kayla said, helping Elizabeth carry the dishes from the breakfast table to the kitchen sink.

“Learning isn't supposed to be easy, child,” Elizabeth said as she set the dishes down into the soapy water.

“Yeah, but I didn't think it would be this hard,” Kayla said. “I mean, you never—”

Across the room, the phone rang. Elizabeth grabbed a dishtowel to dry her hands and then hurried over to answer it. Kayla rolled up her sleeves and began scrubbing the dishes. She listened to one half of the conversation. “Good morning, Nichelle . . . I didn't think there would be any news . . . Well, thanks for calling. I'll see you later tonight at the office.”

Elizabeth's forehead was slightly furrowed with a frown as she walked back to Kayla.

“What was that all about?” Kayla asked.

Elizabeth began drying the dishes Kayla had washed. “That was Detective Cable. She wanted to tell me there had been no update on your case. You're still officially kidnaped as far as the LAPD is concerned.”

“You didn't tell her that I'm here?”

Elizabeth shook her head. “I haven't told anyone anything. I'm still not entirely certain what to do in this situation. I really should take you downtown and have you tell everything to the police. You're a witness to multiple crimes, -including homicide.”

“No!” Kayla shook her head. “Don't you -understand if I do that, it'll never be over? They'll always be after me.”

“Not if they're in prison, they won't be,” Elizabeth said grimly.

“You can't guarantee that! I just . . . I just want to live. I want them to leave me alone.” Kayla thought about it for a moment, wondering whether she should ask the question that had been bothering her all morning. *What the hell*, she thought, and plunged forward. “Elizabeth, if you were serious about maybe, like, adopting me, which I think would be really great, I thought maybe we would want to leave Los Angeles. I mean, I've got this whole crowd of people that may be looking for me, and Carlos knows where you live. Sooner or later, they may come looking. So, I thought, hey, maybe we should just go somewhere else. Like New York, maybe?” *Or Alaska. South America. Burma?*

“Is that what you want to do?” Elizabeth gave her a long look. “Run away? Again?”

*New Zealand? Ireland? Antarctica?*

“Well . . . yes! I mean, I don't want to be here when the trouble arrives. What if those killer elves start looking for me again? Or Carlos?” *Or Ramon . . .*

Kayla thought about Ramon, his laughing dark eyes. *Guess I'll never see that guy again*, she thought. *If I do, his big brother will be right -behind him. I know he's okay; I healed the guy, I shouldn't worry about him. But I do. . . .*

“No,” Elizabeth said firmly. “We're not going to run away. These are problems, child, that you'll have to learn how to face, because if you don't, they'll just find you again and again. You'll have to go to the police and tell them everything . . . well, almost everything,” she amended. “We'll deal with this trouble together. I want you to do this because you know it's right, not because I'm compelling you to do it. But you must know that you have to do it, you have to go to the police and help them put these people behind bars. You have to be willing to confront them.”

*Kind of a scary prospect, that*, Kayla thought, remembering about Carlos, the T-Men, and the Unseelie Court. *It's a whole lot of trouble. More than I want to deal with, that's for sure. How did I get myself into this kind of trouble?*

“I'll have to go into work in a few hours,” Elizabeth said, stacking the clean dishes in the cupboard. “I'll stop by the county office and file papers to see about formally making this your foster home. You, on the other hand . . .” And she gave Kayla a stern look. “You will stay here, try to keep out of trouble, and do some schoolwork. I have a number of textbooks in my library that you can start with. I imagine you've missed quite a bit of school over the past few months.”

“Oh, just a few classes,” Kayla admitted. *Like most of this school year. . . .*

“And I'll call downtown,” Elizabeth continued. “We'll get a regular patrol to stop through here on their circuit, plus whatever else they think is appropriate to a key witness. You'll have to testify, Kayla. It'll probably take a couple of days for them to get the paperwork started on this, but you will have to testify against the gang. I don't know whether the L.A.P.D. can do anything against elves and that ogress . . .”

*They'd better take in a platoon of Marines with them, if they try!*

“. . . but we can certainly do something about the gangbangers,” Elizabeth continued. “If we see any sign of the gang or . . . anything else, the police will probably want to take you into protective custody. So don't be alarmed if a policeman stops by to see how you're doing during the day, while you're studying. And you'd better start cracking the books. You'll have some serious catching up to do if you want to graduate high school with a high enough grade point average to go to college.”

*“College?” Kayla glanced at her. “I can't go to college!”*

*“Of course you can,” Elizabet said, smiling. “I'll help you with the tuition. But you'll need to get your grades into shape or you won't be admitted. It'll take a lot of hard work, but I think you can do it.”*

*“College?” Kayla repeated, her eyes wide. College . . . I never thought I'd be able to do that. I wonder what I'd study? I'd like to learn more about how this magic thing works, but somehow I don't think they'll have classes in Magic 101 at UCLA.*

Elizabet laughed, reaching out to ruffle Kayla's hair. “Of course, imp. College. Who did this to your hair? It looks like it was hacked off with a knife.”

“I like it this way,” Kayla said. “Wow . . . college. I never thought I'd really be able to do it.”

“We'll get you there,” Elizabet said. “Just you wait and see. Well, we do have a few hours before I need to head into the city. Shall we go visit Billy?”

“You bet,” Kayla said immediately. “And I'd like to go looking for Liane, too. I know that no one's seen her around, but I'd like to try to find her. I don't know where she'd be exactly, but we could go back to Suite 230. Maybe she went back there.”

“The police have been checking there once a day or so,” Elizabet said. “There hasn't been any sign of your friend, but we can go look if you like.”

“Yeah, I'd like that.”

Walking into the hospital was easier this time. It was the same, the overwhelming pressure of pain and emotions pouring down on her, but she was able to push it back, to hold it away from her almost without thinking about it. She moved it away from her, closing it off to where it was only a quiet, distant clamor rather than an overwhelming wave. She caught a glimpse of Elizabet's smile as they walked through the hospital lobby.

*Maybe I am learning. Maybe I'm getting better at this.*

“They've moved him to the third floor,” Elizabet said as they walked to the elevators. “He's doing fine, last I saw him.”

“You've been here?” Kayla asked, surprised.

Elizabet nodded. “I asked that they assign him as one of my cases. I also asked that they keep him here for a little while longer even though he could have been discharged from the hospital a couple days ago. Downtown, they're still trying to figure out what to do with this young man, but Billy has his own ideas. I'm sure he'll tell you.”

Kayla only followed Elizabet from the elevator down the hall to room 341. Through the closed door, she could hear an exuberant yell: “Yeah, go Niners!” She grinned, recognizing Billy's voice.

“Come on, Billy!” someone else shouted. “They're history, they're toast, they're outta here!”

Elizabeth opened the door, leaning inside. “Is there room for two more Niners fans in here?” she asked.

“Elizabeth! Come on in!”

Kayla walked in after Elizabeth, a little nervously. Billy, wearing a San Francisco Forty-Niners shirt over his hospital gown, was sitting up in bed. Another boy, very thin and pale and wearing a baseball cap, was in the next bed. Both of them were watching the game on the television set high on the wall across from them.

Billy winced as one of the Niners fumbled a catch and glanced at Kayla and Elizabeth. His eyes widened, and he let out a yell that filled the room. “KAYLA!”

“Hiya, Billy,” she said. “How's tricks?”

“You're looking all right,” he said, grinning. “The 'do is awesome. Did you do your hair with a knife? Can I get your leather jacket if you get hit by a truck?”

“In your dreams, dude,” she said, grinning back at him.

“Shhh, come on, guys, put a cork in it, the Niners are trying for a touchdown,” the other boy said, lying back so that he was only half-visible behind the row of IVs and medical equipment.

“Chill out, Rick!” Billy shook his head. “He's stressed out 'cause tonight's dessert is riding on this.” He added more quietly, “An' the chemo's got him down today.” Billy glanced over at Elizabeth, a little hesitantly, Kayla thought. “So, Elizabeth . . . any news?” Using both hands, he shifted his leg, -encased in a heavy white cast, so he could sit up straighter. “You got any news for me?”

Elizabeth sat down on the edge of his bed. “Oh, nothing much. Just a new home for you. It's up in San Francisco and your foster parent is an engineer, just like you asked for.”

“Really?” Billy's eyes were wide. “You did it, Elizabeth! I knew you could do it!”

Kayla glanced between Billy and Elizabeth, not understanding. “An engineer?” she asked.

Elizabeth nodded. “We've been trying to do that, match kids with parents who are in the profession the kid would like to pursue. Billy told me that he wants to study civil engineering; if he can get into college, that is,” she added, giving him a stern look. “After talking with your teachers at your last high school, that may be tougher than you told me. But I think you'll like this lady, Billy. I talked with her on the phone. She's been working on old buildings, making them more earthquake-proof.”

“Cool!” Billy said. “That's great. We'll have something to talk about over dinner.”

“I didn't know you wanted to be an engineer,” Kayla said. *When did he decide he wanted this? It couldn't have been when we were at the foster home; he never talked about it, never said anything about it. . . .*

“Well, it didn't look too likely when all I was doing was ditching class and trying to run away from lousy foster homes. But talking with Elizabeth made me think about what I'd like to do with my life. So I'll give it a try. If it doesn't work out, maybe I can go work for the CIA or something. I've got all that experience

in breaking and entering, I bet they'd hire me in a minute!”

“Don't you even think it, scamp!” Elizabet said sternly and Billy laughed.

*I never would've guessed this about Billy, Kayla thought. I never thought that maybe he had dreams, dreams of more than just getting through a few days without getting arrested, or how to break into an apartment quicker and faster the next time. I never thought he might want to be an engineer. He's so different. I mean, it's only been a week, and he's changed so much. Or maybe he's not so different, maybe he's been this way all the time, and I just didn't know it.*

“Have you guys heard anything about Liane?” Billy asked, his face suddenly very serious.

Elizabet shook her head. “Nothing new.”

“We're going to go look for her,” Kayla said. “Right after we leave here, we're going into Hollywood.”

“Well, then get your asses out of here,” Billy said with a smile. “And I'll go back to watching the football game. Come back and visit me after you've found her.” He looked down, away from them. “I've been worried 'bout her. Kayla, I figured that you'd be able to take care of yourself, even if you never did before. . . .”

“Hey, thanks a lot, dude!” Kayla said, glaring at him and then grinning in pretend anger.

“No, I'm serious! I always took care of stuff for all of us, after we left the foster home, but it wasn't because I was the only one who could do it. You could; you always could. You just didn't . . . just didn't believe enough in yourself. But Liane's different. I hope she's okay.”

“We'll find out,” Elizabet said reassuringly. “My guess is that she's still somewhere in the Hollywood area, that she wouldn't have gone far, which means . . .”

Elizabet's voice faded, and Kayla glanced over at Billy's roommate, now asleep. His face was very pale and drawn, white even against his pillow, only a few stringy wisps of hair visible beneath the baseball cap. *Something's very wrong there, she thought, something's very . . .*

Without warning, the room disappeared around her. It was as if she was falling into a whirlwind of pain and chaos, sliding between the layers of skin and muscle, until she could see the cells of his body. The cells that were fighting a hopeless battle against each other, killing him piece by piece. It was too overwhelming and confusing; she didn't know how she'd start to heal this. *It's not just a single cut or a wound, she thought, it's all the way through his entire body, it's everywhere. . . .*

She felt Elizabet's hand on her shoulder, pulling her back into herself. “Control, Kayla,” Elizabet murmured. “Disengage from it. Control it.”

Kayla blinked and shook her head, trying to clear the image of the millions of cells fighting against each other from her vision. Then she was standing in the hospital room again, Elizabet's hand on her shoulder keeping her from falling.

She glanced at Billy; he was staring at her.

“Your eyes!” he whispered. “Your eyes were filled with blue fire. It's true. I thought I dreamed it, but it really happened. That scar that the doctors found, the one they said must've happened a few months

back. Except it didn't; I'd never had it before. It was you. What is it, Kayla?"

"We'd better go," Elizabeth said quietly, urging Kayla toward the door.

"Kayla?" Billy called. "Please, I need to know!"

Still dizzy from the magic, Kayla looked back at him. "I don't know, Billy," she said. "I don't know what it is. But I'm going to try to figure it out."

"And I'm going to help her," Elizabeth said.

"Yeah, you do that, Elizabeth," Billy said, settling back against his pillows. "Elizabeth can help you figure things out, Kayla. She's good at that."

Kayla glanced back at her friend. *It's not the same, she thought. It's never going to be the same. We're different people now.* "Take care of yourself, Billy," she said.

"You, too, Kayla," he said, and smiled. "Try to stay out of trouble, hey?"

*No bets on that,* she thought, walking out into the corridor.

In the hallway outside his room Kayla turned to Elizabeth. "Do you know what's wrong with Rick?" she asked. "All that craziness, everything fighting itself?"

"Leukemia," Elizabeth said. "That's what Rick has." She was silent for a moment as they walked past the nurses' station. "Everyone has limits, child," she said at last. "You'll have to learn what yours are."

"Can you do it?" Kayla asked. "Can you cure cancer?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "No. You forget, child, my talents are much more limited than yours. I can't cure a cold, not the way that you can. Some small things, yes, but I'm not in your league. Maybe you can learn how to cure cancer eventually."

Kayla thought about it as they walked out to the car. *That would be great, if I could. I mean, what am I supposed to do with this magic thing, anyhow? It's like . . . there has to be a meaning to it, some reason for it. Elizabeth's the only other person I know who has this magic talent that I have, not counting the killer elves, or whatever they are.*

*If I go to college, and med school after that, then maybe I'll learn just what I can do with this. If I'm a doctor, then I can help people and they won't know that it's magic; they'll think it's medicine. Maybe I can learn how to cure cancer.*

She was quiet for most of the drive into Hollywood, thinking about that.

"Want to talk about it?" Elizabeth asked, as they drove through the slow-moving traffic onto Hollywood Boulevard.

"It's just . . ." Kayla began, then faltered. "Well, I keep thinking there has to be a reason for this, this magic stuff. I mean, why else would I have it?"

Elizabeth smiled. "Thinking that you were put on God's Earth for a reason, child, that's ego. What you

have is a gift, and you have to figure out how best to use it.” She braked as the street light changed to red and glanced at Kayla. “Where did you want to start looking for your friend?” she asked.

Kayla looked at the street, the cars moving slowly through the intersection ahead of them. It was only late afternoon, but already the night people were starting to appear: men in dirty clothes slouching against the storefronts, women walking by in high heels and tight skirts. Two motorcycle cops were parked near the intersection, watching the traffic go by.

“Oh, I don't know,” Kayla said. “I guess we should stop back—” She stopped, realizing that she was about to use the word “home” for Suite 230. And that that word didn't fit it anymore. “I guess we should look at the office building first,” she -finished awkwardly.

“All right,” Elizabet said. She waited for the signal to change and parked in the lot at the corner of Hollywood and Cherokee.

Kayla was very quiet as they walked down the street. She led Elizabet down the narrow alley between two tall buildings and up to the broken window at the back of the office building. “Watch out, there's some glass on the floor,” she said, climbing through.

Elizabet nodded, clambering in after her. Kayla stepped around the pile of dirty blankets and old newspapers, where someone else had obviously set up their digs, and to the stairway down the hall. A few minutes later, they were on the second floor, and Kayla pushed the door of Suite 230 open with her foot, glancing around inside.

Suite 230 looked just like it had the night when all of this started. The blankets were still piled in the corner, and the three half-eaten cans of spaghetti, the contents looking very green and moldy, were still on the sink. “I don't think Liane has been back here,” Kayla said, looking around. She looked into the other room and saw her old backpack on the floor, open and obviously searched, then abandoned. “I don't think she's been in here.”

Elizabet shook her head. “The police were here, but I know they were careful to leave everything the way it was.”

Kayla pulled her jacket a little more tightly around her, not from physical cold but something else. This place looked so empty, depressing. It was hard to believe that she'd lived here. When Billy and Liane had been with her, somehow the place hadn't looked so bad. It'd been more of an adventure than a dump. “I'm glad I don't have to live here anymore,” she said.

“Me too, child,” Elizabet said, smiling.

Kayla bent to pick up her backpack. She -unzipped the main pocket, looking inside. There wasn't much there: half a candy bar, some change, and a bent photograph. She zipped it up again quickly, not wanting to look at the photo of her and her mom and dad in the backyard of their house, at her last birthday party. *I shouldn't have kept that; I should have left that at the house*, she thought. *I should have—*

“Is something wrong, Kayla?” Elizabet asked.

Kayla shook her head quickly, rubbing at her eyes. “No, I'm fine,” she lied. She slung the backpack over her shoulder. “I guess we should ask around out on the street, see if anyone has seen Liane. Folks would remember that I'm a friend of hers, maybe they'd tell me.” Kayla took one last look around Suite 230, then walked to the door.



Out on the street, she saw a few people she -recognized, but not many. There was the old bearded man who sat on the sidewalk not far from the McDonald's, panhandling for change. The shopkeepers were still the same after only a couple weeks, but she'd never talked to any of them before, figuring that they'd only call the cops on her, so they probably wouldn't be much help.

She stood on the street corner, looking around, not certain where to go next. There was the elderly man who sold hot dogs from a wheeled cart. He'd smiled at her before and given them a couple extra hot dogs for free when they'd bought from him. Maybe he'd know something about Liane.

"Elizabet, I'm going to talk to that guy," she said.

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Elizabet said. "I'll go get us some Cokes from the McDonald's."

"Great," Kayla said. She waited for the light to change, then walked across the street to where the old man was slathering onions on a hot dog for one of his customers.

"Excuse me, sir," she began, then she saw Liane walk out from a bar entrance three doors down the street.

*Liane!*

She looked totally different. The old sweatshirt and jeans were gone—she was wearing a tight white blouse and a black leather miniskirt, with four-inch spike heels. Kayla stared at her, too surprised to say anything. She walked to the edge of the curb, obviously waiting for someone. She looked around the busy street, then glanced in Kayla's direction.

Her eyes met Kayla's; she blinked, staring. "Kayla?" she called, her voice mirroring her surprise. She took a few quick steps in Kayla's direction, then stopped.

"Liane?" Kayla walked hesitantly toward her. Liane hugged her, smiling. *She's okay, thank God she's okay. . . .*

Kayla sniffled and rubbed at her eyes as she stepped back, looking at her friend. "Oh, hell, I smeared your makeup! I'm sorry, I didn't—"

"Who cares? I'll fix it! But what did you do your hair?" Liane asked. "It's wild!"

"What did you do to the rest of you?" Kayla asked. "The way you're dressed, you look like—"

A car pulled up on the curb with a squeal of tires—a blue Chevy. Kayla glanced at it and froze. In the driver's seat was Nick, looking just like he had the night all of this started, wearing a white sportscoat with his hair all slicked back.

For a half second Kayla wanted to run away, but she stopped herself. She didn't have to run from Nick, not now.

"Who's that you're talkin' with, Liane?" Nick got out of the car, walking over to them. "Liane, what are you doing with this punkette?"

Before, just that look would have sent Kayla running, especially without Billy around to keep her from

being scared. *But now, things are different.* Kayla glared back at him. “I’m talking to my friend, bozo. What’s it to you?”

“Nick.” Liane put her hand on his arm. “Listen, I’ll just be a few minutes. Can I talk to her?”

*She’s asking permission from him. This isn’t right, this really isn’t right.* “Liane—”

“Two minutes. You got an appointment now, remember? Can’t keep people waiting.”

Kayla pulled Liane a few feet away, closer to a wall. “Liane, what in the hell are you doing? Nick? You’re hanging out with Nick? With that total sleazeball?”

“It’s not like that,” Liane said, glancing at where Nick was waiting, leaning against the door of the Chevy. “Really. Nick is a cool guy once you get to know him, and he gives me lots of clothes to wear, takes me out to restaurants, buys me jewelry, and we get high all the time. It’s really a lot of fun.”

“Jesus, Liane, you can’t mean that!”

“Kayla, you know I hated living up in Suite 230. It was dirty all the time and there was never all that much food to eat. This is so much better. I’m happy now. I’m really happy now.”

“Come on, Liane, time to go,” Nick said, straightening up and walking toward them.

“Liane, don’t you want to . . . I mean, things are working out okay by me. You don’t have to be here—”

Nick reached out suddenly and grabbed Kayla by her jacket, shoving her against the wall. “Shut your mouth, chickie. Liane knows what she’s -doing. She knows what’s good for her.”

Kayla twisted, trying to get free. Behind Nick, she could see that Liane’s face was pale, her eyes wide.

*I could toast you, slimeball, she thought. I could call up the magic and fry your ass.*

In her mind’s eye, she saw the black boy lying on the bloody apartment floor, twisting in pain.

*No. Not that.*

“Nick, please don’t—” Liane pleaded.

Nick glanced at her, then let go of Kayla abruptly. “Sure, baby, anything you say,” he said. “Take a hike, chickie, don’t bother us an more.”

“Kayla, is there a problem?” It was Elizabet, standing a few feet away from them, holding two cups of soda. She surveyed the scene before her calmly, glaring at Nick.

“It’s really okay,” Liane said. “Kayla, this is what I want. I don’t need your help.”

“Let’s go, Liane,” Nick said, taking her by the arm and walking with her to his car. He opened the car door for her and gave Kayla a last furious glance. The Chevy screamed away into traffic a few seconds later.

Elizabet stood quietly next to Kayla. “I’ll call Nichelle downtown,” she said. “I’m sure they can find Nick

again, and Liane.”

“She didn't want me to help her,” Kayla said. “She didn't want any help.”

“Come on, child, let's go home,” Elizabet said gently.

Nataniel leaned back in his chair, gazing out at the lights of Las Vegas. It never ceased to amaze him the way the humans squandered so much electricity on this useless display of lights. It certainly was eye-catching, though, and garish, but still beautiful in its own way.

*Such an incredible waste of energy, he thought, like so much about the humans, especially those with the gift of magic. They live their short, useless little lives, never dreaming what they could truly accomplish. Now that would be an accomplishment worthy of an Unseelie prince . . . to gather the power of all of those untapped resources, guiding it where he will.*

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts. “Come in,” he said sharply.

Shari entered the room. She bowed, fractionally less than the last time she had approached him, he noted with a hidden smile. Shari, in her own way, was becoming dangerous, he had decided, more questioning, edging toward disobedience. She spoke more often now of when they would return to the Unseelie Court, and he knew that she hated life among the humans, even more than most of his followers.

Still, she been the first one to follow him of her own free will when he had been cast out of the Unseelie Court. That was worth something, and he would tolerate a small amount of insolence in the remembrance of it.

“What is it?” he asked.

“The human girl,” Shari said, unable to keep the excitement out of her voice. “The young mage. She's back in Los Angeles and growing in power even as we speak.”

“Oh, really?” Nataniel asked, smiling. He wondered briefly how the human child had survived the Unseelie Court, then shrugged. She was alive, and that was all that mattered, that she was powerful enough to return to the human lands of her own will.

“Razz and his boys, they found her in Los Angeles. She nearly killed one of them with her magic, but apparently healed him afterwards. Several others of their gang disappeared, so they're still searching the area.

“I find it a little hard to believe,” Shari continued, a touch of surprise tinged with something else—admiration?—in her voice. “She nearly killed someone and then healed him. Healing an enemy. Can you imagine that?”

“She's human, and a healer.” Nataniel shrugged. “She probably can't bear the pain of others. We'll change that once we have her here again.” His voice tightened. “Tell the others to prepare for war. Razz has been useful to us, but we can't let him win this prize. We go to Los Angeles.”

## Chapter Fifteen

“Wake up, sleepyhead!” Kayla said, leaning around the edge of the open door. “Come on, Elizabet, time to get up!”

Elizabet groaned, burying her face in her pillow.

“Elizabet, it's almost seven-thirty. You have to get up and drive me to school, remember?” *She looks a little tired*, Kayla thought. *But it's time to go; I need to get to school!*

“To think that I asked for this,” Elizabet said, her face muffled by the pillow. “I asked them to sign the papers, setting you up as my foster child. I must have been on drugs to do that. . . .”

“Elizabet, it's gonna be great. It's my first day at the new school!” Kayla sat down on the edge of the bed, watching her expectantly. “Come on, let's go!”

“Child,” Elizabet said, slowly getting out of bed and reaching for her bathrobe, “there is one major difference between us that you had better understand. I am a night person. I work the night shift at the station and sleep during the morning. You, on the other hand, are a day -person. You go to school in the daytime and sleep at night. As long as you're not too cheerful in the mornings, we should be able to get along just fine.”

“Well, there's one solution that would be really easy. You could buy me a car, since I'll be able to get my driving permit in a couple months, and then you wouldn't have to get up early in the morning anymore, right?” Kayla asked hopefully.

“I'll think about it,” Elizabet said, but Kayla caught the quick flash of her smile, like a hint of sunlight from behind clouds. “First we'll have to see how you do in high school,” Elizabet continued, walking to the bathroom. Through the open door, Kayla could hear the sound of water running from the tap and Elizabet splashing water on her face. “Then we can maybe talk about a car.”

Elizabet emerged from the bathroom drying her face with a towel. “So are you ready for your first day at the new high school?” she asked.

“You bet!” Kayla said, though suddenly she was much less certain. *I think I can deal with it*, she thought. She'd thought quite a bit about it over the last three days, what it would be like to be back in school, meeting new kids and teachers. She hadn't felt nervous at all yesterday when Elizabet had taken her downtown to complete the foster parent paperwork. And then they had driven to the school so Kayla could register for classes. The school secretary had kept them waiting outside her office for ten minutes, but Elizabet only had to deliver a few seconds of what Kayla privately was starting to think of as The Eyebrow, a stern look that allowed no opposition, before the secretary quickly filed the forms, muttering something about needing Kayla's transcripts later. So now Kayla was a registered student at Laurel High School. And now, as of this morning, she was totally terrified.

*It won't be so bad*, she tried to tell herself. *They're just kids like me*. That thought stopped her. *No, not like me. Not anymore. I don't think any of them can call magic with their hands or heal somebody or hear someone else's thoughts. I'm different now, totally different.*

As if hearing her thoughts, Elizabet said, “Don't worry so much, child. It'll be fine. You'll see.”

“Yeah, but what . . . what if I run into one of Carlos' guys or something? You don't seem to be worried about that, but there are a couple of street gangs out there who don't like me very much, remember?”

Elizabeth walked to her closet, reaching inside for a blouse and skirt. “They did come by,” Elizabeth said. “Twice. But they haven't been back in several days.”

“What?” Kayla asked, surprised.

“They came by when you were gone. From what you told me, my guess is that it was when you were in the elven lands. I think time moves a little differently there; you were there for only a few hours, but a week went by for the rest of us. Several boys pulled up in their cars at the foot of the driveway and sat there for a while. They came back, looked around, and always left without causing any trouble.”

“I wish you'd told me that,” Kayla muttered.

“I didn't think it mattered too much,” Elizabeth answered. “After all, they haven't been back in several days. And we have the LAPD keeping an eye on the house, while they get their warrants and subpoenas together.”

“But what if they come back?” Kayla asked. “What will we do then?”

“We'll deal with it then,” Elizabeth said, taking some pantyhose from her dresser drawer. “Go get some breakfast, child,” she continued. “We'll have to get out of here in the next few minutes if we're to get you to the school on time.”

Kayla was lost in her own thoughts as Elizabeth drove. *I wonder what kind of people I'm going to meet at the school? I wonder if there's going to be any good teachers? Like that teacher Ramon was telling me about. I wonder if . . .*

“Stop that, child,” Elizabeth said from the driver's seat, not taking her eyes off the road.

“Stop what?” Kayla asked, surprised.

“I can sense the magic around you,” Elizabeth said. “When you worry, when you're not paying attention, you let your magic show. That's the real danger, child. You can't lose control of that, not for a minute. At home, you don't have to worry about it because I've taken steps to prevent any magic traces from leaking out. But if anybody is going to find you, it'll be because of your magic, not because of a street address.”

“Yeah, right,” Kayla said. She pushed all her worried thoughts away from her, concentrating on calmness, trying to find the burning fire -inside her and quiet it down. *Chill out in there*, she thought, talking to the flickering blue flames as if the magic was a misbehaving child. *Just chill out for a while. We'll probably do magic lessons again tonight. You'll get to do stuff then.*

In the magic lessons, where Kayla was now learning to “hear” better, that was something that Elizabeth had taught her, to think of the magic as a little child, somebody who wouldn't always do what she wanted but could be convinced if you talked fast enough. Her ability to hear people's thoughts and talk directly to Elizabeth with her mind was getting better, as well. *Maybe I'm -finally starting to get the hang of this*

*magic thing*, she thought, and smiled.

“Well, here we are,” Elizabet said, pulling into the high school parking lot. “Try not to raise too much hell on your first morning, will you, child?” She smiled at Kayla, who grinned back her. “I’ll be waiting here at the end of your last class,” Elizabet continued, “but now I’m going home and definitely going back to sleep.”

“See you later,” Kayla said, climbing out of the VW.

*This is a great-looking school, she decided. Twenty million kids all running into their classes. And a few of them even have hair that's more punked out than mine. Not too many with this kind of cool leather jacket, though.*

*Ramon's jacket. I wonder how he's doing?*

She felt smugly proud at having achieved black leather superiority over the other students.

Kayla walked to the school secretary's office. The gray-haired woman assigned a student worker to -escort her to her first class, who also introduced her to the instructor of the English Literature course. The dark-haired man with the handlebar mustache gestured for Kayla to take one of the empty chairs, then continued his -detailed explanation of the relationships- in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* .

Kayla listened in spite of herself, fascinated by the teacher's command of language and the way he stopped every few minutes to recite a few lines from the play, becoming that character for several seconds, bringing the play to life. “And tomorrow we'll watch a film version of *Romeo and Juliet* , and then compare that to *West Side Story* , ” he concluded, just as the bell rang. Kayla blinked, realizing that the hour had gone by without her even noticing it.

*Now all I have to do is figure out how to get to Building 12, Room 3,* Kayla thought, gathering up her notebooks. She waited until the rush of students leaving the room had died down a bit before walking out into the hallway.

“You looked like you were really into that Shakespeare stuff,” someone said from directly behind her.

Kayla glanced back and saw a young man with an unruly mop of wild red hair. He was grinning at her.

“Yeah, I thought it was pretty cool,” she said. “Listen, maybe you can help me out. I need to figure out how to get to my next class.”

“Hey, no problem,” the redhead said. “My name's Mike, what's yours?”

“Kayla,” she said. “Kayla Smith.”

“Oh, you've got Tokugawa next for biology, too,” Mike said, leaning over to look at her class schedule on top of her notebook. “She's a killer, probably the toughest teacher in the whole school. And you've got Wilson for English Grammar after that. Looks like we've got pretty much the same schedule, which makes sense if you're in the Honors program, too.”

“Honors program?” Kayla said. “I didn't know Elizabet signed me up for that.”

“Who's Elizabet? Your stepmom?”

“No, my . . . uh . . . my guardian. It's a long story,” she added at his confused look.

“Yeah, well, tell it to me over lunch. We'd better get ourselves to class.” They walked quickly across the quad to another building, where Mike introduced her to two of his friends, Stephanie and Bert, just before the bell rang to begin biology class. Miss Tokugawa, a tiny Oriental woman, began her lecture on genetics. Kayla realized that Mike was absolutely right: this class was going to be a killer. But an hour later, she knew a lot more about genetics than she had -before.

English Grammar was almost a relief after that, and Kayla was rather pleased when Mrs. Wilson turned out to be a cheerful, exuberant young woman who obviously loved what she was teaching.

After the class ended, Kayla caught up with Mike and his friends in the hallway. He saw her and smiled. “Hey, Kayla, we're thinking of going and getting burgers for lunch. Do you want to go?”

“I thought you needed a lunch pass to leave the school,” Kayla said. “At least, I thought that's what the secretary told me.”

“Well, yeah.” Mike shrugged. “Or you could just climb the fence, which is what we usually do. It's no big deal; they don't really care all that much. We should all take journalism next semester. That way you get an automatic gate pass. Let's go, guys.”

Kayla followed them out the building and around the school auto shop to a deserted area of fence. *I hope Mike's right about this. I'd -really hate to get busted on my first day at a new school.*

Mike scaled the wire fence with the ease of someone who's been practicing it for a long time, and Steph and Bert started up as well. Kayla sighed and began pulling herself up the chain links. She jumped down lightly to join the others on the other side. *This isn't too bad<M>, <D> she thought. First day here, already making some friends, some cool guys who aren't afraid of a little adventure. Though I bet they wouldn't -believe the kind of adventures I've had lately.*

“We usually go to the Burger Shack just over there across the street,” Mike said, starting across the wide boulevard.

“Mike, watch out!” Steph yelled. Mike looked up, too late.

The oncoming driver slammed on his brakes, but not fast enough.

*He's going to hit him! He's going to—*

Mike yelled once, a hoarse sound, and then the blue car hit him, knocking him up the hood of the car. He landed hard against the windshield. The blue car squealed to a stop a few feet further down the road. Mike slid off the hood onto the asphalt, lying very still on the street.

“Oh, shit . . .” Kayla was kneeling next to him a minute later. He was still conscious, staring at her, his mouth moving but not making any sound.

She put her hands on his shoulders and her other vision peeked in a moment later. *He's hurt on the inside, bleeding. No broken bones, but I'd better stop that bleeding.* Relief swept through her as she realized that he'd be okay. And then she called the magic out from that tiny safe place where she'd hidden it away from sight, freeing it to run through her. She could feel it skittering down her arms -beneath the

leather jacket, tickling her hands. She knelt closer over Mike so her body would shield the light, closed her eyes, and let the magic flow through her.

From a distance, she could hear Stephanie's voice. "Oh my God, Mike!" And Bert: "Kayla, is he okay?"

Kayla didn't answer; all of her concentration was on the magic, caught up in the healing.

"Hey, girl, is he okay?" an older voice asked, rough with concern. Someone grabbed her shoulder, pulling her back. Magic flared, bright enough that Kayla could see it through her closed eyes. She damped it immediately, knowing that she'd done what she needed to.

*He's okay, he'll be all right.*

She opened her eyes and saw Steph staring at her, a last hint of blue fire reflected in the other girl's eyes. "Kayla, what . . . ?" she began, and then stopped.

"It's okay, he's okay," Kayla said quickly. "Mike's gonna be fine."

The driver of the car shook his head. "I must be seeing things . . . hey, kid, you all right?" he said to Mike, who was sitting up slowly with Bert's help.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Mike said, then glared at the driver. "Jesus, man, can't you watch where you're driving? You could've killed me."

"Yeah, well, you should look before you run into the street! Goddamn kids," the driver said, then sighed. "Listen, kid, here's my business card. If you decide later in the day that you're not all right, get yourself to a hospital. Don't worry about it, I'll pay for it. Just don't tell my insurance company, okay?"

Mike stood up slowly, a little wobbly on his feet, and Kayla and Bert both reached out to steady him. "Yeah, sure."

"You sure you're all right, Mike?" Steph asked.

He nodded. "Yeah, yeah, I feel fine. Just a couple bruises maybe, that's all." He glanced in the direction of the school. "Hey, look at that!"

Kayla turned and saw the row of students staring and pointing at them through the chain link fence. *Great, she thought. That's all I need now. I know Steph saw the magic, and the driver, though I don't think the driver believed in it. Mike was too out of it to notice anything, but who knows how many of those kids saw what I did.*

"We'd better get out of here before the principal shows up," Mike said. "How 'bout we skip on the burgers for lunch? Somehow I'm not all that hungry anymore."

"Good plan," Kayla said, and they headed back onto the sidewalk, climbing the fence to get back into the school. She saw Steph watching her as she jumped down from the fence, and looked away, not wanting to answer the questions in Steph's eyes.



No one commented on it, though, and by the end of the day Kayla had almost forgotten the incident. Each of her classes was more fascinating than the last, and she'd met a dozen interesting people ranging from the quiet Sandra to Mike's best friend Steve, who described himself as a computer hacker and offered to take Kayla on a guided tour of the AT&T network. Mike had to one-up that offer by saying that he'd teach Kayla how to pick locks and get herself out of a pair of handcuffs, to which Steve said that he figured he'd break Bank of America's security codes by next week and wouldn't that be a fun place to check out?

Kayla was laughing so hard at their attempts to impress her that it took her a few moments to -notice the two businessmen that were loitering just outside the school's wire fence. Loitering and watching them. A moment later, Kayla -noticed their ears.

Their long, curved, pointed ears.

“Uh, excuse me, guys,” Kayla said. She walked quickly into the closest building and stood there for a moment, leaning against the row of metal lockers. *It's the elves. They know I'm here. What am I supposed to do now?*

As if for an answer, Kayla saw one of the business-suited elves walk into the building, scanning the hallway. He saw her, and for a brief moment, they stared at each other. Then Kayla turned and ran.

She didn't hear footsteps running behind her, but a split second later there was the startling crackle of displaced air and then the elf was standing ten feet ahead of her, right in the middle of the only doorway out of the building. He smiled at her. Kayla didn't lose a step, but slammed into him at full speed like a high school football player. The elf had time for one startled expression on his finely-chiseled features before he was knocked flying. Kayla heard him crash into a locker as she fell, then she rolled to her feet and kept going.

*Can't believe it. Elves invading my new high school, and it's only my first day here!* She dodged into the next building, running past the startled faces of other students, then through the open double doors and past the library.

The main entrance to the school was just ahead, and the parking lot behind it. Kayla went through those gates as though all the demons in hell were hot on her tail. *Well, at least one of them is!* She stumbled to a stop in the parking lot, looking around quickly.

Ten feet away, she saw Elizabet's VW, parked with the convertible top down. She ran for it. Elizabet smiled as Kayla flung open the door and dived into the passenger seat.

“So, how was your first day at the new high school?” Elizabet asked cheerfully.

## Chapter Sixteen

“Drive, drive, let's get out of here!” Kayla said, glancing back to see whether the elf was following her. She couldn't see him, but . . .

“It wasn't that bad, was it?” Elizabet asked, turning the key in the ignition and slowly backing the VW out of the parking spot.

“Yes, it was! It was awful!” She stopped, realizing that they were talking about different things. “I mean,

school was fine, great, but . . . but . . . what were you doing around lunchtime, like a few minutes -after noon?"

"Sleeping," Elizabet said, the VW slowing to a stop at the next streetlight. "I work night shift, -remember?"

"Oh yeah, that's right," Kayla said. "Well, it's kinda like this. . . ."

"You got yourself into trouble," Elizabet said. It wasn't a question, it was a statement. "On your first day at your new high school, you got yourself into trouble."

"Well, not exactly school trouble," Kayla said, wondering exactly how she was going to explain this. "Not like getting sent to detention or anything like that. I got into, well . . . another kind of trouble."

"What do you mean by that?" Elizabet asked, glancing at her and raising one eyebrow.

Kayla glanced out the car window, wanting to look at anything but Elizabet's face. She didn't want to see Elizabet's annoyance with her, or the disappointment that she knew was there, that her ward couldn't even get through one day at school without getting into trouble. . . .

The light changed to green, and the VW started forward. Kayla saw a green BMW that looked like it was going to run the intersection. . . .

A green BMW, with the pointy-eared businessmen in the front seat.

"Oh no, it's them!" Kayla shouted, pointing through the windshield. "The killer elves!"

"Kayla, that's a remarkably childish way to try and change the subject," Elizabet said. "You're really—" Her words were cut off by a squeal of tires as the green BMW skidded through the -intersection just behind them, missing the little VW by a few inches. Elizabet swerved their car sharply, barely missing an old Volvo that was trying to make a lane change.

Kayla glanced back to see the BMW scream through a tight U-turn, accelerating after them. "Elizabet, get us out of here," Kayla yelled, hanging on to the dashboard.

For an answer, Elizabet gunned the engine, the VW seeming to leap forward past the other cars on the road. Kayla looked back again to see the BMW deftly dodging two cars in a near collision to stay close behind them.

"Hold on, child," Elizabet said calmly. Without warning, Elizabet yanked the steering wheel hard, bringing the VW to a sharp stop and spinning the tail end of the car around in a perfect circle to face in the other direction. She floored the gas again. Kayla saw, through the BMW's windshield, the wide-eyed faces of two elves in business suits as the BMW went past them in the other direction. She turned to see what they did, but the BMW was lost in traffic within a few seconds, apparently unable to make an emergency turn to follow them.

Elizabet drove in silence, making several more turns through small residential streets, before taking them back to the 101 Freeway.

Kayla was still trying to catch her breath. "Elizabet, that was . . . that wasscary," she said at last.

“My younger brother used to race stock cars in the seventies,” the older woman said. “I learned a few things from him. And now,” she said in a voice with a lot more edge to it, “I would like you to tell me exactly what happened to you at school today. *Everything.*”

“Okay,” Kayla said, a little meekly. *At least we're away from the killer elves—now all I have to deal with is Elizabet.*

Enrique Ramirez glanced around the empty hallway outside the high school gym, before fishing in his jeans pockets for some coins. He dialed the pay phone quickly.

“Hey, Carlos, *mi amigo* . . . yeah, yeah, I'm fine . . . listen, got some news for you . . . that little white girl, *the bruja*. Well, she was here at the high school today. A kid was hit by a car, everyone's still talking about it, and listen, you'll never guess what I saw her do. . . .”

\* \* \*

“Those idiots,” Shari said, slamming down the phone receiver into its cradle. “They're useless, -totally useless.”

“Then you shouldn't use them, my dear,” Perenor said from across the room, his feet propped up on the end of the couch. He looked the picture of an indolent elflord, sipping from a glass of wine, his suit tie undone and lying on the couch next to him.

“What are you suggesting, my lord?” Shari asked tartly. *He's ceasing to be amusing, she thought. He's as cold in bed as he is outside of it. And it's -because he's toying with me; I know he is. He wants something more from me, and he's only playing games until he gets it. . . .*

“Just that this could be done much more easily by you and me than by some of those rejects of the Unseelie Court.”

Shari stiffened at that remark, and Perenor smiled.

“Does that bother you, my dear?” he asked silkily. “I would have thought not. That you would care as little about your exile from the Unseelie Court as I do about mine from the Seelie Court.”

He gestured at the view of the ocean through the pane glass windows. “Isn't this much better than living in the Unseelie Court, in that dark, desolate place? I've been to the Unseelie lands, so lifeless and lacking in magic. Do you really want to go back there?”

“I will return home,” Shari said, a touch of steel in her voice. “My lord Nataniel will see to that.”

“Ah, Nataniel,” Perenor said. “An interesting fellow . . . ambitious, intelligent. I just wonder what he'll be able to accomplish with it.”

“I am loyal to—” Shari began, but Perenor cut off her words with a gesture.

“I know you are, Sharanya. That is one of the things I admire the most about you. I just wonder whether

that loyalty might be misplaced.” He rose from the couch, walking to the wet bar to pour himself another glass of dark red wine.

“What do you mean, my lord?” Shari asked.

Perenor turned, the glass of wine in his hand. “Just this. Imagine for a moment you, Nataniel, my daughter Ria, and I are to meet and discuss various business ventures tonight. We have dinner reservations for five o'clock, as I recall.”

“Yes. What of it?”

“Let's say that you and I were to leave now, to go to that high school where your inept associates completely failed to capture the young human mage. There will be records of where this little mage lives somewhere in their files. We search through the records, or use the -administrators to find the information. . . .”

“Easily done,” she said. “They are only -humans, after all.”

“Agreed. Some simple magic to force them to tell us what we need to know. Then, at dinner tonight, we convince Nataniel that we should go pick up this mage immediately. After all, that's a pet project of his, isn't it? And then, somehow, during the course of capturing it . . . something unfortunate happens to Nataniel.” He raised his glass to her in a toast. “And then you, my dear, would be free to return to the Unseelie lands with your elven host, with the human mage at your side to defeat the Unseelie Queen for you.”

“But I wouldn't . . .”

“Think about it,” Perenor said, smiling. “Nataniel cares too much about this human world. That's why he's built an empire here. Do you really believe him when he says that he wants to go home?”

“I don't know,” Shari admitted. “Sometimes I -believe him, but . . .” She glanced up at him, eyes narrowed. “And what do you get out of this, my lord Perenor?”

He shrugged. “I could say I do it simply out of my regard for you, that I care about you and I want to see you happy. But you would assume that was a lie, of course. Let's say this, instead: I help you gain the Unseelie throne, and then you'll grant me your aid to use against the Seelie Court. I have no great desire to return there, but I do owe them something for exiling me.”

“Now*that* is a motivation I understand,” Shari said. She moved past him, pouring wine into -another glass. “You could lie to me, though,” she said, “Just a little. Pretend that you're doing this because you care for me. That you'd love me -infinitely, the way the humans do.”

“Should I?” Perenor said, an amused tilt to his lips. “Do you want me to lie to you, Shari? Should I tell you about the beauty of your eyes, the way that your hair falls in such lovely flowing waves to your waist?” He moved closer to her, smiling that wicked smile, stray rays of sunlight from the window glinting off his silvery hair. “What other lies would you have me tell you?”

“All of those and more,” she said, taking a sip from her wineglass, close enough that she could have leaned forward to touch him.

“Let's drink to the one thing we both know is true,” Perenor said, raising his glass. “To partnership.”

“To partnership,” she echoed, and drank slowly, her eyes never leaving him for an instant.

*To partnership, she thought, and all the pleasures of it . . . until the moment when I don't need you anymore, my lord Perenor.*

Razz sat back in the back seat of the white Mercedes, his fingers drumming an idle pattern on the leather upholstery. Something was wrong and he knew it, but he couldn't put a finger on it. Maybe everything looked like it was fine, but he knew something was wrong. Here he was, in the back seat of his favorite car, good blow drawn out on the -mirror in thin little lines on the seat next to him, and his best girl promising to meet him later -tonight. But something was wrong.

His mother had said it when he was just a little kid, that he had something special. The eyes, she'd called it, talking about how her mother had had it. A way to know when something bad was going down. And that was what he felt right now, with the hair prickling on the back of his neck and the tight feeling in his belly.

The car phone rang. Flyboy, Razz's driver, picked it up, listened for a moment, and then handed it back to Razz. “It's Hotshot, bro,” he said. Razz took the phone from his outstretched hand.

Hotshot's voice was thin and faint across the crackling phone line. “We've been following Shari's people like you asked,” Hotshot said. “Just like you thought, they led us straight to that white chick, the one that did the number on Marcus. I saw the kid take off like a bat out of hell in a VW with some black mama, heading -toward L.A.”

“You got license plates on her, bro?” Razz asked.

Hotshot laughed a little. “More than that, Razz, I know the sister. It's the lady that works with the cops downtown. Winters, her name is. I met her last time they booked me. She's a good sister, Razz,” he added. “She helped one of my cousins get a job, sent a friend of mine's little brother to the gangbanger camp in Malibu, kept him out of county jail.”

“Yeah, well, we won't do shit to her, but I want that little white bitch,” Razz said. “I don't know what she did to Marcus, but it was some serious shit, you hear me? You find out where this mama lives; we'll go drop by and pay our respects later -tonight.”

“You got it, bro,” Hotshot said. Razz heard the click of him disconnecting.

He held the cellular phone in his hand for a moment longer, thinking about things. That feeling of something being wrong still wouldn't go away.

He leaned forward to speak to his driver. “Stop by the house,” he ordered, “I want to pick up some heavy shit, some of the Uzis and automatics. I have a feeling about tonight. I think we'll need it.”

The sun was setting at the far end of the San Fernando Valley, a disc of dark orange light disappearing behind the hills, turning the sky to shades of pink and pale blue. It was an effect that Perenor knew was caused by the smog, but it was beautiful in spite of that. He heard Shari's breath catch as she looked at

the gorgeous -sunset.

“Such beauty from such filth,” she commented, handing her car keys to the valet as she stepped out of the car. Perenor took her arm and walked with her to the entrance of the restaurant where the doorman stood, holding the door open for them. This was his favorite Japanese restaurant in the Valley, an elegant restaurant nestled against the hills. It was, fortunately enough, also close to where the young mage lived. *Five minutes away, just off Laurel Canyon*, he thought with a satisfied smile.

Inside the restaurant, Perenor glanced past the tables where humans sat talking and eating, looking for his daughter and Nataniel. They were seated in a far corner, talking animatedly. As he and Shari walked toward them, Perenor could hear the edges of their business discussion.

“But you're going to have to amortize, which means that your return on investment will drop over the five-year period down to forty percent!”

“But what if I recapitalize at the end of the fifth year?” Nataniel asked. He glanced up and saw Perenor and Shari as they walked up to the table. “Ah, my friend Perenor! It's good to see you again,” he said, standing and clasping Perenor's hand. “Your daughter has amazing insights into this new venture of mine. I'm delighted that you were able to introduce us.”

“I guessed that it might be profitable for both of you,” Perenor said, holding out a chair for Shari, then seating himself at the end of the table. “Ria is an extraordinarily talented young woman, as we've seen from the success of her Llewellyn Corporation.”

He saw that Ria smiled at that, but her eyes were cool and assessing. *She's learning*, he thought with a touch of regret. *She no longer blindly worships me. Which is a pity, really. If she ever becomes a danger to me . . .*

“But we should talk of other things,” Perenor continued. “Shari has some interesting news for you, Nataniel.”

“Oh, indeed,” Nataniel said, turning to his liegwoman.

Shari crumpled her napkin into her lap . . . a little nervously, Perenor thought. “It's that young human mage that you were so interested in, my lord. Morendil and Keryn found her this afternoon. And Lord Perenor was kind enough to suggest a visit to the girl's school, where we found the school administrators to be . . . quite helpful in giving us the information we needed to find the girl.”

“How interesting,” Nataniel said, smiling. “I knew you wouldn't fail me in this, Sharanya.”

Shari colored slightly, a faint touch of pink creeping across her face. *She does poorly at these games of deception*, Perenor thought. *Nataniel has some skill at it, but Shari is a child beside him—or me.*

“I took the liberty of calling together the Host, my lord,” Shari said. “They can meet us at the girl's address after we finish our supper here.”

“That sounds like an excellent plan,” Nataniel said. “We can have a delightful dinner here in the company of good friends,” he smiled at Ria, who glanced away from him, “and then go pick up this useful little human girl.”

Nataniel's gaze drifted back to Shari, and his eyes narrowed slightly. *He knows*, Perenor thought. *He*

*knows that something is amiss. Like a wolf near a trap, he can sense it. But will he figure it out before the trap closes in on him?*

Nataniel turned back to Ria. “So, Ria, what else can you suggest for increasing return on -investment in this venture?”

Kayla tried to concentrate on her geometry homework, but she couldn't stop herself from listening to Elizabeth's voice from the other room. “Yes, Nichelle . . . no, I agree unfortunately . . . well, then, it's settled.” There was the click of the phone being hung up, and Elizabeth walked into the living room a moment later, frowning.

“So, what did you tell her,” Kayla asked, “And what did she say?”

“That police patrols around the house weren't good enough. She'll arrange a safe place for you to be while they get the warrants together. They're sending over a patrol right now to take us in.”

Elizabeth sighed. “We'll probably spend tonight downtown, and tomorrow they'll send us over to a witness shelter. I just hope you can give them enough information that they can find these people.”

“I'm sorry, Elizabeth,” Kayla said in a small voice. “I never meant to be this much trouble for you.”

Elizabeth smiled and reached over to ruffle Kayla's short pelt of hair. “You certainly know how to make an old woman's life interesting, child,” she said.

There was a knock at the front door, a polite -rapping.

“Could that be the police already?” Kayla asked, glancing at Elizabeth.

“They might have had a patrol car in the area,” Elizabeth said.

“I'll let them in,” Kayla said, bounding up from the couch.

“Then again, I don't think they'd be here so quickly—wait a moment, don't—” Elizabeth said, just as Kayla unlocked the front door.

The first thing she saw was the gun. It was a shiny silver revolver, pointed right at her, the large barrel of the gun right in front of her eyes. Then she saw the face of the young black man holding the pistol, his smile half hidden beneath the hood of his bright blue sweatshirt.

Behind him, Kayla could see two more young men wearing blue caps and sweatshirts, and two cars parked in Elizabeth's driveway. One was the white Mercedes convertible with the bashed front fender, a car that she'd hoped she'd never see again.

“Elizabeth!” Kayla said in a voice that came out as a squeak.

Kayla felt Elizabeth's hand upon her shoulder. Elizabeth's voice was calm, almost too calm, as she surveyed the three gang members standing in her doorway. “Maybe you boys should come inside?” Elizabeth said quietly.

“Thank you, sister,” the young man with the -revolver said. “Don't mind if we do.”

*She's inviting them in?*

As if hearing her thoughts Elizabet murmured to Kayla, “Don't worry, child. Everything will work out fine.”

*I don't think so, Kayla thought. I really don't think so. . . .*

## Chapter Seventeen

“Are you gonna stay chill about this, mama?” the leader of the three young men asked as they walked into the living room. “You're not going to try to fuck around with us, are you?”

“No, I certainly don't intend to do that,” Elizabet said evenly.

The young man nodded as if satisfied and glanced at his associates. “Holster 'em, homies,” he said. “Show some respect for the sister.”

Kayla breathed a very small sigh of relief as the young men put the guns away, sliding them under their shirts or behind their waistbands.

“So, mama,” the leader said, sitting down on the edge of the couch, one knee propped up -under his chin. “We're here with a businesslike proposition.” He glanced at Kayla, still standing by the door. “My name is Razz. These two are my lieutenants.”

“I can't exactly say it's a pleasure to meet you, Razz,” Elizabet said as she sat down in the chair across from him. <T>

*She's so calm, Kayla thought. She's got to be as scared as I am, but she's sure not showing it.*

“The white chick should sit down, too,” Razz said, <W1%-12>“<|><D%0>Cause she's part of the business deal.”

*Somehow I don't think I like the sound of that. . . .*

He gestured at her, and Kayla sat down gingerly at the far end of the couch, as far from the young men as she could manage.

“It's like this,” Razz said. “Here we are, some -enterprising men trying to improve the lot of the African-American in America and we hear about this white kid that can do some wild shit, serious juju magic. And I think to myself: Razz, that's someone that we need, someone that can help our cause. So I come here to talk to the sister who's watching over the white chick, figuring she'll do what's right by our people. That she'll give us the white chick, let her work with us and our people.”

Kayla glanced nervously at Elizabet, who was -being very quiet. *She's not really thinking about it, is she?* Kayla thought, suddenly very scared. *She wouldn't just give me to these guys, would she?*



Elizabet glanced at Kayla and then turned back to the young man. “No,” she said.

He blinked, as though he wasn't certain that he'd heard her correctly. “What are you saying, sister?”

“I said no. What I'm saying, *brother*, is that you're not my brother. You're not a hero of the people.”

Elizabet matched his glare with one of her own. “My people are making something of themselves. They're doctors, lawyers, preachers, politicians. They're doing something to help the African-American in this country. You, boy, are just a thug.”

“Is that what you think, mama?” Razz stood up, shaking his fist at her. “You don't know jack shit about it, lady. Fuck this,” he said. “Grab the kid. We're leaving.”

“Razz!” It was a shout from outside, “You'd better get out here, man.”

Razz strode to the door; he paused, glancing back at Kayla and Elizabet. “Don't let 'em pull any shit,” he directed the two lieutenants, who nodded.

Kayla glanced nervously at the semi-automatic pistol that was now back in one of the young men's hands. She edged a little closer to the edge of the couch so she could see through the open doorway what was happening outside.

There were more cars in the driveway and in the street beyond. Kayla instantly recognized the two standing in the forefront of the small group of people: Shari and Nataniel.

Razz walked out to the group of elves, quietly talking with them for a few moments in a voice too quiet for Kayla to hear. *He can't see them for what they are*, Kayla thought. *Nobody but Elizabet and I know what those people are.*

Razz said something else, then turned and walked back toward the house. Without a word, he stormed into the house, grabbed Kayla by the arm, and dragged her outside. Kayla had a glimpse of Elizabet starting forward, only to have her way blocked by one of the young gunmen.

“This is what you want, Nate? This little white girl?” he demanded, shoving Kayla in front of the Unseelie.

Kayla felt like a mouse surrounded by several hungry snakes. The Unseelie were gazing at her with expressions that she didn't want to identify, and she saw the mix of hate-fear on the faces of Razz's men.

“That's the girl,” Shari said quietly. “You will hand her over to us now, Razz.”

“Like hell, mama!” Razz glared at her.

“You little fool,” Nataniel said, in a voice like ice. “You don't know what you're dealing with, boy. I would rather see this girl dead, and all of your -junior hoodlums with her, than let her remain in your possession.” The look in Nataniel's eyes was terrifying, he looked so calm and almost bored with this. He wasn't bluffing, he was absolutely serious. He'd kill all of them with about as much emotion as someone swatting a fly.

*Somebody get me out of this*, Kayla whispered to herself. *Please, somebody, anybody, get me out of this. . . . There isn't anyone who's going to help me now*, she realized. *Elizabet's back there, being*

*held at gunpoint. There are no cops, no Elizabet, no Ramon, no Billy, nobody.*

*Just me.*

“What are you going to do, Nate?” Razz asked. “You're surrounded by my bros, who'll shoot you before you can blink, man. You've been a good supplier, a good dude to deal with, but you're not going to walk away from here with jack shit, you understand that?”

“Do you think that matters to me?” Nate said, glancing down at his fingernails. “That your boys are armed with guns? That's fairly insignificant in the scheme of things, I think.”

Razz shook his head in disbelief. “You're -insane, man. You're fucking insane. We're leaving here now,” he called out to his gang. “With the girl.”

“I don't think so,” Nataniel said calmly. “You have one last chance to reconsider, Razz.”

“Like hell!” Razz glared at him. “Fuck with me and you're dead, Nate.”

“I couldn't have said that better myself,” Nataniel commented.

“Fucking insane,” Razz muttered, painfully grasping Kayla's arm again and pulling her along with him in the direction of one of the cars.

Without warning, the world exploded around them.

Blinding light and raging flames filled the air. Kayla felt Razz let go of her arm and fell to her knees, her eyes burning too much for her to see, gasping for breath. The air was too hot to breathe, and someone else's agony washed her like a wave. She quickly crawled away, feeling the asphalt melting beneath her hands and knees. It seared the skin of her hands, but she felt her magic responding instantly, already working to heal her.

She heard a horrible scream behind her, slowly dying away into silence, and knew that she hadn't been the real target of that powerful magic, only close to it. As her eyes cleared, she glanced back and saw Razz's body, engulfed with purple flames, fall lifelessly to the driveway, -already crumbling to gray ashes. The T-Men were staring at it in shock, too stunned to move or react.

“Next?” Nataniel said in a bored voice.

One of the T-Men recovered, bringing up his Uzi to fire. Kayla pressed herself flat against the hot asphalt as the air filled with the sound and smell of gunfire. She saw the T-Men diving for cover behind the different cars, and one business-suited elf shoved back against the car by the force of the bullets, as splatters of blood blossomed from his chest.

Another elf leaped toward the gunman with the Uzi. Between one step and the next, the red-haired elf changed, his business suit melting away into a suit of glittering silver armor. He swung the sword that was suddenly in his hands, cutting through the Uzi and the startled gunman in one stroke. Then he staggered backwards and fell, blood trickling from his mouth and the many gunshot holes in the silver armor.

Kayla felt her stomach turn over and forced herself to look away. Bullets sang overhead as she crawled another few feet closer to the house, -hearing shouts and screams from behind her. The front door of the house hung open, an inviting rectangle of light, if only she could reach it. One of Razz's boys was lying

motionless on the steps, his hand outstretched as though reaching toward her.

*Where's his gun? If I had that, maybe I could bluff my way out of here, do something, anything! I don't see it, it must be somewhere in the bushes, it's too dark to see it.*

*I've got to get Elizabet and get the hell out of here!*

She was at the steps when another sound pierced the noise-filled air: the sound of screaming tires. She glanced back at the driveway, to see Carlos, leaning out of the open passenger window of the Chevy as it shrieked to a stop, firing the pistol in his hand. Two other cars were pulling up behind him, homeboys firing through the windows. Coming up the street behind them, she could see a black-and-white police car, tires squealing as it skidded around the street corner.

*Oh my God, I didn't think it was possible for this situation to get any worse, but it just did. . . .*

Kayla gathered herself and leaped up from the pavement, diving for the open door into the house. She dropped hard onto the steps as a hail of bullets echoed behind her. Kayla crawled through the doorway into the entryway, then stopped short, staring up into the barrel of the gun above her.

The young man behind the gun was looking down at her with terrified brown eyes. Kayla didn't know what to do. She couldn't move, couldn't do anything, just stare at him and wait for him to kill her.

She knew the instant he made the decision, his finger slowly tightening on the trigger . . .

Elizabet slammed into the boy with a football tackle, knocking him against the wall. The gun skittered away across the floor. Elizabet turned quickly and picked up a brand-new glass dolphin sculpture from the table, bringing it down on the young man's head. It shattered, and he blinked at her once and slumped against the wall.

*Damn, there goes another dolphin. . . .*

“Quickly, child, we're getting out of here,” Elizabet said, taking her by the arm.

The world changed to pure white around them.

The force of the blast lifted Kayla off her feet. She landed hard on the floor, rolling. All she could see was brightness, slowly fading. Then she saw Elizabet near the couch, lying very still. She sat up quickly and looked around the room.

Nataniel stood in the doorway, blood dripping from his silver armor, his hands glittering with magic.

Kayla glanced at the pistol, lying on the floor a few feet away.

“Don't bother,” Nataniel said. “You've caused me a lot of trouble, girl. I'll take it out of your skin, once we're away from here.” He began to walk into the house and stopped suddenly, as though encountering an invisible wall. With an impatient gesture, he brushed his hand at something invisible in front of him, then walked forward. Shari and another elf that Kayla didn't recognize, an older, silver-haired man, followed him through the doorway. All were wearing bright armor from head to foot, bloody swords in their hands.

Kayla shook her head; her throat was too tight for her to speak.

“Oh, defiance from the little kitten. We'll cure you of that soon enough.” Nataniel stepped over the unconscious body of the young man, moving toward her.

“My lord?” Shari asked in a strained voice, and Nataniel turned.<T>

She had her sword raised, stained with bright blood. As Kayla watched in total disbelief, she brought it down in a killing stroke, aiming for Nataniel's face.

He ducked back, so that only the tip of the blade creased the side of his face, cutting across his forehead and left eye. He shrieked something Kayla couldn't understand and brought up his own sword, parrying her next attack. Blood coursed down his face from his ruined eye as he countered another attack.

*My God, they're trying to kill each other!*

Kayla scrambled backwards as the silver-haired elf joined in the fight, swinging a deadly cut at Nataniel, who barely blocked it with his own sword.

“You too, Perenor?” Nataniel hissed.

Kayla crawled closer to Elizabet, realizing that the elves were totally ignoring her for the -moment. She rested her hand on Elizabet's shoulder, letting her vision change and show her whether Elizabet was badly hurt.

She was. Kayla could feel the place in Elizabet's skull where the bone had broken, and the fragments were embedded deep in her brain, cutting through blood vessels.*She'll die of this*, Kayla realized.*Or worse, she won't die, but it'll destroy her mind.*

*The elves are too busy trying to kill each other; they don't even know I'm still here. I can get out of here, or I can heal Elizabet. . . .*

She didn't even have to think about it. Kayla called the magic and let it flow through her. She wrapped the magic around the bone shards, slowly easing them out and back into their proper place, and quickly sealed off the damaged blood vessels.

Distantly, she heard a scream and felt the agony of a sword slicing through flesh and bone, a killing blow. She forced herself to concentrate on Elizabet, as the magic repaired the last of the damage and faded away. She knelt for a moment, resting her face against Elizabet's motionless shoulder. It was too much, everything was too much; the total terror and exhaustion were dragging her down and she couldn't stop shaking. The clashing of swords across the room finally registered with her again, and she looked up, not knowing what she was going to see.

Shari was lying in a pool of her own blood on the floor. Nataniel and the other elf were faced off, standing almost over her body, eyes intent on each other.

“You convinced her to betray me, didn't you, Perenor?” Nataniel asked, gasping for breath. “Shari would never have done this on her own.”

Perenor's only answer was another swift block and cut combination, almost too fast for Kayla to follow.

Nataniel's mistake was small, and Kayla nearly didn't see it. His foot slipped slightly in the blood on the

floor, just enough to throw him off-balance. The other elf moved instantly, closing in on his blind side and stabbing upward with his sword. Nataniel made an odd choking sound and fell back as the silver-haired elf withdrew his sword from Nataniel's chest. Nataniel staggered backwards, his back to the wall, then slid to the floor, leaving a bloody trail on the wall behind him.

Perenor turned toward Kayla, his sword dripping blood, his eyes bright with insanity. Kayla was held by that gaze, unable to look away. He staggered toward her and nearly fell, clutching at a long gash that cut through his armor along his side. He straightened slowly, his eyes burning, breath hissing through his tightened lips. He brought up the sword with both hands, taking another step forward. . . .

“Father!” It was a blond woman, walking quickly across the blood-slicked floor. The sharp contrast between them, the elegantly dressed woman and the blood-splattered man in armor, was so startling that Kayla could only stare at her.

He looked blankly at her, not seeming to recognize her for a moment.

“Father,” she repeated, her hand on his arm. “You're hurt, and the police will be here soon. We have to get out of here.” She glanced at Kayla, and Kayla saw something flicker across those calm blue eyes, too fast for Kayla to see what it was. Then she turned back to her father, urging him toward the door. “Quickly, Father, walk more quickly. . . .”

Kayla watched the two leave, suddenly aware of the reek of blood and worse filling the room. She sat there for a moment, just breathing. She heard the sound of a car ignition outside, then the sound of the car pulling away, and realized how quiet it was, so quiet that the loudest sound was her own breathing. Slowly, unsteadily, she got to her feet, walking to the open front door.

Nothing in her life could've prepared her for what she saw. The driveway looked like it had been washed in blood. Elves in armor, T-Men, and -Tyrone Street Boys, two uniformed LAPD officers, all lying too still, sprawled on the pavement or against the sides of cars. No one moved, and there was no sound. Except one, the faint voice of someone cursing in Spanish.

Kayla followed that sound. On the other side of a car, she saw Carlos, propped against the tire, his arms wrapped around his middle. He didn't see her at first, lost in his pain as the blood seeped around his fingers and soaked into his jacket. He looked up and saw her. “*Bruja!*” he whispered. “*Bruja*, you're here. You can heal me. Do it, do it quickly.”

She could feel the magic in her responding to his words and his pain, and moved closer, her hands reaching out to him.

Carlos smiled, leaning back. “Always you do what I say, *bruja*.”

She stopped in mid-step.

His eyes widened with pain and surprise, staring at her. “Why are you hesitating, girl? Heal me!” He coughed, blood spattering across his lips and chin. “Heal me, *bruja!*”

*I can't let him die, I can't . . .*

*I can't let him own me.*

*If I heal him, I'll never be free. He'll always want me, he'll always be after me.*

*But I can't let him die . . .*

*I can't . . . I can't . . .*

Carlos sighed and slumped back against the car. Kayla felt the life fleeing from him, fading away. There was still one last moment, she knew, when she could put her hands against him and hold that life in his body.

She didn't move.

The light left Carlos' body, leaving behind a dark, empty shape, faceless as Kayla's vision suddenly blurred with tears. She sobbed, hot tears running down her face.

Kayla leaned against the doorjamb, holding onto it for support. Everything was too bright and blurry around her, but one thing she saw instantly. Nataniel and Shari's bodies were gone, vanished, just like the other elven bodies had vanished during those long minutes when she'd knelt next to Carlos' body, crying too hard to see anything else. Only the stains of blood on the wall and the floor marked where Nataniel and Shari had been.

She walked unsteadily across the room, hearing the sound of wailing police sirens in the distance. She sat down next to Elizabet and took Elizabet's hand in hers, pressing it against her cheek. *It's crazy the world's all pain and bullets and blood too much blood too much . . .*

She couldn't stop the tears from falling and didn't want to. She could feel the tears washing away the blood from her face, and that was all right; soon she'd be clean again, no blood, no blood ever again. . . .

\* \* \*

“Oh my God!”

Detective Cable's face was chalk-white. Walker had never seen her that shocked before, not even when they'd walked into that domestic multiple homicide scene. He'd never seen anything like this, either, not since the Nam.

Cable and the other officers were walking across the driveway, checking the bodies. They already knew that Quinn and Allen were dead, two good LAPD officers dead on the pavement near the gangbangers.

He and Houston walked quickly to the front door of the house. It was quiet inside, but he gestured for Houston to draw her piece and did the same himself. They moved into the house, scanning quickly for any armed opponents.

There was only one live person, and that was a girl sitting, rocking on the floor, blood and tears streaking her face. She stared up at him like a lost soul.

Walker was a father of two grown boys, and his instincts were good. He holstered his gun and knelt beside her, holding her close and letting her tears soak through his uniform, as the other officers walked quietly through the blood-stained room around them.

## Epilogue

The sunlight was warm on Kayla's face, warm and very bright. She stood next to Elizabeth on the sandy concrete of the Venice Beach walkway and looked out at the crowd of people walking along the beach, playing in the sand and swimming in the water. "Do you see him?" she asked Elizabeth, who was also scanning the crowd.

"I don't know what he looks like," Elizabeth said ruefully, "so I have no idea who he is."

Kayla saw him then, standing at the edge of the crowd, next to a couple of girls gawking at a weightlifter working out on the sands.

*Ramon looks thinner, she thought, and a little pale.* There were shadows under his eyes that hadn't been there before. He saw her and waved, walking toward them.

"You must be Elizabeth Winters," Ramon said, nodding to her.

"Elizabeth," the older woman said. "No 'h' on the end."

He stood for a moment, gazing thoughtfully at Kayla. "You look like you are well, *querida*," he said. "Are you?"

"I'm okay," Kayla said. "How 'bout yourself?"

He shook his head. "It's been very difficult. Mama has not been herself, these weeks since Carlos and Roberta's deaths. It's hard for her."

"I'm sorry," Kayla said, and meant it.

"My life is different, too," he continued. "After what . . . what happened with Carlos, I told the other Tyrone Street Boys that I was through with them, and I went to the *policía*. They offered me a job, working at the prison camp in Malibu where they send young kids from the gangs. And they'll help me finish high school at night, too. Maybe working at the gang camp will make a difference, maybe it won't. I don't know."

He sighed. "I miss my brother. I think I'll always miss him. But I can't go on living his life. It's hard to walk away from my friends in the gang. . . ."

"Most of the time, the right thing to do isn't easy," Elizabeth said gently.

"I know, I know. Life is never easy," he said simply. "That's not the reason God put us here on earth. I don't know the reason God put us here, but I know that isn't it. At least, that's what Mama says. . . . I look at Kayla here, at what she's learned to do, the price she pays for helping people, and I think I have to at least try to do the same. I have to try. . . ."

Ramon seemed to run out of words, and stood there looking at Kayla, his eyes lingering on her face.

Elizabeth cleared her throat a little awkwardly. "Well, would you kids like some lunch? There's a good

sandwich place just up ahead; we can get sandwiches and sodas.”

“Thank you, Miss Elizabet,” Ramon said. “That would be fine.”

They walked in the direction that Elizabet pointed, weaving through the thick mass of people on the walkway. A pair of boys on skates zipped past them, a little too close; Ramon took her hand and pulled her to one side. He didn't let go of her hand, after the boys were past, and they continued walking, hand in hand, following Elizabet through the crowd.

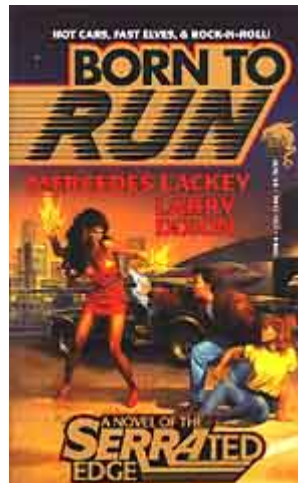
No, it wasn't going to be easy, learning to live with who she was, and what she could do. Kayla knew that. But right now, walking in the sunlight with Ramon, she knew that that didn't matter.

Because it was going to be all right.

Serrated Edge

-- Born to Run --

by Mercedes Lackey and Larry Dixon



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## DEDICATION

Dedicated to J.R. and Shirley Dixon, Ed and Joyce Ritche, and to all parents with the vision to listen to what kids*really* wish for—and help them find it.

Thanks to the music of Icehouse (and to Iva Davies for being the visual inspiration for Tannim), a-ha, Mid-night Oil, Rush, Kate Bush, Alan Parsons, Thomas Dolby (hope you get the keys to her Ferrari), Edvard Grieg, Shriekback, David Bowie (past and present!), Billy Idol (for visceral fight-scene music), Mannheim Steamroller, the Floyd, Michael Hedges, and the entire Narada Artists catalogue, especially David Arkenstone and David Lanz—we could never have done this one without you!

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## CHAPTER ONE

A dark red Mustang perched beside the ribbon of highway, alone but for the young man resting against its door. It was an unusual sight for such a place, here where the shallow water of the wetlands reflected moonlight, and endless silvered marsh grasses whispered in the breeze. The cicadas didn't care if the man was there, nor did the night-birds, nor the foxes and raccoons—they were used to the comings-and-goings of men in their loud machines, and would avoid him. There would seem to be no reason for him to be stopped here—no smoke or steam poured from beneath the nostrilled hood, no line of shredded rubber marked a newly departed tire. A highway patrol officer would have been very

interested—if there had been one anywhere within twenty miles. And that, too, was -unusual; this close to Savannah, there should be police cruising this stretch of road.

“One of these nights,” griped Tannim to no one in particular, “I’ll have a normal drive, with nothing chasing me, pestering me, shooting at me . . . no breakdowns, no detours, no country-western music, no problems. Peace, quiet, and the road. No place to go, no one to save, no butts to cover except my own.”

Tannim pulled himself up onto his old Mach 1, faded black jeans *shushing* over the hood. Its cooling engine tick-tick-ticked, radiator gurgling softly as it relaxed from its work, the warm old American sheet metal satin-smooth and familiar. He ran a hand through his long brown hair, catching fingers in his uncountable ratty knots of curls, and snorted in cynical amusement. Casting his eyes skyward, scratching at his scalp, he said wistfully, “Man. They keep telling me, ‘Y’knew the job was dangerous when ya took it.’ Thanks for giving me the job description *after* I’ve signed the contract, guys.”

The cicadas answered him by droning on, unimpressed.

The road was deserted, the air clear, the bright country sky shining off of the curved fenders. Tiny pinpoints of light twisted into sweeping contours only to be swallowed up in the flat black intakes of the hood.

The beauty and peace of the evening softened his mood. *No finer job in this world, though. When it works out—wish Kestrel were here to help. He’s better at this than me.* Tannim thought about his old friend from high school back in Jenks, Oklahoma, with more than a twinge of regret—regret for Derek’s curious blend of talents, compassion, and guts. Derek Ray Kestrel was gifted not only with a sexy name but with a knack for magic that just wouldn’t quit. Deke spent his time with his cars and guitars, now, and didn’t do road work anymore. *Guess he didn’t have the stomach for it. It can get gross enough to freak a coroner. Damned if he didn’t have more than just talent, though.*

He gave up on his hair and adjusted his jacket, a third-hand Battlestar Galactica fatigue he traded a Plymouth carburetor kit for. Both he and the other kid thought they’d gotten the better deal. They were both right. Tannim didn’t know from carbs then, and had let go of a rare five-hundred-dollar sixpack. Deke had sure given him a hard time about that! The other kid had no idea how hard the battle-jackets were to get. *Live and learn.* He dug around in one of the many pockets he’d sewn inside the jacket, and pulled out a cherry pop, whistling along with the Midnight Oil tape on the Mach 1’s stereo, occasionally falling into key.

*Decent night for a job, though. Not raining like last time, and no lightning to dodge, either.* Tannim was a young man, but he was not inclined to die that way, despite the reckless pace he kept up. *Better to run toward something than away,* he’d always thought, but the scars and aches all over his wiry body testified that even a fiery young mage can be harmed by too much running. Or perhaps, not running hard enough . . . He had been self-trained up to age twenty, and then someone from *elsewhen* had taken him in and really shown him the ropes of high magic. Their friendship had built before their student/teacher relationship really began, Chinthliss admiring the boy’s brazen style, wicked humor, and dedication to the elusive and deadly energy of his world’s magic. That was, in fact, the reason Chinthliss had taken Tannim on in the first place; it had not escaped the young mage that he and his mentor were a great deal alike in many ways. There were a lot of words to describe the two of them, the best of which were creative, crafty, adventurous, virtuous—well, maybe not virtuous—but their many critics had other choice adjectives, none flattering. Tannim had a way of taking the simplest lesson and turning it around to befuddle his “master,” who in turn would trounce the boy with the next one, and giggle about it for a week. It was Chinthliss who had given Tannim his name—it meant “Son of Dragons.” It fit, especially

since he thought of Tannim as he would his own offspring.

Eventually, the lessons simply became jam sessions of experimenting, and Tannim began teaching Chinthliss a thing or two. What was about to occur on this lonely stretch of road was something he'd come up with himself years ago—something that had scared the scat out of Chinthliss. It was the kind of “job” he had done a couple of times with Deke Kestrel in tow. He unwrapped the cherry pop and began chewing on it absent-mindedly, humming along with the tunes. He crumpled the wrapper and slipped it into a pocket, and his humming became a chant through clenched teeth.

He pulled his shoulders back and stretched, neck and back popping from road fatigue, and let in the rush of energy that heralded a major spell. Around him, the cicadas rose in pitch, to harmonize with Peter Garrett and the young man's chanting. Harmonizing with Garrett was no small feat, and he noted it as a good omen. He kept his arms raised toward the crescent moon overhead, and his eyes perceived a subtle change in the starlight as he entered his familiar trance.

His body went rigid, as if rigor mortis had suddenly frozen him in place.

To say that Tannim died then would be misleading—although he was not precisely alive anymore either. The trance he entered was protected well, and he was being monitored by otherworldly allies, but the young mage's soul was now connected to his body by the thinnest of threads—*much* more tenuous than anything most mages ever depended on during out-of-body work. Most of them would have been terrified at the notion of trusting their lives to so fragile a bond. But most mages weren't Tannim. *He* had been trusting his life and more to far more fragile bonds than this for a long time now.

As he stabilized his spirit-form, there was the sensation of everything being well-lit and dark at once, and of infinite visibility—the dizzying effect of mage-sight in the now-and-then hereafter.

He “felt” completely normal, right down to the candy tucked in his cheek and the feel of the Mach 1 beneath him. He tapped his worn black high-tops against the chrome, focusing his thoughts and getting comfortable, teeth gnawing on the pop's soggy stem as he drew energy up from the earth through the frame of the Mach 1, tempering it through the sheet metal, grounding the wild-magic resonances into the engine block, radiating the excess through the window glass.

*Good so far; now to find him.*

With that, he pulled his spirit away from his body, his shadow-image standing upright, stretching, and adjusting its jacket while his body remained seated on the hood, connected to it by a shimmering field of gossamer threads, the only traces of the spell visible to the trained eye. He stepped away from his anchor, and crossed the gravel shoulder.

A figure wavered and coalesced before him, a fortyish man in a plaid workshirt and chinos, standing with his hands in his pockets, looking away from the road. There was a half-smoked cigarette hanging slackly from his lips. He was an ordinary man, the kind you'd see at any truckstop, any feed store in the southern belt, lines etched into his face by hard work, bright sun, and pain endured. The only thing that set him apart now was that he was edged by a soft yellowish glow, which seemed to fill in every shadow and crease in that face, and followed him as he stepped towards Tannim.

His brows furrowed, as if trying to remember something. He took a drag off the cigarette. It glowed, but did not burn down. Smoke curled up around his face, a bright blue and violet. “Haven't seen you here before,” the man said. “Hiya. Canfield, Ross Canfield. . . .” The man stepped forward, reflexively offered a hand. Tannim bit his lip, stepped forward again, and grasped his hand. *Well, I've got him. Oh God, I*

*thought this was going to be easier. He doesn't know.*

“Hello, Ross,” he said. “I’m Tannim.”

Ross nodded; he seemed distracted, as if he wasn’t entirely focusing on the moment at hand. “Tannim? Good ta meetcha. That a first name or a last name?”

“Only name,” Tannim replied cautiously. “Just Tannim. How are you? I mean, you look a little stressed, Ross; are you all right? How do you feel . . . ?”

If Canfield was surprised about this atypical show of concern from a stranger, he didn’t show it. “Been better. Strange night.” Ross took a pull off of his cigarette. Its tip glowed again, but still didn’t shorten. Its smoke wisped up violet and vanished above his head, and he blew smoke from his nostrils in a wash of reddish-purple.

“Mmm. As strange as usual.” Tannim smiled inwardly at the oxymoron. “Where you from, Ross?”

Canfield focused a little more on him as the question caught his attention. “Louisiana. Metairie. You?”

Tannim moved a little farther away, unobtrusively testing the energies coming from Canfield. “Tulsa.”

Now Canfield’s attention was entirely focused on the young mage. “Why you ask?”

“Just curious; I wondered if you were local.” It was time to change the subject “You know, Ross, you seem like a friendly fella, laid back, able to handle ’bout anything. Got something kinda serious to talk to you about.”

“Uh huh.” Ross Canfield set his jaw, and the glow around him turned a rich orange. Not a good sign. Red would be worse, much worse, but orange was not a good sign.

“Ah, look, Ross, I have some bad news for you, so don’t get mad at me. . . .” *They always blame the messenger don’t they?*

“Bad news?” Another drag on the cigarette, which now glowed a fierce red—echoing the glow of energy swirling around him. “My wife just left me, kid, and you say *you’ve* got bad news?”

Abruptly, Tannim was no longer the focus of Canfield’s anger. “That sonuvabitch Marty Lear tore the hell outta my lawn with her in that goddamn Jap pickup of his and—and—took her away—”

So; there was the reason for it all. *Uh oh. Fast work, boy, you hit it right the first time.*

Tannim’s eyes narrowed, and he took the mangled pop stick out of his mouth. Power fluctuated around them, silent and subtle, but there. Tannim noted their patterns, setting up buffer fields with a mental call. He saw a fan of lines spread around them both, channels waiting to be filled if needed.

“What did you do?”

Canfield did not take offense at what should have been considered a very personal question. “Went after ’em. We was fightin’ and she’d already called the bastard; he showed up and she jumped in. Caught up to ’em. Have this old ’Cuda, hot as hell . . .”

*“Had.”*

Tannim was the focus of Canfield’s attention again; he felt the hot glare of Ross’s stare. “What?” Canfield asked.

*He isn’t going to like this.* “You had a Barracuda. I’m sorry, Ross, but . . . that’s the bad news I have for you.”

“What you talkin’ ’bout, son?” Ross Canfield looked pale for a moment, then his glow pulsed cherry red and his face began to twist into anger. He exhaled bright red smoke from his nostrils, jaw set, threads of energy coalescing around his feet and fists.

*Now a quick deflection.* “Ross, walk with me a minute, will you?” Tannim started along the roadbed toward the overpass a hundred feet away. “How long would you say you’ve been standing out here, Ross? An hour, maybe? A couple?”

Ross hesitated, then followed Tannim. The tiny traces of reddish energy crackled and followed his steps.

“Ross, you remember stopping here? Getting out of that car? Lighting that cig?”

Ross absently pulled the cigarette from his mouth and looked at it, brow knotted in concentration.

Tannim stood next to the overpass abutment. It was gray concrete, scarred and cracked, with patches of cement covering half its surface. Bits of glass and plastic glittered in the starlight. Tannim picked up a razor-edged sliver of safety-glass an inch long. *Barrier’s in place; might as well tell him straight up. He hasn’t taken the hints.*

“Ross . . . this is all that’s left of your ’Cuda. You hit this bridge doin’ one-forty, and you never walked away from it.”

The cigarette slipped from Ross’ fingers and rested in the dry grass. It smoldered, but didn’t set fire to the grass it landed in. The energy field around Ross Canfield crackled like a miniature thunderstorm, apparently invisible to him.

“Ross, look over there.” Tannim pointed at the Mustang, and at the man still sitting on the hood. “That’s me.”

Ross took a deep breath, stooped to pick up his cigarette, and returned it in his mouth.

*Here’s where it hits. I can handle it; he’s not too power-ful . . . I hope .* Tannim built up his defenses, preparing for a mental scream of rage. . . . Or worse. *Sometimes they don’t just blame the messenger, they kill the messenger. I hate this part.*

Ross bit his lip, shock plain on his face as he realized the meaning of Tannim’s words.

“Never . . . walked . . . away. . . .”

Tannim nodded, ready to strike back if Ross broke and gave in to the rage building in him. “So I’m dead, huh?”

Tannim could feel the energies arcing between them, screaming for focus. . . .

*Hoo boy. Now so am I.*

“That’s right, Ross. You died three years ago, right here. I’m sorry, really. . . .”

Ross Canfield pulled himself up to his full height, towering over Tannim by almost a foot, eyes glowing red with fury as he seethed. His fists clenched tighter, then relaxed slowly and finally opened. His broad shoulders slouched as his aura dimmed to orange, red tinges slithering away into the ground. He inhaled one massive breath, pulled a hand back through his hair and said—

“Well,*shit* .”

Tannim heard mental giggles from his guardians, felt them skitter away to other business, pulling his borrowed energy reserves with them. He heaved a sigh of relief and lowered his guard against a strike.

Ross swayed as if drunk, then stared at Tannim’s spirit-form like he was trying out newly bought eyes.

“So, this is what it’s like to be a goddamn ghost,” Ross said to Tannim as they stood beside the Mustang. “Just my damn luck. I should’ve expected something like this to happen to me. What the hell do I do now?”

Tannim stood at the hood, beside himself. “I’ll tell you in a second.” He drew up the Walking spell’s reserve energy and stepped back into his body, trusting his instincts that Ross was not going to disturb his transfer. Back at home, he opened his eyes, stretched and stood, rubbing the ever-present kink in his left leg.

“Just for the record, you could have hurt me pretty bad back there, Ross. Just now, I mean. Stepping into and out of a body is a vulnerable time. I trusted you that you wouldn’t—thanks.”

“Uh huh. What was I gonna do, rattle my chains at ya?” Ross snorted. “And, uh, if it’s not too much trouble, what the hell good is this gonna do me? What am I s’posed to do? If I’m dead, where are the angels?”

Tannim paused, and walked to the door of the car. “Get in; I’ll tell you.”

Ross reached for the door-handle, and his hand passed through it, a tracing of fire around the point of entry. “That’s lesson one, Ross. You’re only partially *inthis* land of the physical. You can choose whether or not to interact with it. Lotta advantages to being a ghost; I don’t get the option of deciding if I want to be hit by a bullet or not.” Tannim grinned. “You do. Or rather, you will. You’re not up to that yet.”

“That’s spooky as shit,” Ross observed, watching his forearm disappear completely into the door.

“Normally you wouldn’t be able to do that to this particular car. As a ghost, that is. It has some powerful defenses. I’m lowering the ones against spirits for you, keyed to you and you only. Otherwise, you couldn’t get within a foot of that door. Also, another thing: if you get near my tape collection, I’ll kill you.” Tannim smiled. “You can fry magnetics with a touch—tapes, computer disks, that sorta thing. The tapes are in that red box there. Please don’t touch it.”

Ross looked through the window at the red fabric case, and read “no ghosts or possessions within 10 feet” embroidered into a panel on its lid. The caution was surrounded by arcane symbols. “Yeah, I see. What are those, spells or something?”

Tannim chuckled and leaned against the roof. “The runes? They’re from the back of Led Zeppelin Four. Scares most of the ghosts bigtime, except the metal-heads, they just give me a high-sign and say ‘Duuuude!’ ”

Ross laughed, and pulled his arm free of the door. He shoved his other hand in his pockets, and dragged on his ever-present cigarette. The smoke wisped away, disappearing as blue this time.

“That’s another advantage, you can see things living people can’t, like that warning. It’s for spirits only. Your vision should be changing soon, now that you’ve realized . . . ah, what you are now. Things’ll start getting pretty weird . . . people will have funny glows around them, colors that show how they feel emotionally, the brighter they are the more intense they are. I see that way all the time, it’s called ‘mage-sight’—that’s how I can see you now. Watch out for blind spots, they mean trouble every time. They stand for something you can’t see, something someone won’t let you see, or something you don’t *want* to see.”

Ross appeared grim for a second, then turned his head to face the overpass.

*He looks like he’s seen a . . .*

Well, he turned very pale.

“I can’t see . . . I never noticed that before. That’s where I died, and I can’t see it at all.” Ross looked visibly shaken, and began walking towards the overpass.

Would he be able to see it? Should Tannim even encourage him to try? But he seemed ready. “The trick is to look past it, and bring your field of focus into it. Concentrate on seeing the road past it, then pull back until it appears; the more you want it, the sooner it will come.”

Tannim watched him walk up to the place where he’d died, and stop.

“Ross . . .” he said softly, “you don’t have to do this, if it’s making you uncomfortable, at least not right away. There are ghosts in this world who haven’t been able to come to grips with their own deaths for centuries. It’s not easy.”

“How th’ hell would you know?” Ross snapped, and then immediately looked embarrassed.

“I’ve helped almost a hundred move on to their next destination,” Tannim said. “Not always willingly, but . . . it’s for the better.”

Ross faced him, skepticism warring with a touch of awe. “You’re not—an angel, are you?”

“Me?” Tannim laughed. More often, he was mistaken for something else entirely. “Not hardly. Not even close. I’m just a man who can tell you a thing or two about magic, about dying, and what comes after it. Angels live far cleaner lives, and have cleaner consciences.”

“There are angels, then? And Heaven?” Ross pulled a long drag on his cigarette.

“I guess.” Tannim shrugged. “Hell, I don’t know what your definition of Heaven is, so I can’t say. But I will tell you that not everyone who dies waltzes through the ‘Pearly Gates’ of their choice; they still have things to do. A lot of ’em love this world, and don’t want to leave. They don’t have to, at least, not right away.”

“They don’t?” Canfield looked surprised—and bemused.

“Nope. Not if they still have things to do, things on their minds.” Tannim leaned up against the Mustang. “Most move on to whatever suits them, pretty much right off. But some, it takes a while to find out what it is they want. You’re probably that way. It’s a whole different ball game when you’re dead; conflicts that were big guns when you were alive don’t count for much. You meet all kinds of people from all times. Plenty to talk about. Hell, the drone of sports talk at Candlestick Park from a hundred thousand dead fans is enough to put you over the edge!”

“Uh huh.” Ross pulled the butt from his mouth. “So I’m gonna be this way for a while?”

“Yeah, probably.” He looked up at the clear night sky for a moment. “Since you didn’t—go on, when you really understood what had happened to you. I guess you must have some things to do. The way you are—it’s kind of a way to live again, with your senses enhanced and a new way of looking at things. Kind of gives you a second chance.”

“I guess it isn’t all bad,” Ross observed after a moment of thought. “Guy could do a lot, see a lot, like this. Things he never got a chance to.”

Tannim nodded. “There’s a big tradeoff to it; if there’s something you need to take care of, that tie will hold you to a place. Even without that, there’s ties to your family. Most ghosts build up a sort of ‘monitoring’ of their families and loved ones, so they know what they are doing, and can be there to lend support from beyond if they can, while they’re still ghosts. Native Americans in particular have a strong tie with their ancestors, and their spirits fill everything around them. If I were you, I’d travel a bit and reconcile your feelings about everyone you’ve ever loved or hated. Then visit your gravesite. After that, it’s up to you whether to stay or to move on.”

“Well, ain’t this a helluva turn. Life after death is just as big a pain in the ass as living.” Ross planted his hands on his hips, and stared towards the bridge. “I can kinda see it now, Tannim. And I can see . . . my ’Cuda. Holy shit . . . I really did buy it good.” Ross shuddered, and swore again. “Damn. I loved that car.”

Tannim nodded. “Yeah, I can relate. I’ve lost a couple of good ones myself . . . Thank it for its services and -offer it its own afterlife. Even cars can develop spirits, believe me. Honor everything you knew, Ross, then you’ll be happy again.”

Ross looked down at his feet. “I . . . I loved her too, more than the car, more . . .” he said, and Tannim didn’t have to ask to know who he was talking about. “I cried like a goddamn baby every time I couldn’t tell her how I felt. It was easier to drink the booze than to find the words. And I chased after her drunk . . . hell, I didn’t even know what road she was on. I couldn’t even get dying right. . . .”

*Better intervene before he starts getting caught in a downward spiral.* “Uhhh, Ross, I’ve met a lot of spirits in my day, and there’ve been a lot of them who died ‘good deaths,’ real ‘blaze of glory’ stuff. Every one of ’em mentioned how stupid it was after all, you know, big picture stuff. I don’t know if there is a right way to die. But, they all have had regrets about their lives . . . the real heroes and the regular joes.”



“Hmm. Yeah, well, I guess I have a lot to think about, and a lot of time to do it.” Ross turned, and pulled the cigarette from his lips. “So now I get the chance to change things, huh? Fix what I shouldn’t have been in at all. Fine.” He threw the cigarette down and ground it out. “I’ve wanted to quit smoking for twenty years now, and never could. I’ll be damned if I’ll do it when I’m dead. Don’t start drinking or smoking, boy.”

Tannim smiled and said, “Yeah, the stuff’ll kill you.”

Ross bent down before the concrete pillar, and reached a translucent hand towards a sparkling shard of glass. He crouched there a moment longer and smoothed the dirt over it, then strode towards the Mustang, leaving his death behind him.

\* \* \*

The Alan Parsons Project’s “Don’t Answer Me” played on the tape deck as the wind rushed past the Mach 1, its engine thrumming in mechanical symphony. The breeze from the open windows made the young driver’s hair stream back against the seat-covers, and that same breeze blew right through his passenger.

Ross Canfield put his hand to his chin, shifted to lean his arm against the sill, and put his arm through it. He withdrew and tried again, this time successfully resting his arm against the vinyl. “Shit, this is gonna be hard to get used to.”

Tannim chuckled and leaned forward to tap a sticking gauge. “You’re doing fine, Ross. Just remember, things in my world may or may not affect you. It’s mostly a matter of what you want to be influenced by; for instance, you could, if you wanted to, fall right out of this car doing seventy now by simply deciding that seat won’t affect you. Then, you may choose for the road not to affect you, and you wouldn’t be hurt by the fall. But you missed the armrest just now because you forgot to ‘want’ it to affect you. Tricky, huh?”

“Kinda like—what’d they used to say? Mind over -matter?”

“Exactly.” He nodded with approval. “Now, until you learn spirit-traveling, you’re limited by your old human abilities. One day, you may be able to fly cross-country by will alone, but for now, if you fell out of the car, I’d have to stop and pick you up, ’cause you couldn’t run fast enough to keep up with me.”

Ross chuckled. “Yeah, but I can run faster now that I’m dead. No wheezy lungs from smoking, no beer gut.”

“Yeah, and you can play tennis with dead pros to keep in shape.”

Ross and Tannim both laughed. “You know, I never thought being dead would be so damned entertaining. And it seems like I should be more upset about it.”

Tannim kept his eyes on the road, but he smiled to himself. Ross Canfield was coming along very well—a lot faster than Tannim would have thought. “Well, seriously, Ross, there are a lot of ways to deal with it, but you’re running on instinct. Your subconscious was aware you were dead, but your superconscious wasn’t ready to accept it, so you stood there sucking a butt for a couple of years. Now, it’s kind of a relief that it’s out in the open, and you’re able to get to the decisions you’ve been building towards all this time. And as for it being entertaining, kissing a bridge at lightspeed drunk off your ass is a

grim thing, but there are a lot of things about being a ghost that are damn funny, no matter what the circumstances are.”

“Like fallin’ through doors,” Ross supplied.

“Uh huh. So, deal with it now with a laugh, because there are plenty of things in the future that’ll make you cry, make you scream—” now he turned to look at Canfield out of the corner of his eye “—make you wish you were more dead than you are.”

“Huh. As you can tell by the two-year wait, I don’t *spook* easily.” His face cracked with a smirk.

“Ross! I’d never picked you for a punster!”

“Yeah, well, that’s why I’m not in Heaven right now.”

Tannim grinned and thought about the turn of a friendly card. Maybe they were both lucky they’d met.

“Seriously . . . what do I do now? How’m I supposed to learn all these ghost things, and how do I get outta bein’ one? This shit’s gonna get old eventually.” Now Ross looked uncertain. “I don’t suppose you’d teach me—”

Tannim shook his head. “I can’t, Ross. The best I can do is what I just did—break you out of the stalemate you were in and get you started. Like most things, Ross, you have to get out and practice. Learn by doing. Talk to other ghosts, pick up the tricks. I can’t show you what you need to know; I’ve got too many other irons in the fire, and I’ve got problems enough with people trying to makeme into a ghost.”

At first Ross snorted; then he looked around, and squinted. His eyes widened, and Tannim figured he had started to see some of the protections on the Mustang. It was enough to impress him—even if he wasn’t seeing more than a fraction of the magics Tannim had infused the Mach 1 with. “There are a couple of other things I can tell you: just like you can let the rest of the world affect you, with practice, you can influence what happens in the physical world—or, more accurately, the world I’m in right now. Like back there, when you touched that piece of glass, buried it . . . there’s a lotta different kinds of ‘physical.’ Making a change in this one means discovering how to make yours interact with it. That thing with the magnetics is an example of one you can’t control; there are others you’ll pick up soon enough.”

“Got some simple tips?”

“Sure. Stay away from things that make you tired, don’t fiddle with walls that won’t let you pass, and if anything tries to eat you, *hurt* it.”

“Tries to—eat me?” Ross’s eyes widened again.

“There’s a lot of unfriendly things out there, including some that used to be human. Remember, don’t attack first. Until you have the experience to tell friend from foe, be cautious. It’s always easier to hold a defensive position anyway. And there are a lot of things out there that aren’t human at all; treat them fairly, they can become very close friends. My best friend isn’t human. Pretty simple. Other-wise, things are similar to living. You can have sex as a ghost, ride in an F-15. Fly on the Space Shuttle if you want, if you can find room. It’s very popular. Enjoy it, and learn. That’s the key to moving on—knowledge and matur-ity are important.”

“But, what about moving on? How—”

Tannim shook his head. “I can’t tell you; it’s different for everyone. You’ll know when. If you didn’t know how, you’d have never seen the bridge back there; that was an important move. It shows you’re finally ready to accept what you are.”

Ross was silent for a while, and the miles ticked away as the skyline of Savannah came into view. Finally he spoke. “Tannim . . . thanks.”

“No thanks needed, friend,” Tannim said, slowing as he approached the city limit. “You ready to take off on your own?”

Ross nodded. “If you need anything, call. I’ll find a way to get there. I guess this is dangerous work you’re doing, and I owe you for this,” he said through teary spectral eyes. “I’d better get out there. I lost enough time getting shit-faced before, and I want to see what I missed.”

Tannim looked sideways at Ross Canfield, nodded, and turned his eyes back towards the highway, pulled to the shoulder and stopped. The city lights illuminated the car, the driver, and the empty seat beside him.

“Be sure to visit River Street while you’re here, Ross. Always a party. Good luck. Here’s your exit.”

The ghost stepped through the door onto the shoulder, and Tannim watched him in the rearview mirror, an ordinary enough guy, watching the Mach 1’s taillights recede into the night. Ordinary—except that only Tannim could see him.

And only Tannim could hear him, as clearly as if Ross still sat beside him.

“You need me, you call.”

## CHAPTER TWO

“That was Georgia’s own B-52s, with ‘Rock Lobster,’ ” said the radio announcer, his cheerful voice murmuring from the sixteen speakers of Doctor Sam Kelly’s home-built quadraphonic system. “Next up, Shriekback, the Residents, the new British release from George Louvis, and an oldie from Thomas Dolby, but first . . .”

Sam hit the “mute” button, and the commercial laded to a whisper. The timer would bring the volume back up in another sixty seconds, and by then the station should be back to music. Doctor Samuel Sean Kelly might have majored in metallurgy, but he had minored in electrical engineering; sensing, even back in the ’40s, that the time would come when everyone had to have some understanding of electronics. After all, hadn’t he grown up on H. G. Wells, and the science-fiction tradition that the engineer was the man who could and would save the universe? “Not bad, for an old retired fart,” he chuckled to his Springer Spaniel, Thoreau, who raised his head and ears as if he understood what his master was saying. “I liked Elvis in the ’50s, I liked the Stones and the Fuggs in the ’60s, and now, sure, I’m on the cutting edge—right, boyo?”

Thoreau wagged his stub of a tail and put his head back down on his paws. He didn’t care how eclectic

his master's taste in music was, so long as he didn't crank up those imposing speakers to more than a quarter of their capacity. When Sam retired from Gulfstream, he'd held a party for his younger colleagues that was still the talk of the neighborhood. There had been complaints to the police about the music from as far away as five blocks, and poor Thoreau had gone into hiding in the back closet of the bedroom, not to emerge for three days.

The desk-top before him was preternaturally clean, with only a single envelope cluttering the surface. Sam fingered the letter from "Fairgrove Industries," as the radio volume returned to normal, and Thomas Dolby complained of hyperactivity. He sat back in his aging overstuffed recliner, surrounded by his books, frowning at the empty room and wishing wistfully that he hadn't given up smoking. Or that he hadn't agreed to talk to this "Tannim" person.

It had seemed very harmless when he first got the letter; this "Tannim"—what sex the person was he hadn't known until the phone call came confirming the evening appointment—wanted to talk to him about a job as a consultant. He had offered Sam an amazing amount of money just *totalk* to him: fifteen hundred dollars for an evening of his otherwise idle time. Sam had said yes before he thought the consequences through—after all, how many retired metallurgists could boost their income by that much just by talking to someone? But later, after he'd had lunch with some of the youngsters at Gulfstream and heard some of the latest news, he began to wonder. There was a lot going on over there right now; the joint project with the Russians, a lot of composite development and things being done with explosive welding and foamed aluminum. None of it was exactly secret, but there was a lot of proprietary information Sam was still privy to—and more he could get clandestine access to, if he chose. What if this "Fairgrove Industries"—which was not listed with the Better Business Bureau, and not in any industrial database that Sam had access to—was just a front for something else? What if this Tannim was trying to set him up as a corporate informant, or looking for some "insider trading" type information? Sam had loved his job at Gulfstream; they were, as he joked, a "growing, excited company." He liked the people he worked with enough to socialize with them, even now, when he had been retired for the past several months. He wasn't interested in doing anything that would hurt the company.

Sam tapped the edge of the envelope on his desk and made up his mind about what he *was* going to do, now that he had realized the implications. "Well, Thoreau, if this young fella thinks I'm some kind of senile old curmudgeon he can fool with a silver tongue and a touch of blarney, he's going to be surprised," Sam said aloud. "If it's looking to make a fool of me he is, I just may be making a fool of him."

If this Tannim *was* trying to set him up as a corporate informant, Sam decided, this old man would turn the tables on him. There was a break-in camera under the eaves; it took snaps when the burglar alarm went off, but it could be operated manually. Very well, then, he'd snap pictures of the man's car and license tag when he arrived. First thing in the morning, he'd call his old bosses, give them the number and the young man's description, and let them know exactly what had gone on. Looking for a corporate informant wasn't illegal, exactly—but the fellows at Gulfstream could certainly put a stop to anything shady.

And Sam would still have the fifteen hundred dollars.

Not bad, when you stopped to think out all the implications first, rather than backtracking in a panic. Assuming of course, the check didn't bounce.

But planning ahead in case things did go wrong was what had made Sam one of the best in his field.

"Or so I like to tell myself," he said aloud, smiling at his own conceit.

The doorbell rang, and Sam reached automatically for the modified TV remote-control that, through the intervention of an old Commodore microcomputer, handled gadgets throughout the house. The poor old thing was -useless even as a game machine these days, but it was perfectly adequate to mute the radio—or take pictures of the young man and his car before Sam even reached the door. He made his way to the door with a shade of the limberness of his youth, and opened it, catching the stranger in a “listening” pose that told Sam the man had been trying to catch the sound of his own approaching footsteps.

“Doctor Kelly?” The man at the door was illuminated by the powerful floodlight Sam had used to replace the ridiculous little phony carriage-lamp that had been installed there. And he was *avery* young man, much younger than his deep voice had suggested. He nodded in a noncommittal fashion and the man continued. “I’m Tannim—we had an appointment—”

He was carrying a dark leather folder. Sam first took in that, then the wild mop of curly hair, cut short in front and long in the back, the way a lot of kids on MTV cut theirs—a dark nylon jacket, with a good shirt underneath, and a soft scarf instead of a tie—dark slacks, not jeans—boots—the first impression was reasonable. But not exactly fitting the image of a corporate recruiter. The face was good; high cheekbones, determined chin, firm mouth, fine bone-structure and curiously vulnerable-looking eyes. The kid looked like a lot of the hotshot young engineers Sam worked with. But not like what Sam had been expecting.

“I remember,” Sam replied cautiously. There was something about the young man that suggested trustworthiness, perhaps his eyes, or the curious sense of *stillness* about him; but Sam knew better than to trust his first impression. Some of the biggest crooks he had ever known had inspired that same feeling of trust. And some of them had been just as young as this man.

“Can I come in?” A quirky grin spread across the man’s bony face, transforming the stillness without entirely -removing it. “Or would you rather earn your retainer standing here in the doorway? Or would you like to go somewhere else entirely?”

Well, it wouldn’t hurt to let the youngster in. Sam moved aside, and Tannim stepped across the threshold. Sam noticed that he walked with a limp, one he was at pains to minimize; that he moved otherwise with a cat-like grace at odds with the limp. Sam was no stranger to industrial accidents and their aftermath. This was someone who had suffered a serious injury and learned to cope with it. That moved him a little more into the “favorable” column, in Sam’s mind. Con artists tended to emphasize injuries to gain sympathy—con artists tended *not* to get injured in the first place. “Follow me, if you would,” Sam said, leading the way to his office. This was going to be more interesting than he had thought.

Tannim cocked his head to one side as he entered the office, and caught what was playing softly over the speakers. The playlist had migrated to the outré. His eyes and his smile increased a trifle. “Doctor Kelly—I’m pleasantly surprised by your taste in music.”

Sam shrugged, as the Residents gave forth their own terrifyingly skewed version of “Teddybear.” He took his seat in the recliner behind his desk and waved at the two identical recliners in front of the desk.

But Tannim didn’t take a seat; instead, he put the folder he had been carrying on the desk, and beside it, a set of I.D. cards he fanned like a set of playing cards.

“Before we talk, Doctor Kelly, I’d like to assure you of something. Fairgrove Industries is a brand new

entity insofar as the rest of the world is concerned—but we’ve been around a long, long time in the private sector.” Sam looked up to see that Tannim’s smile had turned into a wide grin. “We’ve been around a lot longer than anyone knows. I know what you’ve probably been thinking; that I’m a corporate raider, that I’m a front-man for industrial espionage, or that I’m looking for information on your former employer. Actually, I don’t usually do this for Fairgrove, but the folks back at the plant thought I’d be the best person to approach you.”

“Oh?” Sam Kelly replied. “So—just what is it that this Fairgrove does that they want from me?”

Tannim tapped the folder with one long finger. “We build racecars, Doctor Kelly. We have nothing to do with aerospace, and I doubt very much we’ll ever be involved in that business. But you have skills we very much need.”

Sam looked back down at the top photo I.D., which was, unmistakably, Tannim. And listed only the single name, oddly enough—no initials, no first or last name. It was an SCCA card, autoclub racing, sure enough; beneath it was a SERRA card (whatever that was), an IMSA card, an I.D. card for Roebing Road racetrack, and beneath that was his Fairgrove card. That particular piece of I.D. listed him as “test-driver/ mechanic,” which Sam hadn’t known was still possible. Not these days, when either profession -required skill and training enough to overwhelm most ordinary people.

But Tannim didn’t give him any chance to ask about that—he opened the folder, and began describing just what it was that Fairgrove wanted from him,*if* he would take the job.

“We need you as a consultant, Doctor Kelly,” he said, earnestly. “We’re working on some pretty esoteric technologies here, and we need someone with a solid background who is still flexible and open to new ideas. You were one of the best metallurgists in the country before you retired—and no one has ever accused you of being stuck in a rut, or being too old-fashioned to change.”

That surprised him further, and embarrassed him a little. He was at a loss for a response, but Tannim was clearly waiting for one. “Oh, I would’na know about that,” he said, lapsing briefly into the Irish brogue of his childhood.

“We would,” Tannim said firmly, nodding so that his unruly mop of dark, curly hair flopped over into one eye, making him look, thin as he was, like a Japanese *anime* character. “We’ve looked very carefully at everyone who might suit us, and who could legitimately work with us without compromising themselves or their current or past employers. You are the best.”

Sam felt himself blushing, something he hadn’t done in years. “Well, if you think so . . . what’s the job, anyway?”

“Metallurgy,” Tannim told him. “Specifically, fabricating engine blocks and other high-stress parts of non-ferrous materials.” He flashed that grin again, from under the errant lock of hair, calling up an answering smile from Sam. “Like your music, we’re on the cutting edge.”

“I don’t know,” Sam replied, slowly, as Tannim finally took his seat, leaving his host free to leaf through the Fairgrove materials. Most of them had the look of something that had been produced on a personal computer, the great-great grandchild of the one that helped Sam run his house, and the cousin of the one on the workstation -behind him. The specs Fairgrove had on their “wish list” were impressive—and as unlikely as any of H. G. Wells’ dreams of Time Machines. “I don’t know. Engine blocks—you’re talking about a high-stress application there. You want a foamed aluminum matrix for internal combustion, with water-cooling channels, air-cooling vanes, and alloy piston sleeves? In five castings for the main block? I

don't know that it's possible."

"Ah, but you don't know it's *not* possible, do you?" Tanim retorted. "We aren't going to pay you on the basis of whether or not common wisdom says it's possible—we're doing research. Applied research, yes, but when you do research, you accept the fact that some of your highways may turn out to be dead ends. That's life. And speaking of payment—" He reached into his jacket, and pulled out an oak-tree-embossed envelope, which he laid on top of the Fairgrove folder.

Sam thumbed it open. There was a cashier's check inside, made out on his own bank, for fifteen hundred dollars. Until this moment, Sam had not entirely believed in the reality of this retainer. Now, holding it in his hands, he could find no flaw in it—and no real flaw with what Fairgrove, in the person of this young man, proposed.

Except, of course, whether or not what they wanted was a pipe-dream, a Grail; desirable, yes, but impossible to achieve. . . .

Or was it? These people certainly had a lot of money to wave around. And *there were* some problems you could solve by throwing money at them.

"I suppose I could take a look at this place," he ventured. "I could at least see what you people have to work with."

If anything, Tanim's grin got wider. He spread his hands wide. "Sure! How about—right now? We're all night owls over there, and it isn't that far away."

Now? In the middle of the night? That wasn't an offer Sam expected. Did they expect him to come? Or did they expect him to say no?

If he showed up now, surely they wouldn't have time to put on a big display for him . . . and that might be all for the best, really. He'd see things as they were, not a dog-and-pony show. As for the lateness of the hour, well, one of the advantages of being retired was that he no longer had to clock in—and he didn't have to follow the company's time schedule. He'd always been a night owl by nature, and although this was the "middle of the night" to some people, for him the day was barely halfway through—one reason why he'd set this appointment long after a "normal" working day had ended.

And besides all that, if he was going to take a look at this place, he wanted to see all of it. That meant the metal shops, too. This early in the fall, daytime temperatures were still in the nineties, and no matter how good their air-conditioning was, the shops would be as hot as Vulcan's forge during the daylight hours. Metal shops always were, especially if these people were doing casting work.

"All right," he said, shoving himself resolutely out of his chair. "Let's go. No better time to see this miracle place of yours than right now."

"Great!" the young man answered, sliding out of his chair and getting to his feet with no more than a slight hesitation for the bad leg. "Want to take my car? We've used it to test out some SERRA-racer modifications; y'know, suspension mods, rigidity, a little composite fiddling. It's street-legal—barely."

There was something challenging about his grin, and Sam decided to take the dare. "Sure," he replied, taking just enough time with his remote to tell the house to run the "guardian" program. He slipped the remote into his pocket as an added precaution; without that, no one would be able to disarm the system. Not even cutting the power would make a difference; the house had its own uninterruptable power

supply, and a generator that kicked on if the power stayed off for more than half an hour. He'd installed all that during the Gulf War terrorist scare, when high-level people at a lot of industries, including Gulfstream, had been warned they might be targets for kidnapping or terrorism. He'd gotten into the habit of arming it whenever he left or went to sleep, and it didn't seem an unreasonable precaution still. Maybe he was paranoid, but being paranoid had saved lives before this.

Thoreau sighed as he saw Sam reach for his jacket. Sam reached down and ruffled the dog's ears, promising that even though "daddy" wasn't going to be around to beg a late-night snack from, there would be a treat when he got back. Thoreau accepted this philosophically enough, and padded alongside, providing an escort service to the front door.

There, Sam was briefly involved in locking the door, and wasn't paying a great deal of attention to the car behind him. Then he turned around.

Sam had been around hot-rodders all his life; seemed to him that for every four techies at Gulfstream who were indifferent to automobiles, there would be one who cherished the things. Now he was looking at a machine that would impress any of them. It was parked with the front wheels turned rakishly, and he made note of its distinguishing features. Dark metallic red; three antennas. Scuffed sidewalls. Dark windows. It was hardly the "company car" he was expecting.

Tannim was wearing that sideways smile of his, and thumbed his keyring. The Mustang rumbled to life, and its doors unlocked and opened a crack. Despite himself; Sam's face showed his interest in the electronic gim-crackery. Tannim gestured to the open passenger's side door with a flourish, and went around to the driver's side as Sam pulled the door open and got in.

Sam pulled the seatbelt snug as Tannim slid into the driver's side, noting as he did so, that these weren't standard American windowshade seatbelts, which tended—in his opinion—to allow far too much freedom of movement for safety. And as Tannim closed the driver's side door, he noted something else. . . .

Something besides the door had closed, sealing them inside the protective shell of the Mustang. It had sprung into being the moment Tannim's door closed, and covered car and occupants. It wasn't tangle, like the seatbelts or the roll-cage—it wasn't even visible to ordinary sight. But it was there, nevertheless. Tannim pushed a worn tape into the dash deck, and turned down or switched off most of the suite of other instruments there—the CB, high-end channel-scanner, an in-dash radar detector, and—what was this, a police-repeater sensor? Sam looked over the interior a little more, noting the various boxes in the back seat. Some more electronics gear. Hmm. There was also a trash-box stuffed with candy wrappers, a tissue box, allergy tablets, fire extinguishers mounted next to crowbars, two first-aid kits . . . and an embroidered tape-case. As he peered at it, Sam thought he could almost see words in the threads, and familiar symbols. This vehicle was not just a very unusual car; there was more to it than that. There was a great deal of power under the hood—and there was far more Power of a different sort infused into it.

The differences might not be visible to normal eyes, but Sam had a little more to use than what his granny had called "outer eyes." Sam had not been gifted with the ability the Irish referred to as "the Sight" to neglect -using it, after all. Nor had becoming a man of science interfered with that. If anything, he was too much of a scientist to discount a gift that had granted him knowledge he might not otherwise have, with fair reliability, over so many years.

Interesting. Very interesting.

"So," he said, as Tannim pulled out smoothly onto the darkened highway, the headlights cutting the



darkness ahead of them into areas of seen and half-seen. “Tell me about Fairgrove. Why did they decide to get into manufacturing? And why nonferrous materials?”

Tannim fiddled with the tape deck for a moment -before replying. He had put in a Clannad tape, and made a show of ensuring that the volume exactly matched that of the radio in Sam’s office, stalling a little. Sam knew a stall when he saw one.

“Before I tell you about Fairgrove, I have to explain SERRA,” he temporized, paying closer attention to the road ahead than it really warranted. “In some ways, they’re almost the same entity. Virtually everyone working for Fairgrove came out of SERRA, and the president and board of Fairgrove actually helped found SERRA. Uh, their families did.”

Sam was pretending to watch the road, but he was really watching Tannim out of the corner of his eye. And that last, about the board founding SERRA, had been a real slip. Tannim hadn’t meant to say that. But what made it a slip?

“So? What’s this SERRA?” he asked.

“South Eastern Road Racing Association,” Tannim -replied promptly, and with enthusiasm he didn’t try to conceal. “It’s an offshoot of the SCCA—Sports Car Club of America. Part of the problem for us was that SCCA doesn’t allow the sort of modifications we wanted, and the folks in SERRA wanted to push the envelope of sportscar racing a bit more, more ‘experimental’ stuff. Fairgrove also supports an IMSA team, running GTP, but that’s for pro drivers, guys who don’t do anything but drive, and we’ve only just started that circuit. Some of us—like me—still race SCCA, in fact, I drive for the Fairgrove team. There’s things to like about both clubs, which is why Fairgrove still maintains a team in both.”

“You don’t drive in the Fairgrove SERRA team?” Sam said. Tannim shrugged.

“We’ve got some drivers as good as I am on the SERRA team, drivers who can’t race SCCA cars. Since I could do both, I opted for the SCCA team, and left rides for the other guys.” He grinned. “Don’t worry, I get plenty of track time in! If I had the time, I could spend every weekend and most weekdays racing.”

Sam had no doubt that Tannim was a professional driver in every sense of the word, despite the disclaimer; the way he handled this car put Sam in mind of an -expert fighter pilot, of the way the plane becomes an extension of the pilot himself, and the pilot can do things he shouldn’t be able to. There was an air of cocky competence about the kid, now that he was behind the wheel, that was very like a good pilot’s too.

“That’s not cheap, fielding several teams—” Sam -ventured.

“Three teams, each with several cars, and no, it isn’t cheap,” Tannim admitted cheerfully. “The founding families started out independently wealthy—inherited money that survived the ’20s crash—but they’ve been making racing pay for itself for a while now. Not just purses and adverts—they’ve been farming out their experts—” he grinned again “—like yours truly, and opening up their shops for modifications to whoever was willing to pay the price. But that could only go so far. *Now* we’d like to hit the bigtime. Indy-style, Formula One, that kind of thing. Getting right up there with the big boys—maybe even have the big boys come to us. But to do that, we have to have something better than just mods. We have to have original advances. That’s where you come in.”

He braked, briefly, and Sam caught the flash of a bird’s wings in the headlights. An owl; a big one. Most

drivers wouldn't have known it was going to cut across the car's vector. Most drivers wouldn't have bothered to avoid it.

"Maybe," Sam replied, feeling his way. "I don't know; this sounds like it could be very risky business. . . ."

"Your part won't be," Tannim promised. "Fairgrove will pay half your consultation fee up front, before you even pin on a badge, and put the other half in escrow in your bank." Then he named a figure that would have given Sam cardiac trouble, if not for watching his diet and cholesterol. It was considerably more than his salary at Gulfstream had been. Of course, one of the disadvantages of staying with a firm for years was that your salary didn't keep pace with the going rate for new-hires with similar experience, but—this was ridiculous; they couldn't want him that badly! Could they?

"What about disclosure?" he asked, when he could speak again.

"We've got a tentative non-disclosure clause in your contract, but we can modify it if you feel really strongly about it," Tannim said. "We based it on the non--disclosure clause at Gulfstream, but we made one modification, and that's in the area of Research and Development in safety. Anything that's a significant advance in safety is immediately released, and patents won't be enforced. Think you can live with that? Even if it means a loss of income?"

Since that was the one area where Sam had himself had several heated arguments with his own bosses over the years, he nodded. "Some things should be common knowledge," he said grimy. "That's in a Mercedes ad, but it's true for all of that."

He asked many more questions over the course of the next fifteen minutes, and although Tannim never refused to answer any of them, he kept getting the feeling that the young man was doing a kind of verbal dance the whole time—carefully steering him away from something. It wasn't where the money was coming from; at least, this wasn't the kind of youngster or the kind of operation Sam would have associated with money laundering and organized crime. And car-racing wasn't the kind of operation that would lend itself to that sort of thing anyway. It wasn't what he would be expected to accomplish. It was nothing that he was able to put a finger on. But there was some skillful verbal maneuvering going on here, and Sam wished strongly that he could see at least the shape of this blind spot, so he could guess at what it was hiding.

Tannim pulled off the highway onto a beautifully paved side road, and stopped at a formidable gate, punching in a code on the keypad-box just in front of it. The gate-doors retracted—

And just on the other side of the gate, a miniature traffic signal lit up—the yellow light first, then the green, and the radar detector under the dash lit up. Tannim turned toward his passenger with a sparkle in his eye, and a grin that bordered on maniacal. "Did you know that there's no speed limit on private driveways?" he said, conversationally. Then he floored the accelerator.

Once again, it was a good thing that Sam had been watching his diet for years—and that he was well-acquainted with "test pilot humor." As it was, by the end of that brief but hair-raising half-mile ride, he wasn't certain if Tannim had *added* years to his age, or subtracted them by peeling them off, with sheer speed as the knife-blade. One thing was sure; if Sam's hair hadn't already been white, the ride would have bleached it to silver.

Tannim pulled up to a tire-screaming halt beside -another miniature traffic light. As they passed it, Sam noted—faintly surprised that he still had the ability to notice anything—that going in the opposite

direction, the light was red as they passed it. It turned yellow well -after they passed, then green a moment later. A wise precaution, if people used the driveway as a dragstrip on a regular basis. A board lit up with numbers, and Tannim laughed out loud. “Elapsed time and speed, Sam.” He cocked his head sideways like an exotic bird. “Not my best run, but not bad for nighttime, and with a passenger weighing me down.”

They rolled up to a driveway loop at a sedate pace. In the center of the circular cut-out was a discrete redwood sign reading “Fairgrove Industries.” The building itself looked like Cape Canaveral before a shuttle launch, with hundreds of lights burning. Evidently these people *were* night owls.

Tannim pulled the Mustang into a parking slot, between a Lamborghini Diablo and a Ferrarri Dino. “Expensive neighbors,” Sam commented. Tannim just chuckled, and popped his seatbelt.

He led the way through a series of darkened offices; the clerical staff was evidently not expected to keep the same hours as the techies. The offices themselves gave an overall impression of brisk efficiency with a touch of comedy; although the desks were clean and orderly, there were toys on all the computer terminals and desks, artwork and posters on the walls, and so many plants Sam wondered if someone had raided a greenhouse. Most of the artwork and toys had something to do with cars. These people evidently enjoyed their work. And these were working offices; had been for some time; there was no way you could counterfeit that “lived in, worked in” look. Whatever else Fairgrove was, it *had* been in existence for some time. This was no façade thrown up to delude him.

Tannim brought him to a soundproof wall—Sam recognized it as the twin to one at Gulfstream, that stood -between the offices and the shops—and opened a door into bright light and seeming chaos.

There were cars in various states of disassembly everywhere, each one surrounded, like a patient in intensive care, by its own little flotilla of instrumentation and -machinery. There was *alot* of expensive equipment here: computer-controlled diagnostic devices, computer-controlled manufacturing machinery behind the cars on their little islands of activity—

There must have been several million dollars in cars alone, and about that in equipment. Oddly enough, though, no one seemed to be using any of the latter; they all seemed to be working directly on the cars. The machinery itself was standing idle. In fact, given the sheen of “newness” on all that expensive gimmickry, most of it hadn’t ever been fired up.

Why buy all that stuff if you weren’t going to use it?

Tannim was looking for something, or someone, craning his head in every direction. Sam was unable to get his attention, and really, didn’t try very hard. There was definitely something odd about this place. There was a -facade—and it was in here, not out in the offices.

Finally, as a little group of people emerged from -behind one of the cars and its attendant machines, Tannim spotted whoever it was he was looking for among them. He waved his hand in the air, and called out to them.

“Yo!” he shouted, his voice somehow carrying over the din. “Kevin! Over here!”

A tall, *very* blond man turned around in response to that shout, green eyes searching over the mass of machines and people.

And Sam felt such a shock he feared for a moment that he’d had a stroke. Those eyes—that face—they

were -familiar.

Hauntingly, frighteningly familiar, though he hadn't seen them in nearly fifty years.

*Heknew* this man—

—*whowasn't* a man.

## CHAPTER THREE

It was the same face—not a similar face, the *same* face, the same man. Identical. There was no confusing it, nor those green, cat-slitted eyes.

Inhuman eyes; eyes that had *never* been human.

Sam fell back across the decades, to his childhood, and his home, and one moonlit, Irish night.

Sam stumbled along beside his father, miserable right down to his socks, and wanting to be home with all his five-year-old heart.

“Da—me tum hurts,” Sam whined.

The full moon above them gave a clear, clean light, shining down on the dirt path that led between the pub and John Kelly's little cottage. A month ago, they wouldn't have been on this path. A month ago, Sam's mummy, Moira, would have made them a good supper, one that wouldn't have hurt Sam's tummy the way the greasy sausage-and-potato mix the pub served up did. In fact, a month ago, John wouldn't have been anywhere near the pub, and the pint of whiskey he had in his back pocket would have lasted him the month, not the night. He would've had tea with his good dinner, not washed bad roast down with more whiskey.

But that was a month and more ago, before Moira took a cough that became worse, and then turned into something awful, something called “new-moan-yuh.” Something the doctor couldn't cure, nor all the prayers Sam and his Da had offered up to the Virgin.

She'd taken sick on a Monday. By the following Monday, they were putting her under the sod, and the priest told him she was with Jesus. Sam didn't understand any of it; he kept thinking it was all a bad dream, and when he woke up, his Mummy would comfort him and everything would be all right again.

But he went to sleep at night, and woke up in the morning, and it wasn't all right. His Da was drinking his breakfast, and leaving Sam to make whatever breakfast he could on cold bread-and-butter and go off to stay with Mrs. Gilhoolie, since he was too young for school. John Kelly was going to work smelling like a bottle, coming home smelling like a bottle, and taking Sam to the pub every night for a bad supper and more bottles.

It was cold out, and Sam had forgotten his coat “Da,” he whined again, knowing that he sounded nasty but not knowing what else to do to get his Da's attention. “Da, me tum hurts, an' I'm *cold*.” The wind

whistled past them, coming around the Mound, and cutting right through Sam's thin shirt and short pants. The Mound was an uncanny place, and Sam didn't like to go there. The Fair Folk were supposed to live there, and they weren't the pretty little fairies in the children's books and the cartoons at the cinema; Sam's granny had told him about the Fair Folk, and she had never, ever lied to him. They were terrible, wonderful creatures, taller than humans, handsome beyond belief, and many were utterly unpredictable. The best a human could do was steer clear of them, for no human could tell whether a man or woman of the Folk was kindly inclined towards humans or dangerous to them. Even when they seemed to be doing you favors, sometimes they were doing you harm, the bad ones. And the good ones sometimes did harm with the idea of doing good.

But right now Sam had more immediate troubles than running into one of the Fair Folk. His tummy hurt, he was so cold his teeth chattered, his head hurt, his Da was acting in peculiar ways—

And oh, but he missed his Mummy—

“Daaaaa,” he whined, holding back tears of grief. When his Da said anything about Mummy, it was to tell him to be a man, and not cry. But it was hard not to cry. The only way he could keep from crying, sometimes, was to whine. Like now. “Daaaaaa.”

There was no warning, none at all. One moment he was stumbling along beside his Da, the next, he was sprawled on the cold ground beside the path, looking up at his Da in shock, his face and teeth aching from the blow his Da had just landed on him. The moonlight showed the murderous look on his Da's face clearly. Too clearly. Whimpering, with sudden terror, he tried to scramble away.

He wasn't fast enough.

His Da grabbed the front of his shirt and hauled him to his feet, then off his feet, and backhanded him. Sam was in too much shock to even react to the first two slaps, but at the third, he cried out.

There was no fourth.

John had his hand pulled back, ready to deliver another blow. Sam struggled fruitlessly in his father's iron grip, crying—

Then there was a tremendous flash of light; Sam was blinded, and felt himself falling. He flailed his arms wildly, and landed on his back, hard enough to drive the breath out of him.

He wheezed and rubbed his eyes, trying to force them to clear. The sound of someone choking made him look up, squinting through watering eyes, still trying to catch his breath.

What he saw made him forget to breathe.

A tall, terrible blond stranger, dressed in odd clothing, like something out of the pantomimes of King Arthur, was holding his father by the throat. John Kelly was white-faced and shaking, but was not trying to move or fight the stranger. This was no one Sam had seen in or near the village, and anyway, most of the people around here were small and dark, or small and red-haired. Not tall and -silver-blond. The man looked down at Sam for a moment, and even though the only light came from the moon overhead, he saw—clearly—that the man had bright, emerald green eyes; eyes that looked just like a cat's. And long, pointed ears.

This was no man. This could only be one of the Fair Folk, the Sidhe; and the fairy-man's eyes caught

Sam like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a motorcar.

Sam couldn't move.

John Kelly made another choking noise, and the stranger turned those mesmerizing eyes back towards his captive.

“John Kelly,” the terrifying man said—with a gentleness made all the more terrible by his obvious strength. “John Kelly, you're a good man, but you're on the way to a bad end. 'Tis the luck of your God that brought you here tonight, within my reach and my ken, for if you hadn't struck your lad just now, I wouldn't have known of your troubles and your falling into the grip of pain and whiskey. Now get hold of yourself and get your life straight again—for if you don't, I swear to you that we'll steal this lovely boy of yours, and you'll never see him again, this side of paradise. Remember what your mother told you, John Kelly. Remember it well, and believe it. We did it once within your family, and we can and will do it again, if the need comes to it.”

There was another flash of light. When Sam could see, the man was gone, and his father was sinking slowly to his knees. Sam still couldn't move, numb with shock and awe, and feelings he couldn't put a name to.

For a long, long time, John Kelly lay in the dirt, his shoulders shaking. Then, after a while, John looked up, and Sam saw tears running down his Da's face, glistening in the moonlight.

“Da?” he whispered, tentatively. “Da?”

“Son—” John choked—and gathered Sam into his arms, holding him closely, just the way he used to. Sobbing. Somehow that made Sam feel both good and bad. Good, that his Da was the man he loved again. Bad, that his Da was crying.

Sam said again. “Da, what's the matter? Da?”

“Sam—son—” John Kelly wept unashamed. “Son, I've been wicked, I've been blind with pain, and I've been wicked. Forgive me, son. Oh, please, forgive me—”

Sam hadn't been sure what to say or do, but he'd given his father what he asked for: Forgiveness, and all the love and comfort he had.

Eventually, John Kelly had gathered his son up in his arms, and taken him home. And from that day until the day he died, he never touched another drop of alcohol.

*It can't be*—he thought dazedly, from the perspective of half a century away.*It can't be*—

Despite the Sight, he'd assumed for decades that the whole incident had been a dream, something his childish imagination had conjured up to explain his father's brief, alcoholic binge and his recovery.

He'd only been five, after all. But this, this tall, blond man striding toward them was the same, the very same person as that long-ago stranger. No matter that the long hair was pulled back into a thick pony-tail, not flowing free beneath a circling band of silver about the brow. No matter that the clothing was a form-fitting black coverall, incongruously embroidered with “Kevin” over the breast pocket, and

not the tunic and treads of a man of the ancient Celts. There was no mistake.

Sam knew then that he must be going mad. It was an easier explanation than the one that fit the situation.

The man strode towards them with all the power and grace of a lean, black panther in its prime. As he neared them, he smiled; a warm smile that reached even into those emerald eyes and made them shine. "You've grown into a fine man, Sam Kelly," he said, stopping just short of them, and resting his fists on his hips. "A fine man, like your father John, and smarter than your father, to wash your hands of a dying land and seek your life on this side of the water. Now you know why we chose you, and no other."

"I see you've met," Tannim said, with an ironic lift of an eyebrow.

This man, this "Kevin"—he hadn't aged a day since Sam saw him fifty years ago. He'd looked thirty or forty then, which would make him what? Ninety? A hundred?

Either he had discovered the fountain of youth, or—

"You—" Sam said, finally getting his mouth to work. "You're—"

"One of the Fair Folk?" Keighvin said, with a lop-sided smile, and a lifted brow that echoed Tannim's. "The Lords of Underhill? The Kindly Ones? The Old People? The Elves, the Fairies, the Sidhe?" He chuckled. "I'm glad to see you still remember the old ways, the old tales, Sam. And, despite all your university learning, you believe them too, or at least, you're willing to believe them, if I read your heart aright."

In the face of a living breathing tale out of his own childhood, how could he not believe? Even when it was impossible? He had to believe in the Sidhe, or believe that someone had read his mind, picked that incident out of his childhood, and constructed someone who looked-*exactly* like the Sidhe-warrior, and fed him all the pertinent -details.

It was easier and simpler to believe in the Sidhe—the Wise Ones who had stolen away his granny's brother, because great-grandfather had beaten him once too often, for things he could not help. He remembered his granny's tales of that, too, for Patrick had been granny's favorite brother, and she'd told the story over and over. Poor Patrick; from the vantage point of near seventy-five years Sam knew what Patrick's problem had been, and it hadn't been willfulness or clumsiness. They'd have called him "dyslexic," these days, and given him special teaching to compensate. . . .

"We helped him," Keighvin said, as if reading his mind again. "We helped him, and sent him over the sea to this new land, and our kin here in Elfhome Fairgrove. He prospered, married a mortal girl, raised a family. Remind me to introduce you to your cousins, one day."

"Cousins?" Sam said, faintly. "I think I need to sit down."

"... so, that was when the Fairgrove elvenkin got inter-ested in racing," Tannim said, as Sam held tight to his cup of coffee, and Keighvin nodded from time to time. Sam sat on an overturned bucket, Tannim perched like a -gargoyle on top of an aluminum cabinet, and Keighvin leaned against one of the sleek, sensuous racecars. Now that there was no need to counterfeit the noise of a real metal shop, things were much quieter, though there was no less activity. "Now roughly a fourth of the SERRA members are either elves or human mages. At first it was mostly for enjoyment. The Fairgrove elves in particular got

interested in the idea of using racing to get some of their members out into the human world, the way things used to be in the old days.”

“Aye,” Keighvin seconded, leaning back against a shining, black fender, and patting it absent-mindedly, as if it was a horse. “In the old days, it could be you’d have met one of the Sidhe at any crossroads, looking for a challenge. You’d have found a kelpie at every ford—and on moonlit nights, the woods and meadows would be thick with dancing parties. Plenty of the Sidhe like humans, Sam; you give us a stimulus we sorely need. It was Cold Iron that drove us Underhill, Sam, and Cold Iron that drove us away, across the sea. It’s deadly to us, as your granny doubtless told you.”

“But—” Sam protested, gesturing with his coffee cup. “What about—that? You’re leaning against Cold Iron.”

Keighvin grinned, white teeth gleaming in a way that reminded Sam sharply that the man was no human. “That I’m not.” He moved away from the car, and the car—twisted.

It writhed like something out of a drug-dream. Sam had to close his eyes for a moment; when he opened them, there was no car there at all, but a sleek, black horse, with wicked silver eyes. It winked at him, and stamped a delicate hoof on the concrete. Sparks struck and died.

“An elvensteed,” Tannim said, with a chuckle. “That’s how the pointy-eared smartasses got into racing in the first place. They transformed the elvensteeds into things that looked like cars, at least on the outside. But once club racing started having *inspections*—”

“I’d have found it damned difficult to explain a racecar with no motor,” Keighvin supplied, as the elvensteed nuzzled his shoulder. “Rosaleen Dhu can counterfeit most things, including all the right noises for an engine to make, but not the engine itself. Only something that looks super-ficially like an engine.”

*Black Rose. She’s beautiful. . . .*

Tannim gestured at the lovely creature with his chin. “And *that’s* how Fairgrove is setting the pace in aero-dynamics, too. Put an elvensteed in a wind-tunnel, and alter the design by telling it what you want. No weeks of making body-bucks and laying fiberglass.” Tannim gloated, and Sam didn’t blame him. This was better even than computer modeling.

“But—you’re still racing now, with a real team—” Sam protested. “With real cars—real engines—”

“With every part we can manage being replaced with nonferrous materials,” Tannim told him. “That’s what we started doing even before the inspections. It was no challenge to race an elvensteed that can reach half the speed of sound against Tin Lizzies. *It was* a challenge to try and improve on human technology.”

Keighvin held up his hands, and only then did Sam notice he was wearing thin leather gloves, black to match his coverall. Sam also noted a black web belt and a delicate silver-and-silk-sheathed knife, more decorative than a tool. “And for those things that can’t be replaced by something other than iron and steel, well, some of us have built up a kind of tolerance to Death Metal. Enough that we can handle it if we’re protected—and we try not to work much magic about it.” He patted the horse’s neck. “I’ll explain the Laws of it all to you later—and how we’re breaking them.”

Tannim jumped down off the cabinet, catching Sam’s eye, and began pacing. Sam suspected he needed to ease an ache in that bad leg. “Racing and building cars was what lured the elvenkin out from



Underhill,” he said. “But racing wasn’t the real reason that some of the elves wanted more of their company out in the human world, and to be more active in it.”

“Some didn’t approve—” Keighvin said.

“But most of Fairgrove did,” Tannim interjected. “And now we have to get into some old history. That’s Keighvin’s subject.”

The horse had turned back into a car again while Sam had been watching Tannim; Keighvin leaned back against its fender (flank?) and folded his arms.

“Do you have any idea why I confronted your father that night, Sam Kelly?” Keighvin asked. “Or what I was talking about, with your great-uncle and all?”

Sam blurted the first thing that came into his head. “The Fair Folk steal children—everybody knows that—”

A moment later he wanted to go hit his head against a wall. *Now you’re for it, Sam Kelly. Why not go into a gay gym and tell the boys there that you’ve heard they seduce six-year-olds?*

But strangely, Keighvin didn’t look the least bit angry “Aye, Sam, we steal children. The Seleighe Court does, at any rate. To save them. Children bein’ beaten within an inch of their lives, children bein’ left cold and hungry and tied t’ the bedpost all day, children bein’ sold and slaved. . . . Oh aye, we steal children. Whenever we can, whenever we know of one in danger of losing life or soul, or heart, and we can *getat* them, aye, we steal them.” Keighvin’s expression was dark, brooding. “We used to do other things, too. There are some problems, Sam, that can be fixed by throwing money at them, as you yourself were thinking earlier. Not all of those problems are technical, either. Do you mind some of the other stories your granny used to tell? About the leprechauns, or the mysterious strangers who gave gold where it was most needed?”

“Aye,” Sam replied, again falling into the brogue of his childhood, to match the lilt of Keighvin’s speech. “But those strangers were the holy saints, or angels in disguise, sent from the Virgin, she said—”

Keighvin snorted. “Holy saints? Is that what you mortal folk decided? Nay, Sam, ’twas us. At least, it was us when there were hungry children to feed, and naught to feed them with; when there was no fuel in the house, and children freezing. When some mortal fool sires children, but won’t be a father to them, leaving the mother to struggle alone. Our kind—we don’t bear as easily or -often as you. Children are rare and precious things to us. We’re impelled to protect and care for them, even when they aren’t our own.”

Suddenly a great many of the old stories took on a whole new set of meanings. . . . But Keighvin was -continuing.

“This isn’t the old days, though, when a stranger could give a poor lass a handful of silver and gold in return for a kindness. For one thing, the girl would be thought a thief, like as not, when she tried to trade it for paper money. For another, someone would want to track down whoever gave it to her. We have to truly, legitimately, *earn* money before we can give it away.”

Tannim shook his head in mock sadness. “Oh, now that’s a real pity, isn’t it—you elves having to *work* for a living. What’s the world coming to?”

Keighvin cast the young man a sharp glance. “One of these days, my lad, that tongue of yours is going to cast you into grief.”

Tannin chuckled, uncowed by the fire in Keighvin’s eye. “You’re too late, it already has.” He turned to Sam. “These boys can literally create anything, if they’ve studied it long enough beforehand. We’ve been making foamed aluminum engine blocks ever since Keighvin here got his hands on a sample from a Space Shuttle experiment.” He hopped back up onto his cabinet, crossing his legs like a Red Indian. “I’m not even going into how we got that. But, we’ve been using the stuff in our cars—now, can you imagine what we could charge some of the big boys to duplicate *their* designs in foamed cast aluminum?”

Indeed, Sam could. And the major racing teams had a great deal of money to play with. “So that’s why you set up this shop, Fairgrove Industries—but what do you need me for?”

“We need a front-man,” Tannim said, leaning forward in his eagerness to explain himself. “We need someone who can give a convincing explanation of how we’re doing all this, and show us how to create a setup that will at least look like we’re making the things by some esoteric process and not by magic.”

“But there isn’t any process—” Sam began. “There isn’t a firm in the world that could duplicate—”

Tannim waved a negatory hand in the air.

“It doesn’t matter if no one else can duplicate what we do,” he said blithely. “They’ll expect us to have trade -secrets. We just need someone who knows all the right techno-babble, and can make it sound convincing. As long as you can come up with something that’s possible in theory, that’s all we need. We’ll keep on buying machines that *gobing*, and you leak tech reports to the curious.”

Sam couldn’t help himself; he started to laugh. Tannim and Keighvin both looked confused and surprised. “What’s so funny?” Tannim asked.

“Do you know much science fiction?” he asked, through his chuckles. Keighvin shook his head. Tannim shrugged. “A little. Why?”

“Because a very famous author, Arthur C. Clarke—who also happens to be one of the world’s finest scientists and engineers—said once that technology that’s complicated enough can’t be told from magic.”

“So?” Tannim replied.

Sam started laughing again. “So—sufficiently complex magic is indistinguishable from technology!”

Keighvin looked at Tannim for an explanation; the latter shrugged. “Beats me,” the young man said with a lopsided smile, as Sam wheezed with laughter. “Sometimes I don’t understand us either.”

It was nearly midnight when they’d gotten the basic shape of a plan hammered out. By then, they’d moved into Keighvin’s office—a wonderful place with a huge, plate-glass window that looked out into what seemed to be an absolutely virgin glade. The office itself was designed to be an extension of the landscape outside, with plants standing and hanging everywhere, and even a tiny fountain with goldfish swimming in it.

“Well, I’m going to have to go home and sleep on this,” Sam said, finally. “Then get into some of the

journals and see what kind of a convincing fake I can concoct before I can definitely say I'll take the job."

He started to get up, but Keighvin waved him down again. "Not quite yet, Sam," he said, his expression grave. "There's just one thing more we need to tell you about. And you may decide not to throw in your lot with us after you've heard it."

"Why?" he asked, a little surprised.

"Because Fairgrove has enemies," Tannim supplied, from his own nook, surrounded by ferns. "Not 'Fairgrove Indus-tries.' I mean Elfhome Fairgrove, the Underhill Seleighe community here." He leaned back a little. "Keighvin, I think the ball's in your—ah—'court.' So to speak."

Keighvin didn't smile. "Sam, how much did your granny ever tell you about the Seleighe and Unseleighe Court elves?"

Sam had to think hard about that. Granny had died when he was barely ten; fifty-five years was a long time. And yet, her stories had been extraordinarily vivid, and had left him with lasting impressions.

"Mostly, she told stories with—I guess you'd say—good elves and bad elves. Elves who wanted to help humans, at least, and elves who wanted only to hurt them. She said you really couldn't tell them apart, if you were a human child—that even human adults could be easily misled, and that sometimes even the good elves didn't know who was good and who was bad. She said the Unseleighe Court even had agents in the Seleighe Court. She just warned me to steer clear of both if I ever met either kind, until I was old enough to defend myself, and could tell a glib lie from the truth."

Keighvin nodded, his hair beginning to escape from the pony-tail. "Good enough. And that fairly sums it up. There's the Seleighe Court—that's us, and things like elvensteeds and dryads, selkies, pukas, owls, things that can pass as humans and things that never could. Oh, and there's creatures native to this side of the water that have allied themselves with the Seleighe Court as well. And for the most part, the very worst one of us wishes is that the humans would go away." The Sidhe looked out into the forest beyond the glass, but Sam had the feeling he was seeing something else entirely. "For the most part, we're interested in coexisting with your kind, even if it forces us to have to change. Many of us are interested in helping your kind. We have the power of magic, but you have the twin powers of technology and numbers. One on one—you humans are no match for us. But population against population—we've lost before we even start."

"All right," Sam agreed. "I can see that. What about the Unseleighe Court?"

"They hate you, one and all," Keighvin replied, somberly. "There are elves among them; and many, many things straight out of your worst childhood nightmares: bane-sidhe, boggles, trolls, things you've never heard of. The Morrigan is their Queen, and a terrible creature she is; she hates all things living, even her own people." His eyes darkened with what looked to Sam like a distant echo of pain. "They hate us, too, for wanting to coexist with you; they're constantly at war with us. They want you gone, and they're active in fostering anything that kills you off. If you run across a human conflict that seems senseless, often as not, they have a hand in it. Not that you humans aren't adept at creating misery for yourselves, but the Unseleighe Court has a vested interest in fostering that misery, and in propagating it. And they don't like the idea that Fairgrove is a little further along the path of easing some of it."

"All right so far," Sam said, a little puzzled, "but what's that got to do with me?"

“We have agents in their ranks, just as they have agents in ours,” Keighvin told him. “We’ve gotten word that some of their lot that can pass as human have found out what we’re planning, and are going to try to expose us as frauds.”

“It’ll be Preston Tucker all over again,” Tannim put in, his own expression grim. “Without someone with a spotless reputation fronting for us, they can do it, too. They can claim we’ve stolen our samples, that the engine blocks aren’t what we say they are, and that we have no real intention of manufacturing the products. It’s happened enough times in this industry that people are likely to believe it—especially with a bit of glamor behind their words and a strong publicity campaign. Your actions will be the saving of us—as Keighvin’s was of you and your father.”

“No one’s ever heard of us, except as a racing team,” Keighvin said, leaning forward in his chair, giving Sam all of his attention. “But they know you. Your reputation can give us the time we need to actually build a few customers. Once we have that, it won’t matter what they say. They’ll have to come after us some other way. But there’s the danger. They will. And not only us, but you.”

Oddly enough, the threat to himself didn’t bother Sam. In fact, if anything, it added a little spice to the prospect. Terrorists and fanatics who threatened folk just because they were American frightened him; there was no predicting people like that, and there was something cold and impersonal about their enmity. Give him a real, honest enemy every time. You knew where you stood with a real enemy; you knew whose side you were on. After all, hating a country takes away its faces, but hating someone because of what he did was something he could get a grip on.

“To tell you the truth,” Tannim put in, “I’d have been a lot more worried before I saw how you’ve got your home defenses rigged. Even a creature with magic is going to have trouble passing them. And once I add my two cents’ worth, I think you’ll be in fairly good shape to hold them off if you have to.”

“Your two cents’ worth?” Sam asked quizzically. Tannim grinned and shrugged—and Sam remembered the odd protections around the car. This Tannim might not be one of the Fair Folk, but there was no doubt he held his own in their company.

More of Sam’s granny’s lore was coming back to him. There was, surprisingly, a lot of it. And the things he remembered about the Unseleighe Court were unpleasant indeed, especially when it occurred to him that she had undoubtedly toned things down for his young ears. Now he wondered how much she hadn’t told him, and how important that information was.

And where she had gotten it from. The “missing” brother, perhaps? He made a mental note to ask Keighvin about that some time.

Still—here was a chance to see things very few other humans had seen. A chance to be useful again. He’d -retired only because he’d had no choice. He had enjoyed the first few weeks of his vacation, but truth to tell, he was getting bored. There were only so many things he could do to improve the house. He hated fishing. He could only watch so much television before feeling the urge to throw something at the tube.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll do it Full speed ahead, and damn the torpedoes. You’ve got your man.”

The little that remained of the evening passed in a blur. Tannim took him home again—and this time did not treat him to a mini-race on the driveway. Neither of them said much, except to set a dinner meeting for that evening—since it was already “tomorrow,” being well past midnight.

Tannim waited until he was safely sealed inside his little fortress before driving off; he wasn't certain if that was a wise precaution, or real paranoia. Surely the Unseleighe Court denizens wouldn't already know he'd agreed to help Fairgrove?

Then again, this was magic he was dealing with; as unknown in its potentials as a new technology. Maybe they could know.

Thoreau was lying beside the door, patiently but obviously waiting for his promised treat. Sam headed for the kitchen and dished out a tiny portion of canned food. Thoreau didn't need extra pounds any more than a -human did, and these late-night snacks were the only time he got canned food. The rest of the time, he had to make do with dry.

Thoreau was one of the more interesting dogs Sam had ever owned. Instead of greedily gobbling down his treat, he ate it slowly, licking it like a child trying to make an ice-cream cone last. Sam left him to it and went to his library in the office, but didn't immediately pull down some of the reference materials he'd mentally selected.

Instead, he sat with hands idly clasped on the desk for a long moment, wondering if, when he did go to bed, he'd wake up in the morning to find that all this had been a dream.

Something crackled in his jacket pocket as he took it off, and he found the envelope with the check in it still in his breast pocket.

"All right," he said to Thoreau, as the dog padded into the study, licking his chops with satisfaction. "Maybe it is a dream. Maybe there are fairy checks as well as fairy gold. But it's here now." He planted the envelope under his favorite paperweight, a bronze replica of the Space Shuttle Challenger. "If it's gone in the morning, I'll know it was a dream. But for now, all we can do is try. Eh, Thoreau?"

Thoreau wagged his stub of a tail in agreement, and put his head down on his paws as Sam got up and -began pulling books and bound magazines down off the shelf. He'd seen this before. He knew it was going to be a long night.

## CHAPTER FOUR

The Mustang purred happily as Tannim drove into Sam's driveway. There were times, especially lately, when Tannim wondered if maybe he hadn't instilled a little *too* much magic into the car. Or maybe he'd planted something else besides pure Power. Lately it had seemed as if the Mach 1 was almost—sentient. It certainly seemed to approve of Sam Kelly; there was a warmth to the engine's purr that hadn't been there before he turned into the drive, and the car had embraced Sam as if he belonged inside it.

Well, for that matter, Tannim approved of Sam Kelly. He was a smart, tough old bird, and too good to waste on retirement. Now, as long as he and Keighvin hadn't gotten the old man into more danger than any of them could handle. . . . His conscience bothered him a bit over that. Sam had brains and savvy, but what if he needed that and a younger man's reflexes as well?

He was taking Sam to dinner, after a couple of drinks at Kevin Barry's Pub in Savannah, on River Street. There were several Irish pubs in the area, but Kevin Barry's was the one Tannim preferred. He had the feeling that Sam would feel more at home, easier, in an atmosphere that reminded him of Ireland

and all it meant.

He'd chosen a dinner meeting rather than a return to Fairgrove for a very good reason; he wanted Sam's first dose of Keighvin Silverhair to wear off before they talked again. Keighvin's formidable personality had been known to overwhelm far stronger personalities than Sam's, even without a glamorie at work.

Not that Keighvin would have used a glamorie on Sam Kelly. They wanted a willing ally, with all his faculties in working order, not a bemused dreamer.

Tannim wasn't entirely certain how old Keighvin was; certainly at least a thousand. That much living produced personalities that could easily bowl the unsuspecting over. If Sam was having second thoughts, Tannim wanted to know about it without Keighvin around to influence him.

The pub itself, however, was a good place to talk to Sam. The atmosphere, so strongly Celtic, should put Sam in the state of mind to remember and Believe, even though he was going to be completely in the "real world."

And there was no more "real world" clientele than the bunch that frequented Kevin Barry's. Students from SCAD, business people, locals, artists, holdover hippies, folkies—you name it, and you would probably see it in Kevin Barry's. Except maybe yuppies; the place wasn't trendy enough for them.

*Not enough ferns, or drinks with clever names and inflated prices. And no selection of forty-five mineral waters.*

Sam must have been watching for him, for he was locking up even as Tannim arrived. He opened the passenger's side door and slid in beside Tannim as soon as the Mach 1 came to a full stop. He was amazingly fit for a sixty-five-year-old man; he looked as if he'd been getting lots of regular exercise and watching his diet—his build was a lot like Jacques Cousteau's, in fact, who at sixty-five had still been leading his own underwater expeditions. Maybe Tannim didn't need to worry quite so much about him after all.

"Am I in for any more impromptu racing today?" Sam asked, with a twinkle, as Tannim pulled out again. And there was no doubt of it; the Mustang was truly purring with satisfaction, a note in its engine he'd never heard before. The Mach 1 liked Sam.

*Too bad I can't ever find a lover it likes that much, he thought ironically. Of course, if I do, she'll probably like the car better than me. I can see it now—my girl and my car, taking off into the sunset without me.*

"No, no racing today," he said, with a chuckle. "I'm taking you into Savannah. I had the feeling you probably haven't been downtown in a while."

Sam nodded. "Not for years," he admitted. "Never had a reason to. And to tell you the truth, I spent most of my time at Gulfstream. There wasn't much of anything I wanted to go downtown for."

"I may be able to change your mind," Tannim replied. "So, how are you feeling about our offer in the cold light of day?"

"Well—the check didn't disappear, or turn into a handful of leaves when morning arrived," Sam replied after a moment. "And my bank was perfectly happy to have it. I wasn't entirely sure it would still be there

when I woke up this morning, and that's a fact. I was half convinced I must have dreamed the whole thing. Especially that car-horse-car."

"I don't blame you." Tannim chuckled, watching Sam out of the corner of his eye. "I know how I felt the first time I saw anyone working real magic."

There. The word was out in the open. Sam hadn't flinched from it, either.

"Magic," the old man mused. "The Sidhe, and magic. Maybe I've come into my second childhood, but—I think I could come to appreciate all this." He tilted his head to the side. "So, what happened the first time *you* saw magic at work?"

Tannim laughed. "I freaked. For the first few minutes, I thought someone had slipped me recreational pharmaceuticals without my noticing. Then, once I figured out that everything I saw was real, I just hoped that whoever was duking it out didn't notice *me*. I was—oh, sixteen or so—and I kind of got caught on the sidelines of a magic duel." He waited to see the effect of that revelation on Sam.

"Fair Folk?" Sam asked after a moment. "A duel -between elves?"

Tannim shook his head. "No. A witch and a sorceress. The witch was the good guy—or rather, gal. I didn't know who the bad guy was, or that it *was* a female at the time. I was just glad the witch had a good sense of ethics and was trying to keep the mayhem to a minimum where the audience was concerned."

"A witch and a sorceress? Aren't they the same thing?" Sam asked, in a genuinely puzzled tone.

Again, Tannim shook his head. "Trust me, there's a difference between the two. The reason it was dangerous was because although the witch was being careful about innocent bystanders, the sorceress wasn't. And, like I said, in this case, the witch was the good guy. There's a lot of parallels between the Seileighe and Unseileighe Courts there."

Sam nodded thoughtfully, but made no further comments for a moment. By that time, they had reached Savannah proper, and the infamous brick-work streets. Quaint and picturesque, but hell to drive on.

They got a bit of relief at a stoplight. Tannim's leg ached distantly, from hip to ankle. "I keep forgetting about these damn streets," he remarked to Sam, who nodded.

"I remember now," Sam responded. "This was one of the reasons I avoided coming downtown. There wasn't anything down here that was worth having to drive this, and the cobblestones are worse."

Tannim sighed. "I guess it's because I like River Street so much I sort of forget what it takes to get there. I'm sure the tourists like this—but I swear, I know I'm -going to have to put the car up and do an alignment when I get home.

"It's the tight suspension, I'd wager," Sam said through clenched teeth. "Makes you wish you had a Lincoln or a Caddy."

Tannim laughed. "Maybe I'll remember this next time I come here, and rent one!"

The Mustang coughed as though its carburetor had stuck, then settled once Tannim patted the dash.

*Some things never change*, Sam thought, as he watched a trio of black-clad art students walk by in the shade of the old, Spanish-moss-bedecked oaks. There seemed to be an unwritten rule that young artists had to wear black and act morose at least twelve hours out of every day. He'd seen that sort of thing, in a different way, with the Gulfstream engineers, who thought that if they wore blue cotton shirts, club ties, and Cross pens, they would be taken for Brain Trust. Sam had never been able to take that kind of thing seriously after watching a PBS documentary about mimicry in moths.

The art students were a constant source of amusement and amazement for the locals, but the kids always meant well. It tickled Sam that their school was slowly buying out the entire downtown, building by building. "Are those ninjas, or performance artists?" Tannim chuckled, nodding at a duo in black *gis* and black, absurdly baggy pants, like rappers wore on MTV. They lounged beneath a wrought-iron balcony that was old when their great-grandparents were their age. They reminded Tannim of similar sights in New Orleans, and the mix of cultures and ambience there.

"Poster kids for mousse abuse," Sam replied solemnly. "Ninjas would have better taste."

"Geez, you could hide aircraft in those pants," Tannim commented, after a second look. "Better keep them away from Gulfstream, Sam. Some of your planes might mistake them for hangars."

A blue-haired old lady under the trees of one of the dozens of tiny park squares nagged at her husband as the balding man focused his camera on a building across the street. "Wait until the kids are in the *picture*, George," she shrilled. "I want a picture with *art kids* in it. This is where the *art school* is, I want *art kids* in the picture."

The old man just grunted and made minute adjustments of the focus. The art students just ignored it all and continued drifting along in front of the boutique windows, expressions of studied *angst* decorating their young faces.

"Maybe he can't hear her," Tannim suggested. "His shorts are drowning her out." Indeed, the man was wearing possibly the most obscene pair of Bermudas Sam had ever experienced; an appalling print in cerise and chartreuse. He and his wife were completely unaware of the team of video students behind them—taping every move *they* made. Sam nearly died, choking down laughter.

They found themselves creeping along at five miles an hour, stuck behind one of the horse-drawn sightseers carriages. Tannim put up with it for a little, but finally muttered something under his breath and turned off their street at the next light, leaving the coveys of tourists and micro-herds of art students behind. After about a mile, Sam noticed they had left the glass-front boutiques and hole-in-the-wall shops behind as well. The buildings were -neglected, now; paint cracked and peeling, windows broken and patched with tape and cardboard, yards full of weeds. The cars here were in the same shape as the houses. There weren't many businesses; what few there were had grates over the windows and rusted bars on the doors.

Sam would not have wanted to break down here, and now he recalled another reason for not visiting downtown. River Street was flanked by two bad neighborhoods. Even in daylight, Sam would not have wanted to be alone out here. The sullen expressions of the toughs lounging on the corners were not feigned or practiced, and their cold, dead eyes gave Sam the chills. He kept his eyes on the dashboard, and Tannim was uncharacteristically silent.

Finally the young man broke the silence. "This neighborhood's economy isn't depressed," he said grimly,



“it’s suicidal.”

They turned another corner and drove for about half a mile, with the buildings slowly improving again. Finally they turned onto River Street itself, and as they hit the cobblestones and the punishment really began, Sam felt able to take his eyes off the dashboard. That was when he found that the dubious sorts weren’t limited to the bad neighborhoods, either; there was a cluster of kids in front of a shop with a “for rent” sign in the window, and from the look of them, they were exchanging money for drugs. Sam watched the loitering toughs out of the corner of his eye, and remembered that this was yet another reason why he had avoided the downtown area in general. He certainly wouldn’t want to come here alone at night, and maybe not even with someone. He knew he was tougher than he looked—yes, and a lot sprier than he let on—but he was no match for a street-gang.

And he was smart enough to know it.

A cop car rumbled down one of the cobblestone ramps from the street above River, and the gang evaporated, vanishing into the covered alleyways behind the River Street stores.

Well, maybe it wouldn’t be so dangerous. The cops were certainly a presence. And then, again, there were a number of Irish pubs around here, and a lot of Irish on the street as well—the ones without the bags and cameras and look of tourists. If *hedid* happen to find himself in trouble, it could be there’d be more help here than he first reckoned.

Tannim pulled into a parking place so abruptly that Sam was taken by surprise; cutting in right under the fender of a departing vehicle, and neatly getting the Mustang worked into the slot so quickly it seemed as magical as the car-horse. As the young man shut the engine off, he turned to grin at Sam. “You’ve got to be quick around here,” he said. “Parking places go fast, and the god of parking has a short attention span.”

To his surprise, since Tannim hadn’t mentioned specifically where they were going, the young man led the way into one of those Irish pubs Sam had been eyeing. And to Sam’s great delight, once inside, the place proved to be real Irish, not “tourist” Irish. It looked—and felt—homey and lived-in. There was a small stage in the restaurant section, against one wall, with a folk-group setting up on it, whose instrumental mix Sam also noted with approval. He liked mixing the old with the new, although one could do some quite amazing things with traditional instruments. One of his most cherished memories was of being in a club in Tennessee and hearing the Battlefield Band performing “Stairway to Heaven” on the bagpipes. . . .

Still, although *he* was prepared to spend several delightful hours here, this did not look like the kind of place that would suit his companion. Young Tannim looked as if he’d never encountered an acoustic guitar in his life; a rock’n’roller to the core. The Clannad tape notwithstanding, he couldn’t imagine Tannim caring for any music that didn’t come with amps and megawattage. It was to Sam’s considerable astonishment that the lady bartender greeted his escort by name, and asked if he wanted “his usual table.” At Tannim’s nod, the lady waved them on, telling them that “Julie” would be with them in a minute.

As Sam took his place across from Tannim, he realized that, once again, he was going to have to realign all his previous ideas about the lad. And that was a discovery just as pleasant as the existence of this pub.

“Well,” Tannim said, when the waitress had brought them both drinks, “ready for a little more business?”

Another surprise for Sam—not the question, but the drink. Tannim had stuck to pure cola. He was young enough to take delight in drinking because he could. Interesting.

“I think so,” Sam replied cautiously. “You gave me a lot of information last night, but it was all in pieces. I’d like more of a whole picture.”

“Fine,” Tannim said agreeably. “Where would you like me to start?”

“With magic.” Sam took a deep breath. “Just what is it? How does it work? What can you do with it—and what’s it got to do with racing—”

Tannim held up a hand. “The discipline people call ‘magic’ is a way of describing an inborn talent that’s been trained. It has rules, and it obeys the laws of physics. It uses the energy produced by all living things; it also uses the energy of magnetic fields, of sunlight, and a lot of other sources. It’s a tool, a way of manipulating energies; that’s the first thing you have to remember. It’s not good or bad, it just *is*. Like, I can use a crowbar to bash your head in, or to pry a victim out of a wreck.” He shrugged. “It’s a tool; just a tool and nothing more. Some people have the skill to use the tool, some don’t.”

Sam nodded, since Tannim looked as if he was waiting for a response. “But—how does it work? And who has it? Can anyone work it if they’ve got the knowledge?”

Tannim chuckled. “Hard to describe, Sam. First of all, you have to be able to see the energies in the first place, or at least know that they’re there. That’s the key; if you can see them, you can learn to manipulate them with magic—which is basically a way of making your own will into that tool to manipulate energy.” He licked his lips. “Here’s where it gets complicated. If you’ve trained your will well enough, you can still use the energies without seeing them. Everyone could use some kind of magic, if they had the training—but most folks never come in touch with what they can use. Know anything more now than you did before I said that?”

Sam shook his head, ruefully. “Well . . . no. Not really. But I can believe in plasma physics without knowing -exactly how *it* works. I suppose I can believe in magic too. So long as it follows rules.”

“That’s the spirit!” Tannim applauded. “Now, what Keighvin won’t tell you, because like most elves, he’s an arrogant sonuvabanshee, is that humans were applying magic to cars before the elves thought of it. A lot of times they didn’t realize that was what they were doing, but a lot of times they knew *exactly* what they were doing, especially on the racing circuit. So when the elves came on the scene, they got a bit of a shock, because there were humans out there already, using magicked cars. That’s when they decided it might be a good idea to try and join up with some of those humans.” He spread his hands. “Voilà—SERRA was born.”

“But why racing?” Sam asked, still bewildered. “For the Sidhe, I mean. It seems so—foreign to what they are.”

“Boredom,” Tannim replied succinctly, tracing little patterns on the wooden tabletop with his finger. “They live—if not forever, damn near. But here’s something else they won’t tell you. The one thing they lack is *creativity* as near as I can figure. Every bit of their culture, with the sole exception of who and what they worship, comes from humans.” He looked up through his lashes, as if he were sharing a secret. “They can replicate what we do, and even improve on it, but I’ve never once seen one of them come up with something new and original. So they depend on us to bring new things to their culture; as far as I can tell, that’s always been the case. They were bored, and racing gave them a chance to bring back some

excitement to their lives, like the old combat-challenges used to give them. Brought them that element of risk back—” his face sobered “—’cause, Sam, if you mess up on the track, sometimes it’s permanent, and sometimes it’s terminal.”

Sam wondered if Tannim’s game leg was evidence of the boy’s own brush with just that.

“But they won’t admit it, even if you confront ’em,” Tannim said, with a crooked smile, making a figure eight. “That’s the real reason they got into racing though, I promise you. Now as to why Keighvin took it farther, to where Fairgrove is trying to make mundane money—he’s not lying, he wants to have that kind of mundane cash to kind of fix things for kids. I’ve got a hunch he wants to set up some safe-houses for abused kids that we can’t take Underhill, starting here in Savannah. All elves have this thing about kids; Keighvin has it harder than most. If he could save every kid in the world from pain, hunger, fear—he’d do it. But he can’t do it magically, not anymore.” Tannim made a complex symbol that looked suspiciously like a baseball diamond. “For one thing, there’s too much Cold Iron around for his magics to work down here in the cities.”

“Huh.” Sam nodded, but he had reservations. Not that he hadn’t heard about all the supposed abused kids, on everything from Oprah to prime-time TV dramas, but he wasn’t sure he believed the stories. Kids made things up, when they thought they were in for deserved punishment. Hell, one of the young guys at work had shown up with a story about his kid getting into something he was told to leave alone in a store, breaking it, then launching into screams of “don’t beat me, Mommy!” when the mother descended like a fury. Embarrassed the blazes out of her, especially since the worst she’d ever delivered in the kid’s life was a couple of smacks on the bottom. Turned out the brat had seen a dramatized crime-recreation show the night before, with an abused-kid episode. Sam was beginning to think that a lot of those “beaten kids” had seen similar shows, then had been coached by attorneys, “child advocates,” or the “non-abusing spouse.” Wasn’t that how the Salem witch-trials had happened, anyway? A bunch of kids getting back at the adults they didn’t like?

As for the runaways—they’d had a solution for that back when he was a kid. Truant officers with the power to confine a kid, and reform school for the kids that couldn’t toe the line at home. Maybe that’s what they needed these days, not “safe-houses.”

But just as he was about to say that, he took a second, harder look at Tannim, and thought back about what Keighvin had said. Tannim might be almost a kid himself, but he didn’t look as if he was easily tricked. And Keighvin had known what was happening to Sam—and presumably Sam’s great-uncle—by supernatural means. It wasn’t likely that *they* were being tricked. . . .

They, the elves, had been right about Sam’s great-uncle. And who could say what might have happened if Keighvin hadn’t intervened that night, so long ago. Would John Kelly have come to his senses before he’d done more than frighten Sam? Or would the beatings have continued, getting worse with every incident, until Sam turned into a sullen, trouble-making creature like Jack McGee, with his hand against every man alive, and -every man’s hand against him? Jack’s father was the mainstay of the town pub . . . Jack’s mother a timid thing that never spoke above a whisper, and always with one eye out for her husband, wore high collars and long sleeves, and generally bore a healing bruise somewhere on her face or neck. Now Sam was forced to confront that memory, he wondered, as he had not, then. What did those sleeves and collars -conceal?

Maybe the stories were true; maybe the elves were right. . . .

*Glory be. Am I thinking as if they’re real?*

He was. Somewhere along the line, he'd accepted all this—magic, elves, all of it. He might just as well accept the abused kids as well. . . .

“Have you people cast some kind of spell on me?” he demanded. “Made me believe in you? Brainwashed me?”

Tannim laughed. “If we used magic to make you -believe in magic, to brainwash you, doesn't that mean magic works?”

Well, the boy had him there.

“I suppose you could have brainwashed me some other way,” Sam said, feebly.

Tannim shrugged. “Why?” he replied reasonably, as the waitress brought another round. “What's the point? By definition, someone who's been brainwashed is operating at less than his optimum reasoning capacity. Why would we want you brainwashed, when what we want is for you to be at your sharpest?” Tannim took a sip of his cola, and looked up at Sam from under a raised eyebrow. “Are you having second thoughts about all this, about agreeing to help Keighvin?” he asked. “If you are, Sam, it's nothing to be ashamed of. We need you, but not at the expense of forcing you to make a bargain you regret.”

Sam sighed. “No. No. It's just that I find myself believ-ing in the impossible, and it doesn't seem right, all my brave words about plasma physics to the contrary.”

The young man took a moment to finish his drink before answering. “Sam,” he said, slowly, gazing off into nothing for a moment, “when you were a kid, people said it was impossible for a plane to fly past the speed of sound, for polio and smallpox to be eradicated, for the atom to be split, for a man to walk on the moon. I don't know what's impossible. All I can say is that ‘impossible’ just seems to mean that nobody's done it yet. There's some people that still don't believe a man walked on the moon. And there's people who still believe the earth is flat. Nobody put*their* names in the history books. I know it all seems fantastic, but *weare* based in reality. It's just a bigger reality than most people are used to dealing with.”

“What*do* you know?” Sam found himself asking, his own meal forgotten for the moment. “You, who's magicked his car, who walks and talks with the Folk and treats them like mortals—what do you know?”

Tannim grinned. “Well—I know your beer's getting flat.”

Sam laughed, and gave in.

Tannim finished his third cola with one eye on Sam, and another on the crowd. On the whole, the evening had gone well. Sam had weathered both his initial exposure and the period of doubt that always followed it in good form. Better than Tannim had expected, in fact. Of course, he'd had a dose of the Folk as a child; that tended to leave a lasting impression.

Sam had finally worked himself round to asking specific questions about the elves, and how they were functioning in the human world. And why.

The crowd-noise around them was not too loud for them to be able to talk in normal voices—or at least, it wasn't after Tannim did a little local sound-filtering around their table, a tiny exercise in human magic that was worth the energy he expended on it. “Well, this is something else Keighvin won't admit unless he's pressed. Essentially, the Seleighe Court is split,” he said. “One group thinks they should all withdraw

Underhill, and leave the world we know to the humans. The other group thinks that would be a major mistake.”

“Why?” Sam wanted to know, his head turned to one side.

“Remember what I told you about them, that they can’t seem to create anything?” Tannim reminded him. “Keighvin thinks that if they withdraw, they’ll stagnate. That’s something a little more serious to them than it is to humans. They call it Dreaming; they can be forced into it by caffeine addiction, or they can drop into it from lack of stimulation, and being cut off from their old energy sources by Cold Iron. That’s happened to one group in California already. They managed to get out of it, but—it wasn’t pretty.”

He didn’t like to think about that. They had all been *damned* lucky to pull out of their trap. And they wouldn’t have been able to without the aid of humans.

He pulled his thoughts away; Elfhome Sundescending was all right now, and thriving. “Like the old story of the Lotus-Eaters; they lose all ambition and do next to nothing, sit around and listen to music and let their magic servants tend to everything, dance, and never think a single thought. Scary. I’ve seen it once, and I wouldn’t wish it even on the Folk who’d be pleased to see me six feet under. Keighvin’s got some plans to keep it from happening on this coast, and they involve all of us in Fairgrove.”

Just then, his attention was caught by someone that didn’t fit with the usual Kevin Barry’s crowd. She was clearly underage; he guessed round about thirteen or fourteen. Fifteen, max, but he doubted it. She was tarted up like a bargain-basement Madonna in black-lace spandex tights, a black-lace skirt, and a cheap black corset; wearing entirely too much makeup, so that her eyes looked like black holes in her pale face, with a bad bleach-job that made her hair look like so much spiky dead straw. What in hell was she doing here? This didn’t look like her kind of crowd. *God, she looks like Pris from Bladerunner*, he thought.

But then, Sam had been surprised that *he* was a regular here. Maybe she just liked the music.

“I can see that, and I can see why racing, now,” Sam said, in answer to whatever he’d just told the man. “But what are they doing about Cold Iron? That’s what drove them out of the Old Country, isn’t it? Doesn’t it bother them now?”

“How much real iron and steel do you see nowadays?” Tannim countered, raising his eyebrows. “Plastic, fiberglass, aluminum, yes—but iron?”

“Hmm. You have a point.”

The girl had worked herself in towards the stage, with a look of utter fascination on her face. Tannim felt a twinge of sympathy; he remembered the first time *he* encountered really good Celtic folk-rock. It had been right here—and this band, Terra Nova. Kind of like having your first experience of pizza being Chicago deep-dish. And it wasn’t often that the old members of Terra Nova got back together again for an old-time’s-sake gig, what with Trish being so busy at the restaurant and all. No wonder this chick had shown up. Yeah, it looked like she was just a punker with Celtic-rock leanings. Too bad she was so young. This was supposed to be an adult club, what with the bar and all. She could get bounced in no time, if she got herself noticed.

Well, if she behaved herself, they’d probably leave her alone.

He watched her, still a little bothered by something, something not quite right. Then, as he saw her stop

and talk to a businessman who shook his head abruptly—and ignore a SCAD student who half-made an approach, it dawned on him.

She was a hooker.

He'd thought he was beyond shock, but this stunned him. So damned young—

He watched her make her way around the floor, most of her attention on the band, but obviously a part of her keeping an eye out for a potential john. *Don't try and turn atrick in here, honey, please*, he pled silently with her. He might be wrong—but the more he watched her, the surer he became. At that age—out here on a school night, dressed like she was—it was long odds against her being on River Street for the fun of it. *If you get too obvious, or bother the customers, they'll throw you out. Stay cool. It's cold and mean out there, and if one of the soft-hearts sees you, they'll get you something to eat and you'll be safe a little longer. . . .*

Sam asked him a question, and he answered it absently. “Well, what’s happening is that some of the elves—with Keighvin leading the pack by a length—are trying to build up a kind of immunity to Cold Iron—or a tolerance, at least. I can think of half a dozen, actually, who can handle it with a minimum of protection, and two that can actually tolerate it well enough to work on and drive a stock car.”

*Donal, he thought fondly. Wish you were here, man. You could pick up this poor little chick and glamorie her into coming back to Fairgrove with you, tuck her away Underhill until you'd talked some sense into her. And if you couldn't your brother could.*

The more he watched the girl, the less comfortable he felt. She was wandering around the area of the stage, and although she wasn't making any full-fledged tries at picking up the customers, it was pretty obvious that if anyone that she thought had money responded to her tentative overtures, she wouldn't turn him down.

“Keighvin says the Folk have to adapt or die, it's that simple,” he concluded, as the band finished a wild polka and went into a still wilder reel. “They haven't got a choice anymore. *He* thinks if they withdraw, they'll do worse than stagnate, they'll fade away. Just—disappear.”

“Is that possible?” Sam asked, sounding surprised. Tannim pulled his attention away from the girl long enough to catch his eyes. He nodded, slowly.

“It's already happened,” he said seriously. “Mostly in Europe, but even over here, there've been enclaves of the Folk that went Underhill and just vanished after a while. Nobody's heard from them, nobody can find them.”

“Couldn't they just have closed themselves off?” Sam wanted to know. “If they became that anti-social, maybe they even got tired of other elves. I mean, what is this Underhill, anyway? We used to say the Fair Folk lived in the mounds, but what you're saying, it sounds more like Underhill is everywhere. Couldn't the missing Folk have just shut the door and turned off the phone, so to speak?”

Tannim shook his head. “Underhill doesn't work that way. It's hard to describe. It's kind of—another world, one magicians can touch, and sometimes get into. A kind of parallel world, I guess. Lots of magic; I mean, of power, and it's readily available, like electricity, only it's like—” He thought for a moment, as the crowd began clapping in time to the music. “It's like having all the power--stations and the power-grid in place and running, only there's nobody manning it, and no electric company to make you pay for what you take. It's yours for the tapping into. The only 'cost' involved is in tapping into it and in

using it.”

Sam shook his head, but not in disbelief, exactly. “Sounds like free lunch, to me.”

Tannim looked around for the girl, but she’d gotten lost behind a screen of taller people. Not *that* was hard, as tiny as she was. He thought he knew where she’d moved to, though, by the path of mild disturbance along the bar. “Not really; the cost to the individual of tapping in and using it is high, and you have to have the ability in the first place. Kind of like solar energy. Keighvin thinks that’s where the power created *here* that doesn’t get used leaks off to—if you think of it as bio-energy, the kind that makes Kirlian auras, you’re close enough to the truth.”

Sam closed his eyes for a moment in thought. “All right,” he replied, opening them again. “That much I can believe in. What’s it like in there?”

“Parts are like a bad sf novel,” Tannim laughed, without humor. “Like some of the old pulp writers described an alien planet. Parts of it are like an architect’s wet-dream.” He spread his fingers wide for emphasis. “Mostly it’s a kind of chaos, a place where things are always changing, always dangerous, and that’s where the Unseleighe Court creatures go. Then there’s stretches of order, walled gardens or even small countries, and that’s where the Seleighe Court enclaves are.”

“And those?” Sam prompted.

Tannim sighed, but this time at the memories Sam’s question invoked. “I’ve only been there a couple of times, and each time it was different. Figure every description you’ve ever heard of Elvenlands, Morgan Le Fay’s castle, the Isles of the Blest—that’s what those Underhill enclaves are like.” He felt his eyes sting with remembrance and the inevitable regret that he hadn’t stayed, and pushed the memory away. “Incredible—and they require elven-mages of very high power and a great deal of will to force the chaos out, and the area into that shape. That means they leave a mark on the world of Underhill, very visible, like the Red Spot on Jupiter. When someone like Keighvin goes Underhill, he *knows* where all the other pockets are, at least the ones created by other Folk. Always. He might not be able to get into them without invitation, but he knows where they are.”

Sam took a sip of his beer before replying. “So it doesn’t matter if the Folk in that place don’t want to be bothered, they can’t hide themselves. At least not on purpose.”

Tannim nodded. “Right. So with the ones that faded out, the places that have gone missing—well, they’re not there anymore. Maybe they died, maybe they went to still another world, and maybe they just dissolved back into the chaos. Even if there are still Folk alive in there, nobody can reach them, and they can’t find their way back to the rest of us, nor to the real world. Likeliest—according to Keighvin—is that they faded until they were easy prey for the Unseleighe Court critters.”

Sam toyed with a napkin, looking troubled. “You mean—they—”

Right on cue, Terra Nova launched into “Sidhe Beg and Sidhe Mor;” a tune that sounded lighthearted—but was about a war between elves of the Seleighe and Unseleighe Courts. The body count, as Tannim recalled, had been pretty high.

He raised an eyebrow at the band. Sam chewed his lip, as the meaning of the tune came home to him. “The Unseleighe Court plays for keeps, and every time they kill a Seleighe Court creature, or a human, they add his life-energy to their own power. Elves can die; they can be killed. Ever think about where the word ‘banshee’ came from?”

Sam's eyes widened. "Bane-Sidhe?"

"Right. 'Bane' or 'death' of elves. And it's not just a name." Tannim was just glad he'd not had any personal experiences with one. The descriptions were bad enough.

"The stories my grandmother told me—she said some banshees actually came for people." Sam looked a little embarrassed, as if he'd been caught believing in the -bogyman.

*Who also exists.*

"They do that too; they'll do their damndest to scare you to death," Tannim said grimly. "That's how they get their energy; from your fear and from your dying."

"Oh." Sam blinked, as if he wasn't sure how to take that. He'd accepted danger last night—but that was with Keighvin, in Fairgrove territory. He was here now, the "real world," in the middle of a pub full of noisy people and a Celtic-rock band.

And a thirteen-year-old hooker.

She appeared again, this time giving up all pretense of working the crowd, just standing close to the stage and hugging herself, as Trish sang "Buachail on Eire" with a voice an elven Bard would have paid any price to display.

A glitter of Trish's half-closed blue eyes, and the set of her chin, betrayed the fact that she was watching the girl too, and Tannim relaxed minutely. Trish didn't pick up on street-sparrows often, especially not now that she was managing "Acadia," but when she did, she was very kind to them. Like the way she'd adopted that monster wolfhound of hers, letting it take over her life to the point of buying a house just so the dog would be able to stay with her. She wouldn't let the girl get away without at least trying to see she got something to eat. With luck, she'd keep the child busy until Tannim could take over.

*Maybe I can get her to Keighvin. I can't get him out of Fairgrove territory, not yet, but if can get her to him, he'll take care of her.* Not for the first time, he wished that he could just lie to the kid, get her into his car and make off with her, but to take her away from whatever life she had chosen, he had to have her consent, and she had to know what she was choosing. Conal and Donal wouldn't have worked that way, but they were Sidhe, and trickery was a part of their nature. Not his. It couldn't be by deception. Even Keighvin could work that way, but he couldn't; he was bound by a different set of rules. Self-inflicted, but nevertheless real. He hadn't liked being lied to, or manipulated, even with good intentions, when he was younger. He wouldn't do that to another kid. *Besides, small incidents have a way of turning around and biting my ass. If the wrong person saw me getting into my car with an underage hooker, it could mean big-time trouble later. Trouble we can't afford.*

As the band finished the set, he saw with relief that Trish definitely had her eye on the girl. As soon as they'd finished their bows—and before the child had a chance to escape—she was down off the stage and beside the kid. She made it look completely casual, and Tannim gave her high marks for her subtlety.

"What's wrong?" Sam asked, startling him. He tore his eyes off the girl for a moment to stare at his companion.

"What do you—"



“Oh, come now,” Sam interrupted. “You haven’t had more than half your attention on me for the past fifteen minutes. And you’ve got a frown on your face, so it can’t be that you’re watching a pretty girl, or that you’re -enthralled by the band. So what’s the problem?” As Tannim paused, debating how much to say, he lost his half-smile and began to frown, himself. “Is it something I should know about?”

Tannim sighed. “Over there, with Trish, from the band. See that other girl?”

“The one that’s made up like a cheap tart?” Sam asked, disapproval thick in his voice. “Girls these days—ah well. What about her?”

“She’s not only made up like a cheap tart, she probably *is* a cheap tart,” Tannim replied wearily. And before Sam could reply to that, added, “Take a good look under all the paint. She’s not only underage, she’s hardly gotten away from playing with Barbie dolls. What’s a kid like that doing out here hooking? And more than that, why? She has to be a runaway—what’s she running from that’s bad enough for her to be turning tricks at fourteen?”

Sam started to make some snap reply, but it looked as if some of what Tannim had been talking about—the abused kids and all—had penetrated. Tannim could almost read his mind from the fleeting expressions that passed over his face. First, contempt—then disgust—but then a moment of second thoughts, followed by worry. “I don’t like it,” he said.

“Neither do I,” Tannim told him, “but we’re going to have to be careful about this. She could be bait in a trap; she could be a trap herself. Some of the Unseleighe Court things can look like anything they want. *I* don’t see any magic around her, but that doesn’t mean she’s not one of them, or even a human kid they picked up to use against me. This is one of my regular hangouts, and everybody knows it.”

*And they know my soft spots.*

“So what do we do?” Sam asked. A frown line was forming between his brows. Obviously he wasn’t used to the kind of the multitudinous layers of deceit the Unseleighe Court creatures used by habit.

“We let Trish handle her. If she’s after me, she’ll find a way to get Trish to bring her over here. If she’s a real kid in real trouble, she’ll act like one.” He watched the two of them, without seeming to. It looked as if the singer was warning the girl against soliciting; Trish was nodding her head so emphatically that her black hair bounced, while the child blushed under all the makeup, and hung her head. But the singer didn’t leave things there; she took the girl to a table in the corner, and got her a sandwich and a cola, standing over her and talking until the food arrived. By then, it was time for the next set, and Trish abandoned the girl for the stage.

The kid finished the food in about three seconds flat. Tannim had never seen a kid put away food so fast, and the way she cleaned up every crumb argued that it might well have been the first meal she’d had today. She lingered over the dregs of her cola until Trish was obviously wrapped up in her song. Then a look of bleak determination passed over her face, and she slid out of her seat; and without a single glance at Tannim or even in his direction, she went back to the bar.

Tannim sighed, half in relief, half in exasperation. *All right*, he said to himself. *She’s genuine. Now what am I going to do about her?*

## CHAPTER FIVE

Just as Tannim asked himself that question, the girl found a mark.

It wasn't one of the regulars, and Julie hadn't even bothered to try to find the jerk a table. He was holding up the bar, more than two sheets to the wind, and up until the kid cruised by, he'd been insisting that Marianne, the barkeep, turn on a nonexistent television. He jumped all over her tentative overture, so much so that it was obvious to half the bar that he'd picked her up. The guys on either side of him gave him identical looks of disgust when they saw how young the girl was, and turned their backs on the situation.

Unfortunately, Tannim wasn't going to be able to do that. Not and be able to look himself in the mirror tomorrow. *Hard to shave if you can't do that. . . .*

Well, he knew one sure-fire way to pry her away from Mr. Wonderful. And it only required *alittle* magic. With a mental flick, he set the two tiny spells in motion. With the first, a Command spell, he cleared people to one side or the other of a line between his table and her. With the other, a simple look-at-me glamorie, he caught her eye.

At precisely the moment when she looked his way, down the open corridor of bodies, he flicked open his wallet, displaying his Gold Card, and nodded to her. Her eyes were drawn to it, as if it was a magnet to catch and hold her gaze. Only after she looked at it did she look at him. She licked her lips, smiled, and started toward him.

Tried to, rather. The drunk grabbed her arm.

"Hey!" he shouted, rather too loudly. "Wa-waitaminit, bitch! You promised me some fun!"

All eyes went to the drunk, and none of the looks were friendly. Kevin Barry's was not the kind of pub where the word "bitch" would go unnoticed.

*So much for taking care of this the easy way.*

Tannim was up and out of his seat before the girl had a chance to react to the hand gripping her arm. He grasped the drunk's wrist and applied pressure. The drunk yelped, and let go. "I think she's changed her mind," he said, with deceptive gentleness.

The drunk yanked his hand away, and snarled aggressively, "Yeah? And what's a faggot artsy punk like you gonna do about it? Huh?"

His hands were balling into fists, and he swung as he spoke, telegraphing like a Western Union branch office. Tannim blocked the first blow with a little effort; the second never landed. Three patrons landed on the drunk, and "escorted" him outside. And that was all there was to the incident; Kevin Barry's was like that. Tannim was family here, and nobody messed with family.

And nobody even looked askance at Tannim, for guiding a kid barely past training bras back to his table. It would be assumed that, like Trish, his intentions were to keep the kid out of trouble, and maybe talk some sense into her. He caught Sam's eye as he made a show of pulling a seat out for her; the old man was anything but stupid. "I'll be at the bar," he said as Tannim sat down. "I can hear the band better over there."

That was a palpable lie, since the bar was far from the stage, but the girl didn't seem to notice. Sam vanished into the crowd, leaving Tannim alone with the girl. She looked around, nervously; tried to avoid his eyes.

*But then, young hookers are always nervous.*

“So, what’s your name, kiddo?” he asked quietly, -projecting calm as best he could, and regretting the fact that he wasn’t an Empath.

“Tania,” she said, so softly he could hardly hear her.

“Tania. Okay, my name’s Tannim. We’ve both got the same first syllable in our names, that’s a start.” She looked up at him, startled, and he grinned. “Well, heck, it’s not much of a line, but it beats ‘Come here often? What’s your sign?’ ”

She smiled back a little. “Wh-what do you want me to do?” she asked bluntly. “W-we could go to your car and—”

*My car. So she hasn’t even got a place of her own.* The thought sickened him. How long had she been turning tricks in strange men’s cars?

“What’s your rate?” he asked, just as bluntly.

She didn’t bat an eye. “Sixty an hour.”

*Right. You wish. And you’d take sixty a night.* He raised an eyebrow, cynically. “Give me a break. That’s for somebody with a little more experience than you’ve got.”

She wilted faster than he expected. “Forty?” she said, tentatively.

He watched her over the top of his drink, as Trish belted out one of her own compositions, the notes sailing pure and clear above the crowd. “Sixty and forty. Okay, that makes a hundred. Let me tell you what you’re -going to do for a hundred.”

She looked frightened at that, and she might have tried to get up and run except that he was between her and the door. He wondered if she’d gotten an “offer” like this before. And if she’d gotten away relatively undamaged.

Yes to the first question, from the look of fear in her eyes—and no to the second. It was all he could do to keep up the pretense; to keep from grabbing her hand and dragging her to his car, and taking her straight to Keighvin.

“No, I’m not a cop,” he told her; “and I’m not going to bust you. I’m not into S and M and I’m not going to hurt you.” A little of the fear left her eyes, but not all of it, not by any means. “*I am a pushover.*”

He looked up long enough to signal Julie with his eyes. She hustled over to his table as soon as she’d set down the other customer’s beer. Tannim’s tips were legendary in the River Street bars and restaurants, and that legend ensured him downright eager service.

“Julie, I need four club sandwiches with everything—to go.” He nodded significantly and she winked at

him, turning and heading towards the kitchen with the order. He turned back to Tania.

“Okay, that’s a hundred dollars for tonight; the first time. You take it, you go home if you’ve got one. You get off the damn street, at least for tonight. You get a room if you don’t have a home.” He slid the five twenties he fished out of his wallet across to her. She looked at them, but didn’t touch them. “Use what I gave you for seed money; start putting a real life together for yourself. I come here a lot. You find me here and ask me for help, you get another hundred to keep you going—but only if you aren’t doing drugs. Believe me, I can tell if you are, better than any blood-test. Got that?”

She was just inexperienced enough to believe him, and experienced enough to be skeptical. “So what do you get out of this?”

He smiled crookedly. “I stop having to rescue you from drunks. *Itold* you I was a pushover.” He sobered. “Tania, it’s harder to keep believing in dreams these days—but when you stop believing in them, you kind of stop believing in yourself. I still believe in them. And I’m just crazy enough to think that giving an underage hooker a hundred bucks just might make a difference to her. Maybe give her a chance to go out and build some dreams of her own.”

“I’m not under—” she started to protest frantically.

He covered her hand, the one that was holding the cash, with his, just for a moment. “And you can start by not lying to me. Kiddo, you’re underage even in Tennessee, and we both know it. Now there; one crazy, helping hand. This time, I pushed help off on you. Next time, you ask for help. All right?”

She nodded, speechless, as Julie arrived with the sandwiches. “Julie,” he said, as he shoved the brown paper bag towards Tania, “I want you to start a tab for Tania here. Two hundred bucks’ credit, food only. Put it on the card.”

“Sure thing, Tanim,” the waitress replied, plucking his credit card from his outstretched fingers, and flashing a sparkling smile. She winked at Tania, who clutched the paper bag with a dumbfounded look on her face, looking for all the world like a kid in a Halloween costume.

*Yeah. “Trick” or treat. Poor kid.*

“Now, you get hungry, you come here,” he ordered. “Even if I’m not here, you can get fed. Okay?”

“O—okay,” she said, letting go of the bag long enough to shove her money into her cheap vinyl purse.

He grinned again. “Go on, get out of here. It’s getting nasty out there, and I don’t just mean the weather.” She whisked herself out of the chair, threading the crowd like a lithe little ferret, and vanished into the darkness beyond the door. Sam returned almost immediately.

“What the hell was all that about?” he asked, sitting himself down in the chair Tania had vacated.

Tanim sighed. “The first step in building trust,” he replied. “I just put up a bird-feeder. If I’m really lucky, one of these days the bird will eat from my hand. That’s when I can get her back to where she belongs—or over to Keighvin, whichever seems better for her.”

Sam shook his head dubiously. “I don’t know. You gave her money, didn’t you? What’s to stop her from blowing it all on drugs?”

“Nothing,” Tannim admitted. “Nothing, except that she doesn’t do drugs, yet. Kid like that probably doesn’t turn more than a couple of tricks a week. I just gave her enough to stay off the street for a while, maybe even more than a week, and promised her more if she asks for it.” Julie brought back his card and the credit slip; he signed it, and added a sizable tip for her. “And this gives her a two-hundred-dollar food tab here.”

Sam frowned. “You’re a fool, boy. She’s going to be on you like a leech.”

He let out some of his tension in a long breath. “I don’t think so,” he replied. “I know . . . I don’t have a real reason to think that way, but I don’t think she’s hardened enough to see a potential sugar-daddy and snag him. And even if she did—well, I could insist she come stay with me, and hand her over to Keighvin that way. Frankly, Sam, I’m more worried she’ll vanish on me; decide I’m some kind of nut, the Savannah Zodiac killer or something, and never come near me again.” He looked up again at the stage, where Trish had just begun “The Parting Glass,” a sure sign that the gig was over, at least for her. The rest of the band might stay, but Trish was calling it a night. “Enough of this. That’s our signal to move along, Sam, and go find ourselves some dinner. How’s tandoori chicken with mango chutney and raita sound? Or lobster with macadamia nuts?”

Sam gave him a look of pure bewilderment. “What in hell are you talking about?” he asked.

“Dinner, Sam,” he replied, grinning with anticipation. “Pure gourmet craziness.”

“Sounds crazy, all right,” Sam said, as they wormed their way through the crowd, and out into the damp, fish--redolent air.

“Trust me, Sam,” he laughed, as the mist began to seep across the street, the precursor of one of Savannah’s odd, chin-high fogs. “Trish knows wine and food the way she knows music. It might be odd, but you won’t be -disappointed.”

Tania Jane Delaney slipped up the warped steps to the apartment she shared with five other kids, her heart in her mouth. The entrance to the upstairs apartments gaped like a toothless mouth when she’d arrived, dark and unfriendly. The light at the top of the stairs had gone out again—or somebody had broken or stolen the bulb—and she shivered with fear with each step she took. Jamie’d been beaten up and robbed twice by junkies; Laura’d had her purse snatched. If anybody knew she had money—if there was someone waiting for her at the top of the stairs—

But there wasn’t, this time, nor was there anyone standing between her and the door as she’d feared when she felt for the knob. She fumbled open the lock with hands that shook so hard her key-ring jingled. There were only three keys on it, and the little brass unicorn Meg had given her for good luck. One key for this place, and the two to the locks of the townhouse in North Carolina—

But she wouldn’t think of that.

There wasn’t anyone else in the apartment, which was all right. She really didn’t want to share Tannim’s largess with the other three kids that had the room with the kitchenette, anyway. They’d given her a hard time the last time she’d wanted to cook something, and she thought they were filching things from her shelf in the fridge. Not that there was much to filch, mostly, but there had been things she’d thought she had that came up missing. She and Laura and Jamie never *gavethem* any trouble over using the bathroom, and never had any problem with making sure there was paper and soap in there.

*Please, don't let them blow all their money on dope again, she pled with an uncaring God. The rent's due in three days, and old man March sent his kids to collect it last time. I think they could wad us up like Kleenex without even trying hard. They could throw us out on our asses and we couldn't do a thing about it.*

She'd already eaten one sandwich, feeling guilty, but too hungry to leave it alone. She hadn't eaten anything yesterday but a cup of yogurt she'd shoplifted. But that still meant Jamie and Laura had a sandwich and a half each, plus all the chips. There'd been a styrofoam cup of bean soup in there too, and cookies; she'd saved the cookies for Jamie and his sweet-tooth, but she drank the soup, sitting on a stone bench in Jackson Square, watching the fog roll in, listening to the far-away music coming from a bar somewhere. It had been awfully good soup.

Mother had never made soup like that. Mother never made soup at all; she bought it from a gourmet place. And when she bought it, she bought weird things, like cold gazpacho or miso, things that didn't taste like soup at all. When she wasn't on some kind of crazy diet with Father; that is. When Tania ran away, they'd been on one of those diets; some kind of stuff that looked like rice with things mixed into it, and tasted like hay. They'd made Tania eat it too, and she was hungry all the time. She'd have killed for a candy bar or a steak, or even a hamburger.

*"You only think about what tastes good," Mother had said, scornfully. "Just like every child."*

The only time Tania had eaten real soup was when she was little, and she got it at school or the learning center. It wasn't called a "day-care" center, it was a "learning center," and she'd had lessons stuffed into her every day for as long as she could remember. French, math, music . . . she hadn't gotten bedtime stories, she'd gotten flashcards. She hadn't gotten hugs, she'd gotten "quality time," with quizzes about how well she was doing in school.

*Like the Spanish Inquisition, with long talks about how if I really wanted to get into a first-class college like Yale I had to have better grades.*

She left the food on her roommates' sleeping beds. Jamie and Laura had an old mattress, with the seams popped and the stuffing coming out. It had been so stained that Tania would have been afraid to use it, because of germs, but they didn't seem to mind. They had a pile of cargo pads stolen from a moving van for bedding, all spread neatly on top of it, plus the blankets and sheets Laura had taken out of the Goodwill drop-box, all different sizes, none matching. Tania had two thin foam mattresses she'd gotten from the open dumpster at the old folks' home, piled on top of each other, and some of Laura's leftover sheets and blankets. Laura had thought the idea of using the egg-crate mattresses was too creepy; they wouldn't have been out in the dumpster if their owner hadn't died, probably *on* them. But the idea of ghosts didn't scare Tania; she'd taken them, hosed them down real good in case the old person had peed on them or something, and she hadn't been haunted yet. In fact, a ghost might be preferable to some of the people who hung out around here.

She went to the bathroom to wash the makeup off. The makeup, bleach-job, the whole outfit was Laura's idea, but she wasn't sure it was working. On the other hand, any tricks she got looking like the way she used to would be real pervs. The makeup at least made her look older, and the outfit like she knew what she was doing. But it itched, and if she didn't wash it off every night, she'd wake up looking like Tammy Faye Baker after a good scam-cry. She saw as soon as she pulled the chain on the bare bulb dangling from the ceiling that somebody had been by the Hilton again; the toilet-tank lid was covered with little bars of soap, and matching rolls of paper sat on the cracked and grimy brown linoleum. It was probably Laura; she was really good at sneaking in, finding an unattended maid's cart, and sneaking out

again. That was how they'd gotten their towels, too.

She ran some water into the sink, ignoring the rust that had stained the gray, grainy porcelain under both spigots. The hot water was actually hot tonight, and Tania decided impulsively on a bath. She had to clean the tub first, though, and by the time she was done, she was ready for a good long soak.

She went to the footlocker where she kept her things, got her tiny bottle of hotel shampoo, and discovered that there were lots more beside it. That clinched it; only Laura would have gotten shampoo for everybody. She silently blessed Laura as she stripped, hurrying because the apartment was cold. She ran some hot water into the tub to warm it, trying not to think about her beautiful, anti-septic, sparkling-clean private bathroom at home.

*It wasn't my home. It never was home. It was just a place to live. They probably didn't even miss me when I was gone; I bet they're glad I'm gone, in fact. Now they can buy another BMW or a Porsche and take a trip to Bermuda.*

She washed her hair under the tap, kneeling in the bottom of the chipped, scratched tub, then filled it to the top with water as hot as she could stand. Mother and Father had a Jacuzzi in their bathroom, but they'd never let Tania use it.

She sighed, and sank back into the hot water. She was so cold; when the fog came, it brought chilly air with it, and Spandex wasn't very warm. She'd been out longer than she'd intended after that strange guy gave her all the money. She'd stopped to watch *Legend* through the window of somebody's apartment after she'd eaten the soup; the unicorns had attracted her attention, and she stayed when there didn't seem to be anyone in the room who could see her peering in from outside.

*What a great movie.* Altogether, it had been a good night, and she felt a little happy for the first time in weeks. First there'd been the music at that bar, then the food the singer had gotten her, then the money for doing *nothing*. That would have been enough, but there was a two--hundred-dollar tab waiting for her, and she'd be able to get one good meal a day for all three of them until that ran out. She wasn't certain the guy was for real, but the tab was. It would be easy enough to avoid him, and still eat on his money.

The movie had put a cap on the night. She hadn't seen it when it was first out, Mother and Father hadn't permitted it. They didn't let her watch any TV at all except PBS, didn't let her see any movies, *ever*, but this had been one film they would have really tossed a hissyfit over.

*Fantasy.* They said it like it was a cuss-word. If Meg's parents hadn't been one of Mother's clients, they'd have made her throw out the unicorn keychain. She wasn't -allowed to read anything but schoolbooks, listen to anything but classical music, but *fantasy* was the ultimate slime, so far as they were concerned. She'd managed to read some at school, by keeping the books from the school library in her locker, along with the unicorn poster Meg gave her, and the dragon calendar. She'd also had a little cache of books she'd hidden under the springs of her bed, books Meg gave her when she was through with them, books full of unicorns, elves, magic . . . and that turned out to be a major mistake. Mother had found them.

*You'd have thought it was kiddie-porn, she thought, angry and unhappy all at the same time. Or drugs. You'd have thought they were Fundies and the books were about demon-worship.*

The way they'd carried on had been horrible; not yelling, no, yelling would have been a relief. No, instead they lectured her, in relays. About how the stuff was going to ruin her mind for logical thinking;

about how it was wasting time she could have been using on extra-credit stuff to boost her grades and give her an edge. How they felt betrayed. How if the colleges found out she read this stuff, they'd never let her in. On and on and on—

And then they took it and her into the living room and burned the books in the trendy gas-log fireplace, right in front of her.

“No living in a dream-world for you, Tania,” Father had said, as he fed the brightly colored books to the flames. “It’s time to wake up to the real world.”

*Well, I’m in the real world now, Father,* she thought at him, her eyes stinging. *It’s more real than yours.*

They hadn’t been able to do much to her, other than spend every minute they had to spare lecturing her. What could they do, after all? She wasn’t allowed to “waste” her time on clubs, boyfriends, hobbies, music for pleasure—the only time she was ever outside the townhouse was when she was at school or at her after-school lessons: ballet on Monday, piano on Wednesday, tennis on Saturday. She didn’t *like* any of those outside lessons; they couldn’t punish her by taking any of them away. She didn’t have any friends but Meg, she wasn’t *allowed* to have any friends but Meg, and she only saw Meg on Saturday, at the club for tennis lessons.

Then she found one Saturday that there was still one thing they could do. They moved her lesson, from Saturday morning, to Saturday afternoon. She’d lost even Meg’s tenuous friendship.

They told her Friday night. That was when she decided to run away.

Father always accused her of being unable to plan ahead, of forgetting about the future. *Well, he was wrong.*

She knew the combination of the safe, and how much money her parents kept in it. She went to it by the light of a tiny flashlight, opened it, and counted . . . she didn’t dare take too much, or they might miss it if they happened to need money for something on Saturday, but she made sure she had enough for the fare. Then she packed her tennis bag, taking everything she could fit into it, stuffing it and her purse to bursting. Father was on the way to New York, Mother was seeing a friend of Meg’s father, helping him find a house for a relocating veep. She did things like that for her clients; that was why she got so many accounts.

*Too bad she didn’t do things like that for her kid. Or maybe I was like a “declining account” to her.*

When Mother dropped her off at the club, she’d gone around to the kitchen instead of to her lesson. She asked one of the busboys how to get to the city bus, figuring they’d know, if anyone would.

It was easier than she’d thought; many of the employees at the club used the bus as their primary transportation. She’d taken the city bus downtown, and from there it was a simple matter to get to the Greyhound depot. Before the four-hour tennis lesson was over, she was on her way to Savannah. There was no special reason to go there, it was just a place somewhere, anywhere, else. She’d picked it more-or-less at random, figuring if she hadn’t known in advance where she was going neither would her parents. Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, vanished behind her.

*If Father’d been more like Tanim. . .* She let a little more hot water into the tub, and sank back with



a wistful sigh.

Money didn't last as long as she'd thought it would. Really, she didn't have any idea how much things cost. She made the mistake of buying a couple of nylon bags and a lot of t-shirts and things to wear so she didn't look so conspicuous. By the time she reached Savannah, she was down to her last twenty dollars, and desperate. The bus arrived after midnight, and had dumped her out on the street, cold and scared. Afraid to hang around the bus terminal, she'd wandered the streets, jumping at every shadow, expecting to get mugged at any moment.

That was when Jamie found her; she found out later he'd just turned a really good trick, and was a little high, and feeling very generous and expansive. All *she* knew was that this really cute guy came up to her, as she was sitting on a bench in some kind of little park, and looked at her kind of funny. Then he'd said, "You're in trouble, aren't you?" and offered her a place to stay.

If she hadn't been so exhausted, she'd have been horrified by the awful apartment. The place was musty, full of mildew, with stained ceilings where leaks had sprung. Two rooms, on the top floor of an old, unpainted building so rickety that it leaned. No furniture, cracks in all the walls, carpeting with about a hundred years of dirt ground into it, bugs crawling everywhere—she'd never seen a place like it before.

Laura had been waiting, and when she saw that Jamie'd brought Tania with him, she started to yell at him. But then she'd taken a second look, and just gave Tania a couple of blankets and a pillow, and said they'd talk in the morning.

They talked, all right. Or rather, Tania talked. When she was through, Jamie'd looked at Laura, and Laura had nodded slowly. "All right," Laura had said. "Y'all can stay. But y'all gotta pay your own share. We ain't got anythin' t' spare a-tall."

She'd thought it would be easy. She didn't know that no one was going to hire a fourteen-year-old with no experience, no phone, and no transportation. Not when there were so many SCAD students looking for jobs. After a week of filling out applications and getting turned down, she was getting desperate. If Laura and Jamie threw her out—

She asked Laura to get her a job whereshe worked. That was when Laura laughed, and told her what she, Jamie, and the other kids sharing the apartment did all night. And offered to show her how.

"It's easy," Laura'd said cynically, in her thick, Georgia-cracker accent. "They pay y' forty bucks, and y' just lie there. Half hour, and it's over, an' ya go find another john."

She'd had sex education; she knew about all of it, from contraceptives to AIDs. As desperate as she'd been, she hadn't thought it would be that bad.

So she'd been deflowered by some guy in the back seat of his car and gotten forty bucks out of the experience; he hadn't even known she'd been a virgin. It had hurt a lot, but she soaked away the pain in the bathtub, and went out the next night. After a while it stopped hurting—physically.

*It could have been worse*, she told herself. In fact, she'd been incredibly lucky, and she knew it. There were guys who hung around the bus station waiting for kids like her; they'd offer a place to stay, and the next thing the kid knew, she was hooked and he was her pimp. Jamie saved her from that, anyway. At least she wasn't doing drugs, her money was her own, and she could make her johns wear rubbers.

She sat up a little in the tub, thinking she heard the key in the lock. But no, it wasn't Laura or Jamie. It

was getting awfully late, and she was beginning to worry.

Especially about Jamie. *He'd* started using drugs; he'd always smoked a little grass, hell, he was high when she'd met him. But she was pretty sure he'd been doing something harder than grass, lately, and she was afraid it was crack.

She couldn't blame him, in a way. She'd naively assumed that he was getting picked up by women the way she and Laura were hooking with men. Then she'd seen him in a car with one of his johns . . . and later, down on Bull Street, with the other cute young boys, cruising for -another customer. Male customers.

"I'm not a fag," he'd said fiercely, when she mentioned she'd seen him. "I'm *not*. I'm straight, I'm just making the rent, okay? It doesn't mean anything."

"Okay," she'd said hurriedly, "I believe you." And didn't bother to tell him that it didn't matter to her if he was gay or straight. Her father had referred to one of her Fine Art Appreciation teachers as "queer as a football bat," and she'd always liked *him*. What mattered was that Jamie was careful; that he made sure all his johns wore rubbers, the way she did, and that he stayed *safe*. That he didn't start on heavy drugs, like the kids in the other room.

Because she'd seen what happened when you got hooked. Especially the guys; they wound up going to a pimp, one who'd keep them stoned all the time and take all their money, and when they got stoned, they weren't so careful anymore.

Laura wasn't much better about taking chances. When Tania did anything besides in the guy's car, she never went anywhere with a guy except a motel room, and then she'd meet him there, and if he wasn't alone, she'd leave. She wouldn't do kinky stuff, either. Laura did things Tania never would; Laura took chances all the time.

But Laura was a lot tougher than Tania.

*You'd have to be tough to take what she did. Getting raped by your stepdad, then thrown out of the house for telling . . . her mom saying she was a slut, and that she lied about it all. . . . I guess she figures she hasn't got a lot to lose. Except Jamie, I guess.*

Laura spilled the same story every time she came home drunk, which was about once a week, even though she wasn't more than sixteen. Jamie didn't talk about *his* past. Tania figured it must have been worse than Laura's; sometimes she'd wake up and hear Jamie crying, hear Laura comforting him. She'd seen him nude a lot, and there were scars all over his body.

Tania was getting all wrinkly, like a raisin; she got out of the water reluctantly, and pulled the plug. As she watched the water run down the drain, making a little whirlpool, she remembered the PBS show bit about how you could tell what hemisphere you were in whether the whirlpool ran clockwise or counterclockwise.

Gravity, Coriolis forces . . . her life was running out like the water. It was so hard to think of anything but the next trick, hard to plan past making the rent.

She used to have dreams, plans. When she first ran away, she was going to get a job, maybe learn to be a model . . . or get into a tech school and learn computers . . . or maybe see if her art teachers were right about her being good at drafting. These days, she watched the SCAD students with a kind of dull hatred.

They had it all, and they didn't even know it. How *dared* they pretend they were so tortured, so tormented by art? They didn't know what torture was.

Torture was coming home with cigarette burns on your arms, like Laura; having scars all over your body, like Jamie.

Torture was running fifteen blocks with a guy chasing you, hoping you knew a way to get away from him -before he beat you up and took your money. Torture was not having enough to eat, ever; worrying about getting kicked out onto the street because the junkies in the next room couldn't afford their share of the rent.

Tannim had talked about having dreams. What had happened to hers?

She pulled on an oversized t-shirt and curled up in her blankets, waiting for the others to get home. Next week was the end of the month and the bookstores would strip books of their covers, turn in the covers for credit, and pitch the stripped pages into the dumpster. There might be some fantasy or science fiction in there, if she got there early enough. There had been, last month.

If she couldn't live on her own dreams, she'd take other people's. That would do. She thought again about that black-and-white TV she'd seen for ten bucks at the Goodwill store; maybe she could get it with a little of the hundred dollars. . . .

Meanwhile she'd wait for Laura and Jamie to get home, make sure they ate the food she'd brought, make sure they were all right.

They were all the family she had.

She must have dozed off, because she woke up with a start to the sounds of the kids in the other room coming in, all three together, higher than anything. Joe and Tonio were all over each other, and Honi kept telling them to hush in a voice louder than their giggles. Tania didn't know if Honi was a boy or a girl; Honi had awfully big hands and feet for a girl, and a prominent Adam's apple, but she never wore anything but tight black skirts and pumps and fishnet hose out on the street—and this grubby old bathrobe with tatty marabou trim at home.

Joe and Tonio were, according to Jamie, “queer as football bats.” Odd that Jamie and her father used the same expression. They said they were lovers, but whenever they got drunk—as opposed to high—they beat each other up something awful. Laura and Jamie ignored them, but Tania always stayed hidden in bed when they started on each other that way.

She glanced over at the other bed, almost by reflex, and saw one lump in it, with long, fire-red hair. Laura.

“Jeezus, ah wish the hail them queers'd take it outside,” came a loud groan from the lump. Laura had deliberately made it loud enough for the others to hear, and Tonio just giggled harder.

“But baaaby it's coold outside,” Joe shrieked, and by the thump, fell onto the sleeping-bags he shared with Tonio. The overhead bulb went out in the other room, leaving the harsh light from the cracked ceramic lamp in the corner of their room as the only source of -illumination.

Laura sat up, shaking her hair out of her eyes, and peered through the doorway into the other room. “Weahll, theah goes the rent,” she said glumly. Tania pulled her blankets back and sat up too, her heart sinking.

But then Laura took a second look. The trio in the other room were already snoring. “Or mebbe not,” she said thoughtfully, and slipped out of her bed to creep quietly into the other room.

She came back with a handful of something. “Damnfools didn’t spend it all, this tayhme,” she said grimly. “Got thutty from Tonio’s pants, foahy from Honi, an’ twenny from Joe. I got foahy put by. How ’bout you?”

Tania dug into her purse and came up with Tanim’s five twenties, handing them over without a qualm. After all, she didn’t have to worry about eating for a while.

Laura looked at her with a dumbstruck expression on her face. “Whut in hail did y’all do, gal?” she asked. “Ah found the sammiches. You go to a pahty, or didja get a delivery kid?”

Tania giggled, and shook her head. “No,” she said, and the story of the strange guy in the bar spilled out under Laura’s prodding. But to her surprise, Laura wasn’t pleased.

“Jee-zus!” the girl finally exploded, tossing her tangled hair over her shoulders. “Whut in hail didja thank you was doin’? This ain’t no fairy tale, girl! Man don’ give away money foah nothin’! You ain’t gonna go back theah, are you?”

“Not while *he*’s there,” she replied, resentfully. “But the tab’s real, Laura; I saw the charge slip. I think we oughta eat it up before he changes his mind—”

Laura wasn’t convinced, and she scowled, then interrupted her. “That’s ’nother thang, now ah’m glad I didn’ eat them sammiches—he prolly put dope in there. First taste is free, but—”

“Laura, they came straight out of the *kitchen*. He didn’t touch them! Kevin Barry’s is straight-edge, you dummy, they wouldn’t do anything like that!” At Laura’s continued scowl, she added, “Besides, I already ate one, and it was okay.”

“*Jeezus*, ” the older girl said explosively. Then, “I reckon it’s all right. But don’ go near him agin, you heah me? He’s prolly a pimp, all that crap ’bout dreams and do-good bull. Only dreams man like that has come in white powdah, or lil’ brown rocks. He jest wantsta get you off, get you stoned, an then he’s got you.”

Tania sighed, and bowed her head in acquiescence. It would have been nice to have somewhere to go for help. She had vague memories of a dream, where Tanim was some kind of warrior, in leather and blue jeans, and he fought monsters to protect her. . . .

But this wasn’t a fairy tale or a movie; Laura was right. Nobody gave money away for free, and dreams had a way of vanishing when the rent needed to be paid. Laura was nibbling tentatively at a corner of one of the sandwiches, as if she expected to bite into something dangerous.

That much was real, anyway. Food today, and food for the next week or so, and just twenty more dollars from Jamie and the rent would be paid up.

“Where’s Jamie?” she asked, and Laura stopped chewing. Her scowl turned to a frown of worry.

“Ah don’ know—” she began, and then they heard the rattle of a key in the lock. From the sound of it, Jamie was having a hard time finding the lock.

When he stumbled through the darkened outer room, it was obvious why. He was even higher than the others had been. But this was a manic kind of high that made Tania sick inside. There was booze on his breath, but that wasn’t all.

*Crack. He’s been smoking crack.*

She sat in dumb silence, while Laura scolded him out of his clothes and into bed, holding out one of the remaining sandwiches. But even she went silent at the sight of rope burns on his wrists.

“Whut happened?” she asked, after a long pause. Jamie laughed and snorted.

“I did a party, baby. There was a birthday, and I was the favor. They got a little rough, but they made it up to me.” He snatched at the sandwich she held, and -devoured it before she could say anything; dove into the bag and got the cookies and ate them, then the second sandwich.

*How? With dope and booze? Or did he get that after?*

“How many?” Laura asked, finally, flatly. He gave her an owl-like stare, as the food made him sleepy.

“I don’ know,” he replied, his words slurring. “Four. Five. I wanta sleep.”

“Did you make ’em use rubbers?” she snarled, as he lay down. When he didn’t respond, she shook him. “-Answer me, dammit!*Did you?*”

“Yeah. Sure. I’m gonna sleep now.” And he pushed her away. He didn’t so much fall asleep as pass out.

Frantic now, Laura scabbled through his pockets, turning them out on the cargo-blanket and pawing through them. A pocket-knife, a butterfly-knife, assorted change. Keys. Three crumpled twenties. Gum wrappers and half a pack of gum.

Three condoms.

“He went out with six,” Laura whispered, her voice tight with fear. “He had six.”

Six; three gone—but Jamie had said there were four or five johns. And he had been at a party; no telling how many times each.

Laura started to cry, tears streaking her face with cheap mascara, rent money lying forgotten on the bed.

Tania went to her, hugged her, and held her, rocking, not able to say anything, only able to be there.

“It’s all right,” she said, meaninglessly. “It’s all right. We’ll take care of him in the morning, okay? It’ll be all right. This isn’t the first time this has happened, and he was all right before.”

“Yeah,” Laura sobbed, “but—”

“If they had the Plague, they wouldn’t have partied together, right?” she said, trying come up with something that could soothe Laura’s fears—and*not* mentioning her own.

*Like, what if they had it and didn’t know yet. Or what if they all had it and didn’t care?*

“But—” Laura couldn’t get the rest out through her tears.

“Look. Whatever happens, we’ll take care of it,” she said, holding Laura and rocking her. “We will. We’ll take care of it together.”

## CHAPTER SIX

George Beecher sighed, pulled his raincoat a little tighter against the damp chill, and lit another cigarette. He moved out of the shadows, walking a little farther along the riverfront, and leaned on one of the cutesy gaslights, staring out at the river as if he was watching for -something.

He was, but it wasn’t out on the river—which you -really couldn’t see much of because of the creeping fog. What he wanted was inside that building behind him, in warmth and laughter and candlelight.

Well, the only way he was going to earn some of that for himself was to park out here, in the dark, fog and cold. And wait.

A lot of what a P.I. did was wait, although for the life of him, he couldn’t imagine why the gal who’d hired him had wanted her hubby followed. Or what she figured he was doing on his nights out. He hadn’t done anything at all this whole evening. He’d thought she was a little odd when the boss first talked to her; now he was sure of it.

The guy had shown up at the Irish bar, like she’d said he would—but it wasn’t with a chippie, like he’d expected; it was with an old man, a guy that had that “white-collar worker” look about him. Retired white-collar. Nothing untoward there, either, the old guy was as straight as they came; George had a knack for picking out the bent ones no matter how far in the closet they’d buried themselves. The young guy just had an odd friend, that was all. No big deal. Plenty of guys were buddies with old guys—maybe this was somebody he’d worked with before the old man retired.

They’d listened to the band—along with the rest of the bar. The guy—kid, almost—hadn’t even had anything to drink; it had looked to George like he’d stuck to cola the whole time.

Then a chippie*had* shown up, a free-lancer, and way out of place for the bar. For a little bit, it had looked like he was going to get a bite; the guy’d come real close to getting into a fight over the underage hooker.

But the fight never materialized. The rest of the -patrons bounced the drunk, and the guy George was following had taken the kid back to his table. The old guy left them alone.

Once again, it started to look like pay-dirt, but he’d just talked to the kid; then got the girl some food, maybe passed her some money, then turned her loose. And when he and the old guy left, it wasn’t to go party with the chick—it was to this second-floor restaurant.

They'd been there for hours. The girl had evaporated.

Nobody in his right mind would give a hooker cash and expect her to be waiting for him after dinner. Either the guy was really crazy, or—

Or the guy was a pushover for a sob story. Stupid, but nothing you could prosecute in a court of law. Unless wifey was planning on getting him committed. . . .

You'd need a lot more than giving a panhandling kid some dough to get a guy committed. He hadn't even started the fight in the bar back there—and he'd hardly laid a finger on the drunk. You'd need some serious shit to lock a guy up; some evidence that he was being more than just a pushover for a sob story, something really crazy. So far the guy hadn't obliged at all.

What was more, he didn't look as if he had enough money to make locking him up a profitable deal. He had a nice classic car, yeah, but nothing wildly spectacular, no Ferrarri, no fancy clothes, and he wasn't parading around with high-class types.

On the other hand, he *had* flashed a Gold Card. And he *was* eating in a gourmet place. A lot of millionaires didn't look or act the part. Maybe—

Well, it wasn't George's business what she did with the information he got her. All he had to do was follow the dude around, and make his report, take his pictures. He'd gotten one of the guy with the old guy, and one going into the restaurant. Funny thing had happened; every time he wanted to get a pic of the guy with the hooker, somebody had gotten in the way. He had only his verbal report, and a picture of the kid as she came out of the bar.

No matter. Wifey would have what he'd gotten. Whatever she did with the full report after he turned it in was her own affair.

He dropped the cigarette on the cobblestones, ground it under his heel, and lit another. It was going to be a two-box night from the looks of it.

Aurilia nic Morrigan leaned over her stark ebony desk and flipped through the pages of the last detective agency's report one more time, frowning. This perusal, like the last, yielded nothing she could use. Bruning Incorporated certainly hadn't come up with much in three weeks of following Tannim around; hopefully the new agency she had hired would be a little more resourceful.

She slapped the folder closed, petulantly, and stared at her perfectly manicured nails. Aurilia wanted Keighvin Silverhair shredded, scattered over at least a continent, preferably by those same perfectly manicured nails. But Keighvin had formidable protections, and at least the grudging backing of Elfhame Fairgrove. She and Vidal Dhu were the only Folk of the local Unseleighe Court who wanted Keighvin's skin; they had *no* backing if it came to an all-out war instead of minor skirmishing. So she and Vidal were reduced to hide-in-corner strategies; one thing she had never been particularly good at. Right now, the only way to get Keighvin, at least so far as she could tell, was through this "Tannim" character. The problem was, she had discovered that beneath a veneer of commonly known information, there wasn't *anything* to give her a clue to the human's nature.

She sighed, tossed the bound folder onto the filing cabinet, and stretched her arms over her head, slowly. The beige suede screens that walled her off from the rest of the room were hardly more than a

few feet away, just barely out of reach. There was very little in her tiny -office-cubicle besides the desk, the filing-cabinet and the black leather chair she sat in—but unlike humans, she and her associates didn't need much in the way of paper records. The single three-drawer filing-cabinet served all their needs for storage, and all of one and a half drawers was taken up with reports on Fairgrove and the personnel there. The records for Adder's Fork Studios filled barely half of the bottom drawer.

But Adder's Fork didn't need much in the way of -paper-trails and record-keeping. Customers came to find *them*, not the other way around. There was no need to go to any effort to keep track of accounting; payment was -always in advance, cash only. And if the IRS or any other busy-body agency came looking for them, their agents would find—nothing.

Customers, on the other hand, could always reach them. Vidal saw to that.

*Supply and demand*, Aurilia mused, a little smile playing about her lips. *A small market, but a loyal one. And one with few options to go elsewhere. . . .*

She stood up, walking around the discreet beige partition to the space taken up by the studio. It was a good thing they didn't need to hire outside secretarial help. A mundane secretary would never be able to handle the environment.

Nearest to the office was the newest sound-stage. Tiny, by Hollywood standards, but quite adequate for the job, it looked very much like an old-fashioned doctor's office. Aurilia looked the new set over again, and decided it wasn't quite menacing enough. There was a definite overall impres-sion of threat, but the customers weren't terribly bright sometimes; they needed things pointed out.

*Circles, arrows, and underlings.*

She considered the doctor's examining table. The next film would be a period piece, of the 1800s, re-enacting a series of incidents that had taken place during the Chicago World's Fair. With liberal embellishments. The kind their customers really appreciated.

The lead character—one could hardly call him a "hero"—in this movie was a physician who had used the activity and bustle caused by the Fair to cover his own activities. He had lured in young women new to the city by advertising for secretaries, and offering a room above his office as an added incentive. With the Fair in full swing, rooms had been at a premium and were very expensive even in the poorest parts of town. Doctors were respected professionals—and in any case, he (supposedly) did not actually live in the same building as his office. Many young women applied whenever he posted his advertisement.

He only chose select individuals, however. Pretty girls, but ones with no family, or very far from home. Girls with no friends, and especially, no boyfriends. Girls with quiet, submissive natures.

He would scientifically discover their weaknesses, play upon them, and eventually, lure them down into his "special office," with the hidden door. Among other things, he had performed hack-abortions before he had hit on the secretarial scheme. Some of those secret patients had been his victims. It had been no problem to have any number of surprises concealed within the building; it had been constructed from his own plans. Once hidden behind the soundproof walls, he would overpower his girls with chloro-form, then strap them to a special examining table—

And once he was finished with them—or even at the climax of his pleasures—he would behead them, with a special device he mounted onto the table.



The bodies he disposed of in various ways, none traceable at the time. Aurilia reflected that he had really been very clever, for a human. His downfall had come when he overestimated his invulnerability and grew careless, choosing a girl he thought fit the profile—who didn't.

But that was not what concerned the studio. They would use only the barest bones of the original story—and it certainly would not end in the doctor's capture.

Indeed, they were going to take extreme liberties in the matter of the victims' ages. None would be over the age of sixteen. Most would be nine to thirteen, or at least, would look that young. Vidal already had several girls in mind, and there would, of course, be many constructs used to fill out the cast. Aurilia was considering a second version, employing young boys instead of girls, and a female "doctor"—or even a third and fourth with same-sex pairings. After all, why waste a perfectly good set?

But right now that set still needed a few modifications. Aurilia considered the examining table carefully. She couldn't make the restraints any more obvious. Perhaps—

Perhaps a change of color.

She reached out with her magic, and touching the aluminum with the hand of a lover, stroked the surface of the table, darkening, it, dulling the shiny, stainless surface and changing its substance, until the table top had become a slab of dark gray marble.

That did it. That was exactly the touch the set had needed. Now the table called up images of ancient sacrificial altars, without the mind quite realizing it, or wondering why.

Of course, after the first victim, the audience would know what the table was for, and would simply be waiting for the "doctor" to lure another victim to his lair.

But the little touches and attention to detail was what had made Adder's Fork the leading producers of S and M, kiddie-porn, and snuf-films in the business. There was true artistry involved, and centuries of expertise.

*Hmm. Perhaps an Aztec theme for the next group. Wasn't there a sect where the sacrifice was first shared by all the participants?*

Aurilia busied herself with the rest of the set, checking the apparatus and the camera and sound set-ups, making certain that everything was in place for the shoot tomorrow. It was ironic that both the Unseleighe Court and the Seleighe Court had the same problem in dealing with the modern world. They both had to earn real money.

Different motives, and different ends, but the same needs. For Aurilia, Vidal, and Niall, it was money to pay for the private detectives and to buy property. Money to buy arms to ship to both sides of a fight, be it a simple gang-war or full-fledged terrorism. Money to bribe officials, or those whose power was not official but no less real. True money from human hands, not magic-made duplicates, for the underworld was cannier than the rest of human society and would catch such tricks quickly. The underworld preferred bills in denominations of less than a hundred dollars; preferred old, worn money rather than newly printed. They would not accept money with sequential numbers. The time it would take to gather single, old bills and duplicate them, or to duplicate a single, old bill and make enough changes in it to make every copy look different, was better spent in ways that simply earned that amount of money.

*There are times in the humans' world when it is simpler and easier to do without magic.*

That had left Aurilia with a few problems of logistics, but nowhere near as many as her opponents were forced to cope with. The Seleighe Court fools limited their ways of earning cash to legitimate means. Fools they were, because “legitimate” and “constricted” were one and the same. And when one reduced one’s options, one halved one’s income.

Anything illegal was *far* more profitable than anything legal. And, for all of its difficulties, moving and working in the shadow world of the underground was much simpler than coping with all the regulations and laws of the “honest citizen.”

Look at everything Keighvin had gone through to establish Fairgrove Industries, for instance. He’d created something that could function totally within human parameters, and yet leave the nonhumans free to work. Resourceful he was, indeed, and though she hated him passionately, Aurilia could admire that much about him.

Whereas Adder’s Fork had required only three things once Aurilia and Vidal had arrived at a plan; kenning an airplane and all the equipment they needed, making an underworld contact adept at forging records and getting their electronic copies into the proper systems, and installing a Gate into Underhill inside the plane.

The plane, a C-130 cargo craft, had taken six months to duplicate and another to modify so that it no longer looked like the craft it had been copied from. The lines had been subtly changed, and the color turned to a light blue that blended in very well with the open sky. Being able to work Underhill had helped; magical energy was much more readily available there. But they had not been able to create the craft exactly; in point of fact, there was no iron or steel anywhere in it, it had no engine, and never needed refueling on mortal aviation gas. That was both an advantage and a disadvantage. There was nothing to break down, and they could land and take off from anywhere, at any time, but they dared not let inspectors or anyone with more than a cursory knowledge of aircraft anywhere near it. That flaw made a dreadful hole in their defenses. Aurilia would have liked a real engine—but the Unseleighe Court shared their rivals’ “allergy” to Cold Iron. How Keighvin and his crew could bear to work so near it was a mystery to her. And if they ever broke through the Fairgrove defenses, Cold Iron and humans wielding it would without a doubt be Keighvin’s second line of defense. That was fine . . . she had a syringe of human blood with iron filings ready to inject into Keighvin when she had him. It would be very entertaining to watch his reactions to that.

But for that single technical flaw—the authenticity of the aircraft—Adder’s Fork was completely in the clear. Gold coins—kenned copies of genuine Krugerrands—had bought the records for plane and pilots, and had bought the human who inserted those records into the humans’ computers. More coins, sold one at a time to dealers, had rented equipment long enough for Unseleighe Court mages to ken it. Aurilia had stock-piled many favors over the course of several hundred years; she cashed them all in on this venture.

Then it had only required time. Time to reproduce complicated gear and make sure that it worked; time to build the studio Underhill. Time to make more contacts in the human underworld, offering the kind of product certain humans would literally bankrupt themselves to own.

Adder’s Fork did simple porn movies at first—well, relatively simple. All of their pictures had real, if -unadorned, plots, and most involved the occult. And -every Adder’s Fork film involved pain, bondage, S and M; these things raised power, energy the humans never used, -energy that would ordinarily have gone to waste, so in addition to bringing in human money, the filming itself was a potent source of power. The favors Aurilia had cashed in were quickly replaced by other favors owed as the denizens of Underhill vied to be in at the filming, acting either on Vidal’s direction as camera operators or other technicians, or

as extras, if they were attractive enough. Not every creature of the Unseleighe Court was a boggle or troll. Some, like Aurilia and Vidal, were as lovely as any High Court elven lord or lady.

Now that they had both studios up and running, they still did produce that simpler sort of film, for over in Studio One, they'd finished one such film tonight. Agay--bondage party using the Caligula set, to be precise; one with a simple plot that was close to the reality of the situation—a group hires a strip-tease entertainer for the birthday-boy, then they all decide to take things a little farther. The “party-favor” had been a very pretty young male hooker, dark-haired and dreamy-eyed, who Aurilia thought they might use again some time. He was the only one who hadn't known the “party” was being filmed; he'd been plied with liquor at the bar where he had been picked up, and drugged in the cab on the way here. The set was a discreet one, the cameras mounted behind mirrors. The other five men, old customers, had been recruited with a cash bonus and a promise of whatever they wanted from the company catalog.

That was a formidable promise, and one that might have lured them more than the money. One thing that Adder's Fork had that no other pornshop possessed was an unbreak-able copy-guard. Adder's Fork tapes could not be duplicated; attempts would only result in both tapes' signals breaking up—thanks to a special spell in the Underhill duplicating room. There was a warning to that effect at the front of each tape—and every time Aurilia received a request for a copy of something that duplicated an order to the same address, she smiled. Certain humans never could believe that there was something they couldn't get around.

*High-tech meets high magic—and loses.*

A more economic way to make ends meet. She considered her solution to the cash-flow problem to be just as clever and creative as Keighvin's. And far less work. His setup had taken decades to establish; hers mere months. His was rooted to one spot, and if there were ever troubles, he would have to vanish with no other recourse. Hers was as mobile as her “plane,” for it did not matter where the Gate was located in the here-and-now of the humans' world, so long as it was rooted in something large enough to serve as an anchor. It was useful to have the studios Underhill, especially Studio Two. Screams couldn't penetrate the Gate, and even more Unseleighe Court creatures were vying for a chance to serve as extras in the films Two produced. Adder's Fork Studios had always been known for high-quality porn, but the Studio Two films, snuff-pictures with emphasized occult and satanic themes, really had the customers begging for more.

The customers raved about the “special effects,” and it was not the deaths they were talking about. Vidal's careful camera work, showing every nuance of the snuff and lingering on the corpse afterwards, so that the customer could see for himself that it was neither moving nor breathing, made sure the customers knew they had gotten what they paid for. Most of the dead were magical constructs, who lived and breathed only long enough to scream and die, but there were enough true human deaths—and -human reactions of fear and pain—to satisfy both the customers and the thirsts of Aurilia and her partners. No, the customers were talking about the “monsters” and “demons” that participated in the sexual rituals, and usually accounted for half of the deaths. Little did the clients know that these “monsters” were not humans in makeup and prostheses, but the Unseleighe Court creatures who thronged Aurilia's auditions every time she cast a picture.

And no one ever went away disappointed. Whoever didn't get on camera, got to help dispose of the corpse when Vidal didn't need it anymore. *Maybe we ought to film that next time. . . .* The Chicago doctor in this version was going to be a satanist as well, and at the moment when the police broke down his door, would summon a demon to carry him to (presumed) safety. On second thought, Aurilia decided to leave the script the way it was, with nothing other than the rituals and the half-seen hints of “the Master,” with the supernatural actually entering the picture only at the end. Save all the limb-chewing for

the next flick.

It was ironic, Aurilia thought, that human religious fanatics seemed convinced that there were so many truly innocent activities that were inspired by their “Satan” and created by evil, yet they didn’t recognize true evil when it walked among them. Adder’s Fork was the name of the studio that produced bondage, kiddie-porn, and snuff-films. The holding company that owned the airplane and (supposedly) produced training films was a respected member of the Chamber of Commerce, incorporated as “Magic Mirror, Inc.” Vidal went to all the meetings and all the functions, smiled, and passed among the foolish human sheep, even donated money to some of the more fundamentalist churches, and none of them ever guessed that beneath his smooth, flawless exterior lay a creature that would gladly have torn their hearts from their living bodies and eaten them alive. In fact, he was praised by those fundamentalist leaders as a “true Christian businessman.”

A shiver of energies touched her spine as the Gate let someone through from the human world. She wasn’t worried; right now the Gate was keyed only to herself, Vidal, and Niall mac Lyr. She waited a moment, dimming the lighting with a thought. Vidal stalked through the door from Studio One shortly thereafter, closing it so carefully -behind him that Aurilia knew he was angry.

*Lovely. What sort of temper tantrum am I going to be treated to this morning?*

She turned slowly to face him: He was still wearing his human-seeming, which meant that although he was angry, he had not been enraged so far as to lose control. It was much the same as his true-shape; raven hair replaced the silver, though he wore it longer when he was not passing among humans. The pale skin had been overlaid with a golden tan. Brown eyes with round pupils substituted for the colorless, pale green, cat’s eyes . . . But the brow was just as high, the cheek-bones just as prominent, the eyebrows still slanted winglike towards his temples, and the body was still the wiry-slender build of a gymnast or a martial artist. His face wore a cool, indifferent expression, but his body betrayed him.

She, in her turn, did not pretend she did not notice his anger. She simply waited, smoothing the cream-colored silk of her skirt with one hand. She might be the head of this triad, the one with the plans, but he was the strength. He was only a little less intelligent than she, and a better, more powerful mage than she, and she had no intention of ever forgetting that fact. Only his hatred for Keighvin Silverhair kept him at her side, for normally Vidal worked alone. What Keighvin had done to him to warrant that undying enmity, Aurilia did not know and had never asked, but Vidal had tried to destroy the High Court lord for centuries. Until recently, he had rebuffed all efforts at recruiting his aid, even to eliminate Keighvin—but when she approached him with her plan, he had volunteered his help as soon as she had presented it all to him.

So now *she* waited for *him* to speak, and even though she felt a flash of irritation at his superior attitude, she suppressed it. She could not afford to lose him, and she would not antagonize him. Not yet, anyway.

He stalked past her, to the Roman orgy set; they’d finished the Caligula picture last week, but Aurilia hadn’t broken the set down yet, because she’d planned to use it for the party picture. Vidal flung himself down on one of the stained cream satin-covered couches, and glared up at her through absurdly long lashes. She seated herself calmly, folded her hands in her lap in a position of calculated passivity, and waited for him to say something. It would have to be verbally; he would not deign to speak to her mind-to-mind. She was not of sufficient rank to warrant that intimacy.

“Keighvin’s close to getting the engines into production,” he snarled, finally. His command of human vernacular had improved out of all recognition in the past few months. Now it was almost as good as hers. “Very close. He’s within weeks.”

Aurilia frowned as she recalculated her original plan; she hadn't expected to have to put it into motion quite so soon. She crossed her legs, restlessly. "That's not good—but we've got a counter-plan already in place to discredit him." She blessed the day that she had watched that movie about Preston Tucker. It had given her everything she needed. . . .

"It won't fly," Vidal informed her, his black brows meeting as he scowled. "Somehow he's figured out his own weak spots, and he's ahead of you. He's got a human to front for him. A man with respect and reputation; a -retired metallurgist who used to work for Gulfstream. This -human knows his field, Aurilia, and he's got contacts we can't touch in the human world. He's going to be able to concoct an explanation that will hold up. And both Keighvin and that human mage of his have placed protections about this new man. I can't touch him magically, not with human and elven magic working against me. I couldn't even take down the first of his shields unless I could catch him Underhill."

That wasn't good; briefly she wondered if Keighvin or the human had seen the same movie she had. She would have to assume that they had, and plan accordingly. She closed her eyes for a moment, and thought. "This human, how old is he?" she asked, finally. "How healthy is he? Could we attack him physically?"

"Well, he's retired, so he's at least sixty-five," Vidal admitted. "He doesn't look terribly sturdy, but he's from the Old Country. You know those scrawny little men—they look fragile, but they're as tough as a briar root and twice as hard to break."

*From the Old Country? Eire? Hmm—first generation immigrant? I can work with that.* "But their meals are full of butter and eggs and fattybacon," Aurilia said with a sly smile. "And they drink. That doesn't do a great deal for their hearts, their arteries, or their livers. By now, Keighvin has convinced him that all of his childhood tales are really true, and he's thinking of the things besides the Seleighe Court that might be real. He should have dredged up a tale or two from his memory about us—hopefully, a gory one. Why don't you go see if you can't frighten him into a heart attack?"

Vidal considered the idea for a moment, then smiled, slowly. His muscles relaxed, and the frown-line between his brows faded. "Now, that's not a bad notion—and it has a certain amount of entertainment value as well. A good thought, *acushla*. Well done."

That last was patronizing, a pat on the head, as one might pat a dog for a clever trick. Aurilia kept her temper, and smiled winsomely back at him. She was the mind, and he the strength; as long as she kept that firmly in mind, she remained in control of the situation, no matter what he might think. Let him break into a froth at every obstacle. She would keep her head, and guide them all through to the other side.

As she would keep careful track of every insult. She was not of high rank in the Unseleighe Court—but rank could be gained by toppling one higher. There would be an accounting when this was over.

*Oh, yes.*

Vidal lounged on his couch, perfectly at ease now, with a look in his eye as if he might well order Aurilia to wait on him in a moment. He could get away with that if he cared to, right now. He could order her to produce refresh-ment, or even to serve him in other ways, and she was bound by rank to do as he asked.

She had to sidetrack him, to remind him of her status in the human world, where he depended on her plans and knowledge. He'd enjoyed working the Caligula picture; he didn't much like the Deadly Doctor

concept, mostly -because it wasn't decadent and luxurious enough. Aurilia sought for a distraction in plans for Adder's Fork to keep him from giving her orders—she wasn't sure she'd be able to keep her temper if he took the master-slave tone with her.

“What do we do after the Deadly Doctor?” she asked, innocently, looking around at the cream-and-red set, four couches, a couple of marble columns, and a lot of draperies and mirrors. And the series of red ropes lying about. It wasn't an elaborate set; the extras had provided much of the ornament on the Caligula film, and the party picture hadn't needed much more. “It ought to be something demonic. I'd thought Aztec—”

Vidal shook his head emphatically; the one place where she trusted his judgment over hers was in marketing. Somehow he always anticipated what the customers were -going to buy. “Not yet. I don't think the customers are going to be ready for anything that exotic yet. It requires too much imagination, and the lead characters are the wrong color. We'll lose a lot of our Southern audience. They want handsome white men as their protagonists. We need something—steamy—decadent—depraved, debauched. Exotic, but not something where the customer can't identify with the master character—”

He shook his head, unable to come up with anything. On reflection, Aurilia agreed with him. She searched for a subject that might do, and suddenly a most unlikely source of inspiration flashed into her mind.

It was the rack of paperbacks at the airport; fully half of them were lurid romances, and she remembered thinking at the time that taken with a little less sugar and -allowing the “villain” to win, the plots weren't all that different from Adder's Fork productions. *Passion's Frenzied Fury*, *Harem Nights*, *Wild Moon Rising*, they featured stupid, sweet and submissive heroines and some villains who certainly fit the “exotic, depraved, and debauched” description.

“What about a harem thing?” she asked. “We could ---re-use most of the Caligula set. . . .” But Arabs were not in particularly good odor at the moment, not even with the Adder's Fork customers. And the master character in a harem theme would have to be an Arab. “No, how about pirates; we could do the same there, use this set for the pirate captain's cabin, with one couch and a couple of sea-chests full of bondage gear. The customers won't know they didn't have reclining couches on ships, and frankly, I doubt they'll care. We can open with a boarding party, kill off a few constructs, lots of blood and guts there, take prisoners, and then cut to the cabin.”

“Pirates,” Vidal mused. “I like that. Snuff, or S and M?”

“Why not both?” she suggested. “A little torture, a little bondage, film from a couple of different angles, mix and match, and leave out the snuff scenes for the S and M flick. But what about the occult angle?”

Vidal grinned, pleased to come up with something she didn't know. “Voodoo, *acushla*. Everybody knows pirates were into voodoo. It's perfect; it's black magic on an -exotic island setting, the white stud presiding over a harem of dusky priestesses on a moonlit beach. . . . easy to reproduce Underhill with constructs doing all the extra parts. We can even use the arena set for the voodoo rituals, just grow a few palm trees, fill in the seats with foliage, and conjure a moon.”

Aurilia felt that cold shiver again, but this time it was not due to someone using the Gate, but to a brush of fear. She did not care to meddle with alien magic—especially alien human magic. She'd had too many bad experiences in the past. . . .

“Be careful with that, will you? We can't afford to bring in something from real voodoo, even by

accident. They might not be amused.” *They weren’t the last time. The Manitou was particularly displeased. If I hadn’t been operating against whites, and not against the natives, I might not have survived his displeasure.*

“True.” Vidal frowned, this time absently. “I think it’s worth it, though. Especially since I suspect we can get extra footage for another couple of flicks out of this. It’s going to require some careful research.”

*By which he means I should take care of it, of course. Well better research assistant than lowly handmaiden.*

“Consider it done,” she said, with a sweet smile. Vidal looked much happier, and she decided to broach her other idea. “What about making the Deadly Doctor into a -foursome, with a female doctor in two of them?” This would be a chance for Aurilia to take her turn in front of the camera. Vidal got plenty of opportunities; even when there weren’t any Unseleighe Court volunteers to act as technicians, he could control the camera magically even when he was being filmed by it, and his incredible—attributed—made him a natural for the master character. But they hadn’t done anything with a Dominatrix for a long, long time. She’d wanted a chance to be in on the kills personally for weeks.

Vidal pursed his lips, looked sour, but nodded reluctantly. “Not a bad idea, I suppose. How many victims are we talking about? All told, I mean. It takes energy to make the constructs, and it won’t be you who’s doing it.”

*As if I didn’t know that.* “For the first film, I’d say six constructs and two real kills,” she replied cautiously. “For the other three, I think the female-male needs a couple of extra real kills, otherwise the customer won’t believe in the doctor’s ability to overpower young men. But I wouldn’t put real kills in the same-sex flick at all; the situation itself is going to be enough of a shocker.”

Vidal nodded, after a moment of thought. “We ought to downgrade the same-sex encounters to bondage and torture. The fringe there is a lot smaller market, and I doubt it’s worth going after.”

She nodded, for once in complete agreement. “That was what I thought—and there’s more money available from the leatherboys than there is from the psychotics. The leather crowd never *will* believe that they can’t find some way to break our copy-protection.”

She rose, so that he followed her lead, subtly answering his superior attitude with body language of her own.

To recover his upper hand, he spoke first, with an order framed as a request. “Why don’t you set up your casting-call while I go pay a visit to Doctor Kelly,” he suggested. “And get me some parameters for the constructs. I’d prefer file personas, if you have some that will do; they’re a lot easier to make than brand new types.”

“I don’t know why file personas shouldn’t work,” she replied, already heading for the office and speaking over her shoulder as her cream-leather heels clicked against the marble floor. “I’ll just modify the Submissive Secretary, the Street-Sparrows, the Victorian Hookers, and the French and Irish Maids. The hardest part will be the costumes, and I’m a good enough mage for that.”

“Precisely,” he said, not quite sneering. She ignored the implied insult that she was only a good enough mage to make clothing. He strode towards the door, his soft-soled shoes noiseless on the marble, already reaching for the knob.

“Bring me back some*good* news this time, all right?” she responded sweetly, with the implied insult that *she* was sending*him* out to do her bidding.

But the door closed on her words; he was already gone.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Held aloft by good fellowship and excellent wine—for Trish did, indeed, know her wines as well she knew -music—Sam deactivated his alarm system, unlocked his door, and with a farewell wave to Tannim, slipped inside. Thoreau had been waiting, and gave him a tail-wagging welcome, then padded beside him with eager devotion.

Sam smiled down at his faithful companion, and his pleasure was not due just to the wine, the company, or the greeting. This was going to work, this strange alliance of magic and technology, of the ancient Sidhe and modern engineering. It was as real, and as heady a mixture, as the odd gourmet dinner he’d just eaten. And like the meal, it all meshed, so well that the various parts might have been made for each other.

For all his skeptical, cynical words to young Tannim, he’d seen a reflection of the elves’ purported concern for the welfare of children in the way Tannim had treated the young prostitute. That hadn’t been an act of any kind; Tannim had been worried about the girl, and had expressed that worry in tangible ways that could help her immediately and directly. Money was one thing, but giving her a way to eat regularly for a while was a damned good idea.

*He could have bought her groceries—but that would have entailed getting her into his car, and that could be trouble if the police took an interest in the proceedings. And even if he’d bought food for her, chances are she’d not have known how to cook anything. Assuming she lives somewhere that she can cook anything.*

It must be a hard, lonely way to live, now that he thought about it. Under the makeup, the child had been thin and pale, wearing a brittle mask of indifference that was likely to crack at any time. He’d always assumed hookers were too lazy to do any real work—but what place would hire a thirteen-year-old child? And what runaway would risk the chance of being caught by giving her real name to get a real job? Under the age of sixteen, you had to have a letter of parental consent to work, and if she was, indeed, a runaway, how would she ever get one?

Of course, she could have lied about her age, and forged a parental consent letter, but such fragile deceits wouldn’t hold up to any kind of examination. Perhaps she had tried just that, and been found out. Perhaps she had discovered she had no other choice. Sex seemed less important these days than it was in his day; perhaps selling herself to strangers didn’t seem that terrible.

Then again, perhaps it did, but there were no options for her, no way to go home.

He had never quite realized how relatively idyllic his own childhood had been. Why, he’d even had a pony—of course, most Irish children living in the country had ponies, but still . . .

Her life now must be hellish—but as Tannim had asked, if she was willing to continue with it, how bad must her home life have been that she chose this over it?



Sam resolved to start carrying books of fast-food gift certificates. That way, if they *did* run into the child again, or one like her, he'd have a material way to help as well.

*And 't isn't likely she'd find a dope dealer willing to trade drugs for coupons.*

But there wasn't much he could do now, not without knowing all the circumstances, without even knowing the child's name and address. He had work to do; Tania's plight would have to wait.

He'd learned long ago how to put problems that seemed critical—but over which he had no control—in the back of his mind while he carried on with lesser concerns. He'd gotten several possibilities for the solution to Keighvin's needs last night, and he needed to track down the latest research, to see if anything new could eliminate his -bogus "process" right off.

*At least there's one problem I won't be having. The engine blocks will be there, and be every thing I claim, pass every test. This won't be a cold-fusion fiasco—I've got real results, solid product that I can hand out to anyone who doubts. If the boys in Salt Lake City had waited until they had working test reactors producing clean power before they went public, they'd have saved themselves a world of trouble. And if the process had worked the way they said it did, well, nobody would be arguing with their theory or their results, they'd just be going crazy trying to reproduce what they'd done. That's what's going to happen here.*

He was looking forward to watching the other firms going crazy, in fact. This was almost like his college-prank days, on a massive scale.

Sam walked slowly down the hall, turning on lights as he passed. He intended to re-arm the security system as soon as he got to the office so that he couldn't be disturbed. His mind was buzzing with all of his plans, and he was so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he didn't even notice the stranger standing in his office until Thoreau stopped dead in the doorway and growled.

Perhaps the man hadn't been there until that very moment—for as soon as he saw the creature, Sam's own hackles went up. There was a curious double-vision quality about the intruder; one moment he was black-haired and dark-eyed, and as human as Tanim. The next moment—

The next moment he was as unhuman as Keighvin, and clearly of the same genetic background. But there the resemblance ended, for where there was a palpable air of power tempered with reason and compassion about Keighvin, this man wore the mantle of power without control and shaped by greed. Now Sam understood what his granny had meant when she had said that even with the Sight it was difficult for humans, child or adult, to tell the dark Sidhe from the kindly. If the creature had not been so obvious in his menace, he might have convinced Sam that he was Keighvin's very cousin.

Thoreau growled again, a note of hysterical fear in the sound; he backed up, putting Sam between himself and the Sidhe. Not very brave, certainly not the television picture of Lassie—but very intelligent. Sam was just as glad. He didn't want this creature to strike out and hurt his little companion. Sam had defenses; Thoreau had none.

"Samuel Kelly, do you see me?" the Sidhe asked flatly. It had the sound of a ritual challenge.

"I see you," Sam replied. "I see you as you are, so you might as well drop the seeming." Then he added, in a hasty afterthought, "You were not invited." Just in case recognition implied acceptance of the man's presence. Granny's stories had warned about the Sidhe and the propensity for semantics-games.

“I don’t require an invitation,” the Sidhe responded arrogantly, folding his arms over his chest as he dropped the human disguise.

*One for me*, Sam thought. The Sidhe played coup-games of prestige as well. Every time he surprised the creature, or caused it to do something, he won a “point.” That intangible scoring might count for something in the next few moments. The higher Sam’s prestige, the less inclined the thing might be to bother him.

“So what do you want?” Sam asked, tempering the fact that he’d been forced by the stranger’s silence into asking with, “I’m busy, and I haven’t time for socializing.”

Again the Sidhe was taken aback—and showed a hint of anger. “I have come to deliver a warning.”

To the stranger’s further surprise, Sam snorted rudely. “Go tell it to the Marines,” he said, hearkening back to his childhood insults. “I told you, I have work to do. I’ve no time for games and nonsense.”

Inwardly, he was far from calm. Tannim had put some kind of arcane protection on him after dinner tonight, when he signed a preliminary agreement with Fairgrove. The young man had said that Keighvin would be doing the same, but how effective those protections would be, he had no idea. He knew *something* was there; he saw it as a glowing haze about him, like one of those “auras” the New Agers talked about, visible only out of the corner of his eye. How much would it hold against? Would it take a real attack if this stranger made one?

The Sidhe raised a graceful eyebrow, and the tips of his pointed ears twitched. “Bravado, is it?” he asked in a voice full of arrogant irony. “I should have expected it from the kind of stubborn fossil who would listen to reckless young fools and believe their prattle. Hear me now, Sam Kelly—you think to aid yet another rattle-brained loon, one who styles himself Keighvin Silverhair. Don’t.”

Sam waited, but there was nothing more. “*Don’t?*” Sam said at last, incredulously. “Is that all you have to say? Just *don’t?*”

“That is all I have *to say*,” the Sidhe replied after a long, hard stare. “But I have a demonstration for fools who refuse to listen—”

He didn’t gesture, didn’t even shrug—

Suddenly Sam was enveloped in flames, head to toe.

His heart contracted with fear, spasming painfully; he lost his breath, and he choked on a cry—

And in the next moment was glad that he hadn’t -uttered it. The flames, whether they were real, of magical energy, or only illusion, weren’t touching him. There was no heat, at least nothing he felt, although Thoreau yelped, turned tail, and ran for the shelter of Sam’s bedroom.

He remained frozen for a moment, then the true -nature of the attack penetrated. *It can’t hurt me, no matter what it looks like*. After a deep breath to steady his heart, Sam simply folded his arms across his chest and sighed.

“Is this supposed to impress me?” he asked mildly. A snide comment like that might have been a stupid thing to say, but it was the only attitude Sam could think to take. Tannim had warned him about lying to

the Sidhe, or other-wise trying to deceive them. It couldn't be done, he'd said, at least not by someone with Sam's lack of experience with magic. And good or evil, both sorts took -being lied to very badly. So—brazen it out. Act boldly, as if he saw this sort of thing every day and wasn't intimidated by it.

The Sidhe's face twisted with rage. "*Damn* you, mortal!" he cried. And this time he *did* gesture.

A sword appeared in his hand; a blue-black, shiny blade like no metal Sam had ever seen. A small part of him wondered what it was, as the rest of him shrieked, and backpedaled, coming up against the wall.

"Not so impudent now, are you?" the Sidhe crowed, kicking aside fallen books and moving in for the kill, sword glittering with a life of its own.

Sam could only stare, paralyzed with fear, as his hands scrabbled on the varnished wood behind him—

Tannim cursed the traffic as he waited at the end of Sam's driveway for it to clear, peering into the darkness. Something must have just let out for the night, for there was a steady stream of headlights passing in the eastbound lane—when he wanted westbound, of course—with no break in sight. And there was no reason for that many cars out here at this time of night. It looked for all the world like the scene at the end of *Field of Dreams*, where -every car in the world seemed lined up on that back country road.

"So if he built the stupid ballfield out here, why didn't somebody tell me?" he griped aloud. "If I'd known the Heavenly All-stars were playing tonight—"

He never finished the sentence, for energies hit the shields he'd placed on Sam—which were also tied to *his* shields.

The protections about Sam locked into place, as the power that had been flung at the old man flared in a mock-conflagration of bael-fire.

Mock? Only in one sense. If Sam hadn't been shielded, he'd have gone up in *real* flames, although nothing around him would have even been scorched. Another Fortean case of so-called "spontaneous human combustion."

But Sam was protected—the quick but effective shielding woven earlier caught and held. Tannim had not -expected those protections to be needed so soon.

He knew what the attacker was, if not who. Only the Folk could produce bael-fire. And the *hate-rage-lust* pulse that came with the strike had never originated from one of Keighvin's Folk. That spelled "Unseleighe Court" in Tannim's book.

All this Tannim analyzed as he acted. He jammed the car into "reverse" and smoked the tires. The Mustang lurched as he yanked the wheel, spinning the car into a sideways drift to stop it barely within the confines of Sam's driveway. He bailed out, grabbing his weapon-of-choice from under the seat and didn't stop moving even as he reached the door; he managed to force his stiff legs into a running kick and kept going as the door crashed open, slamming against the wall behind it.

He pelted down the hall, his bespelled, bright red crowbar clenched in his right hand, and burst into Sam's study. Sam had plastered himself against the wall nearest the door; Tannim flung himself between

his friend and the creature that menaced him, taking a defensive stand with the crowbar in both hands, without getting a really good look at the enemy first.

He never did get *areally* good look. He saw only a tall, fair-haired man, a glittering sword, a scowl of surprised rage—

Then—nothing.

Only the sharp tingle of energies along his skin that told him a Gate had been opened and closed.

The enemy had fled. Leaving, presumably, the way he had arrived, by way of Underhill.

*It's gonna be the last time he can do that*, Tannim thought grimly, framing another shield-spell within his mind, setting it with a few chanted syllables. He dropped it in place over the body of the house, allowing the physical form of the house itself—and, more particularly, the electrical wiring—to give it shape and substance.

It was a powerful spell, and one of Tannim's best. Now no one would be able to pop in here from Underhill without Sam's express permission, nor would they be able to work magics against the house itself.

But it was draining, and Tannim sagged back against the wall when he was done, letting the crowbar slip to the floor from nerveless fingers. It fell on the carpet with a dull *thud*, and Tannim kept himself from following it only by supreme effort.

He looked up, right into Sam's face.

The metallurgist was reaching for his shoulder to help hold him up, such a mixture of expressions on his face that none of them were readable.

"I . . . don't suppose you have any Gatorade . . . ?" Tannim asked, weakly.

" . . . and he set fire to me," Sam continued, after -another sip of good Irish. After all the wine tonight, he was only going to permit himself one small glass—but by Holy Mary, he needed that one. His nerves were so jangled that he wasn't going to be able to sleep without it, and he didn't trust sleeping-pills. "He did, I swear it. Only the flames didn't burn. Scared the bejeezus out of poor Thoreau, though."

He reached down and fondled the spaniel's ears. Thoreau had emerged from the closet only after much coaxing, and remained half-hidden at Sam's feet, completely unashamed of his cowardice. Sam had praised the little dog to the sky for doing the right thing, though he doubted that Thoreau understood much of what he was saying; probably all Thoreau knew was that Daddy said he was a Good Boy, and Daddy was going to comfort him after the terrible fright he'd taken. Sam was quite glad that Thoreau had deserted him. One small spaniel was not going to make more than an indentation in a Sidhe's ankle—assuming the animal got that far before being blasted. He'd lost enough pets in his lifetime to old age and illness. He didn't want Thoreau turned to ash by a Sidhe with a temper.

"That was bael-fire, Sam," Tannim replied, refilling his cup from the bottle of Gatorade on the kitchen table. He'd already polished off one bottle, and Sam wondered where he was putting it all. "If you hadn't been protected, you'd have burned up like a match, but nothing around you would have been touched.

Charles Fort had a lot of those cases in his books of unexplained phenomena. He called it ‘spontaneous human combustion,’ and thought it might have something to do with astral travel.” The young man shook his head, much wearier than Sam had ever seen him. There were dark circles of exhaustion beneath his eyes, and his hair was limp and flattened-looking. “Nobody ever told Fort that going up in heatless flames is what happens when you get the Folk pissed off at you.”

“But I was protected,” Sam protested, sensing a flaw somewhere. “You said I had shields, and you said other mages would know that.”

Tannim nodded, and rubbed his eyes. “Exactly. *Heknew* bael-fire wasn’t going to touch you. He’d have to be blind not to know those shields were there. I don’t think he intended you to be hurt directly, Sam.”

“What, then?” Sam asked in fatigue-dulled apprehension. What worse could the Sidhe have had in mind? “Or was that just intended as a warning? A bit extreme for a warning, seems to me.”

“Heh. The Sidhe are always extreme.” Tannim cocked his head sideways. “I think he was trying to scare you to death. I think he wanted it to look like you died naturally.”

Sam took another sip of Irish, thinking about that for a moment before replying. “He did then, did he?” His apprehension turned to a slow, burning anger. “Sure, and that’s a coward’s way, if ever I saw one.”

“Attacking a human with bael-fire is just as cowardly, Sam,” the young man pointed out. “Or going after a -human with elf-shot. In either case, it’s like using grenades against rabbits. The target hasn’t got a chance. I think he must have assumed that since you’re retired, you’re frail, and he was going to use that.”

“Can I assume the blackguard was Unseleighe Court?” Sam asked, the anger within him burning with the same slow heat as a banked peat-fire.

Tannim nodded, and finished the last of his Gatorade. “That’s their way, Sam. They never take on an opponent of equal strength if they can help it. I assume they came after you because you’re hooked in with Fairgrove and Keighvin. I told you before that if you wanted to back out of this, you could.” He capped the bottle and slowly tightened the lid down. “You’re still welcome to. Nobody is—”

“Back out?” Sam exclaimed. “Bite your tongue! If the blackguards want a fight, they’ve come to the right place, let me tell you! Sam Kelly never started a fight, but he always finished them.” He bared his teeth in a fierce smile. “I don’t intend to let that change, no matter how old I might be.”

Tannim’s tired face lit up in a smile, and he clapped Sam on the shoulder. “That’s the spirit! I was hoping we could count on you!”

Sam let the grin soften to something more wry than fierce. “They should have known better than to try and frighten an Irishman. We’re stubborn bastards, and we don’t take to being driven off. But come to think of it—what the devil did you do to frighten *him* off? You just popped in the room, and he ran like a scalded cat.”

“It wasn’t what I did,” Tannim replied, tapping the glass bottle on the crowbar that sat on the table between them. “It was what I had. This.”

“Cold Iron?” Sam hazarded.

“Twenty pounds’ worth, enchanted to a fare-thee-well,” the young man told him, one hand still on the red-painted iron bar, a finger trailing along the gooseneck at one end, apparently remembering past uses. “One strong shot with this, and I don’t care how powerful a mage he is, he’d have felt like he’d been hit by a semi. Eh heh . . . pureed by Peterbilt.”

Sam snorted, then gazed at the bar with speculation. “Can anyone use one of those things? I used to be a fair hand with singlestick not long ago.”

Tannim’s eyes widened for a moment, then narrowed with speculation. “Huh. I never thought about that, but I don’t know why not. I’ll tell you what; I can’t give you this one, but I can make one for you. And until I finish it, just remember that any crowbar is going to cause one of the Folk a lot of distress. If you’d had one in here tonight, it might even have disrupted the bael-fire spell.”

Sam made a mental note to visit an auto-parts store tomorrow. He’d have one under his car seat and in every room in the house. “I’ll get the one out of my car before you leave, and I’ll pick up a few more tomorrow. You’re sure nobody is going to be able to get back in here -tonight?”

“Positive.” Tannim took a deep breath, and held Sam’s eyes with his own. “Absolutely positive. And as soon as I get back to Fairgrove and tie Keighvin’s protections into yours, if the sorry sonuvabitch even tries, the Fairgrove Folk will know. If he brings in enough firepower to crack those shields, he’ll touch off a war—”

“Not on my account!” Sam exclaimed with dismay. *That* was far more than he’d bargained on . . . and something he did not want to have on his conscience.

Tannim grimaced, and now Sam realized that the young man had been a lot more shaken by the attack than he wanted to admit. “No—no, don’t worry, they won’t even try. They aren’t any readier for open warfare than you and I are. But—you really can quit, Sam, and no one will hold it against you. . . .”

Sam shook his head emphatically. “I told you before, and I meant it. Tannim, the answer isn’t ‘no,’ it’s ‘hell no.’ In fact—” he grinned, and discovered it was actually a real smile “—you couldn’t get rid of me now if you paid me!”

Aurilia sighed, sipped her herb tea, and tried not to look at Niall mac Lyr. She concentrated instead on the delicate, fragile porcelain of her teacup, on the white satin tablecloth, and on the gray velvet cushions of her lounge chair. Normally she would have been enjoying a luxurious breakfast along with the tea, but her breakfast companion was not a creature designed to stimulate anyone’s appetite.

The Bane-Sidhe squinted across the table at her, and glowered, its cadaverous face made all the more unpleasant by its sour expression. Every time Niall moved, a breath of dank, foul air wafted across the table toward her. Niall smelled like a fetid ditch—or an open grave. There had been times in Ireland when they were one and the same. The Bane-Sidhe did not at all match his surroundings in Aurilia’s sybaritic sitting room of white satin and gray vel-vet. He looked like a Victorian penny-dreadful cover, for something entitled “Death and the Maiden,” or “The Specter at the Feast.” Aurilia sighed again, and pulled the gray silk skirts of her lounge-robe a little closer. She could only hope that when Niall left, he’d take the stench with him.

“Where is he?” Niall asked, for the seventh time. The Bane-Sidhe’s speaking voice was a hollow, unpleasant whisper; not even Vidal cared to hear its full-voiced cry. The wail of the Bane-Sidhe brought

unreasoning terror even into the hearts of its allies.

Aurilia shrugged. It was no use answering him. She'd already told him she didn't know where Vidal was. The Bane-Sidhe was only interested in his own grievances.

"We have work to do," it continued, aggrieved. "Studio Two should be operational around the clock—we don't have to put up with union nonsense or mortal time-clocks. You promised me when I joined you that there would be enough nourishment for all of us. You told me—"

"I know what I told you," Aurilia snapped, her temper frayed by the Bane-Sidhe's constant whining. "I told you that *eventually* we'd have all the pain you could ever need or want. I didn't promise it immediately."

"Pah!" the Bane-Sidhe snorted, tossing its head petulantly. "That was a year ago! You could have had Studio Two in full production three months after you brought up Studio One. It's not as if we have to fret about the cost of sets or casts, or even equipment! But no, you had to chase after Keighvin Silverhair—you had to waste your time discovering what he was up to. And instead of being at full power, I must limp about on the dregs of energy a few paltry deaths supply, and Studio Two has produced only that puny little Roman fantasy—"

"You think humans come running to us to bare their throats to the blade?" Aurilia countered with justifiable irritation. Niall simply would not come to grips with the fact that the world had changed, and she had gotten tired of trying to convince him that things were different now than in 1890. "You think there's *no risk* involved in finding those 'paltry few victims'? This isn't the old days; when people die or disappear, even if they have no relatives to ask after them, someone generally notices! Take too many, and we'll be contending with mortal police at every turn! I'd rather *not* have to fly the anchor off if I don't have to, and if too many people come up missing, or we pick the wrong victims, Folk or not, we are going to be—"

"That is not the point," the Bane-Sidhe whispered -angrily. "Your—" It turned, abruptly, its enshrouding wrappings flaring, sending a wash of dank stench over Aurilia, as the door to her sitting room opened and Vidal entered.

She assessed his expression, and her already-sour mood spoiled further. If Vidal had been unhappy before he left on his errand, he was livid now. Aurilia started to ask him what was wrong, then thought better of the idea. The rage that burned behind his thoughts was palpable even to her, and she was not particularly sensitive to emotion.

Well, this time she was not going to play scapegoat. Niall would undoubtedly want to know where Vidal had been and what he had been doing all this time. And just as surely, when the Bane-Sidhe learned of his errand, Niall would sneer at him.

Well and good. Aurilia would stay out of it. If anyone was to suffer Vidal's anger, let it be the Bane-Sidhe.

*After all, she thought maliciously, he spoiled my breakfast by arriving when he did. Let him take it in the teeth. I've had more than my share of My Lord Vidal's temper tantrums. Niall outranks him; let Niall exert himself for a change.*

"And where have you been?" Niall snarled. "I have things I wish to discuss—"

“And I don’t give a damn!” Vidal exploded, his eyes black with rage, fists clenched at his sides. He turned pointedly away from Niall and snarled at Aurilia. “That thrice-damned human mage! Keighvin has had his little protégé put *shields* on the old man. I couldn’t touch him! And what’s more, when I threw bael-fire at him, the old bastard *laughed* at me!”

The Bane-Sidhe rose to its full seven-foot height, stood over Vidal, and glared down at the elven-mage, its tattered draperies quivering with anger. “Do you mean to say that you have been wasting your time trying to frighten Keighvin’s pet mortals when you could have—”

“I’m doing what *you* should have been doing, you shabby fraud!” Vidal sneered. “You should have been the one trying to frighten the old man into a heart attack, not me! Not even a shield would have stopped your wail—right? Or—”

“Why? Why should I waste my time, waste the energy it takes to cross the Gate into the mortal world?” the Bane-Sidhe countered. “I’ve not enough to spare as it is!”

Vidal was not to be daunted by height or stench, Aurilia had to give him credit for that much. “Because Keighvin has to be stopped, or he’ll stop us. Even *you* admit that! If you’d been here—”

The Bane-Sidhe’s eyes flashed angrily, and Aurilia held her breath. If Niall grew enraged, he might lose control. “I would not have been wasting my time pursuing a dead-end vendetta when there are other options open!” Niall whined, his voice climbing dangerously in pitch and volume. “Humans are infinitely corruptible. Just look at the sheer numbers of them that are willing to pay to watch their fellows in torment! Look at our files! All we need do is find these foolish mortals’ weaknesses and they will be our allies, not Keighvin’s! It’s simply—”

“A lot *you* know!” Vidal spat. “You haven’t been Outside for a century! The mortals you knew are as dead as the creatures of Tam Lin’s time! You can’t corrupt a -human by dangling a pretty piece of flesh in front of his nose anymore! And they aren’t naive little village boys with shit on their shoes and not two thoughts in their heads. It’s bad enough that we’ve got Keighvin against us, but now he has these human *mages* with him, and artificers, and they’re not stupid, I’m telling you!”

The Bane-Sidhe grew another half a foot. “I have taken the lives of more mortals than you ever dreamed of; I’ve the deaths of six knights of the Seleighe Court to my credit. That’s more than you’ve ever *hoped* to do, you elven trash! Destroying the likes of you is less than a -pastime—”

*By the dark moon, this is getting serious—*Aurilia clapped her hands together, distracting both of them for a moment.

“Niall, unless you really want a duel on your hands,” she said coldly, “I think you’d better take back those last words to your *partner* .”

She had dealt with the Bane-Sidhe for so long now that she knew exactly what was running through its head, now that she’d sidetracked it. For all Niall’s power—and he *was* powerful—he was old and afraid of losing any of it. He used his hoarded energies sparingly, and he lived in fear of finding himself in a duel of magics and coming out the vanquished. Vidal was young, as elves went, but he was powerful as well. Niall did not know *how* powerful, and that uncertainty would be enough. If he were forced to go head-to-head with the younger mage . . .

. . . who had done away with two of the Seleighe Court single-handedly, in the far past. . . .



“I beg pardon for those hasty words,” the Bane-Sidhe whispered stiffly. “I am concerned that you seem to be wasting time better spent elsewhere.”

Aurilia turned to Vidal, who stood, still rigid with -anger, facing the Bane-Sidhe. “You should explain the problem to Niall, Lord Vidal,” she said, in as close to a servile tone as she could manage, given how *angry* she was at both of the fools. “You are right in saying he is not familiar with the world outside the Gates today. You should tell him why Keighvin and his pets are dangerous to us.”

Vidal’s jaw tightened, but her subservient tone evidently mollified him enough to try to be polite. “Keighvin Silverhair is interfering directly in the world of mortals,” he said, slowly, “as I have pointed out to you before. He will stop us *in our* quest for power if he can, for we are on directly opposing sides where mortals are concerned. But he has gone beyond simply interfering. Tonight I discovered that he is *using* them, recruiting and training them. And betraying our deepest secrets and weaknesses.”

“*What?*” Niall and Aurilia both gasped. This was news to Aurilia; unpleasant news. If mortals knew how to meet the Folk in equal combat—

“The mage tonight had a bar of Cold Iron as a weapon,” Vidal continued grimly “Not steel—pure, forged Cold Iron, with Far-Anchored spells keyed to the Folk, and shieldings set specifically against our powers. The bastard *glowed* to the Sight, and he knew what he was doing, I tell you. Keighvin must have told him everything. He’s going to be impossible to deal with. Another Gwydion, Merlin, Taliesen.”

If Niall could have paled, he would have. Instead, he seemed to shrink, and he fluttered back into his seat, collapsing bonelessly with a moan.

“By the dark moon,” the Bane-Sidhe groaned. “Why didn’t you tell me this before? We must—”

Aurilia knew what the old coward was about to say—that they should leave, pack up in defeat and leave the ground to the enemy. Not a chance.

“Oh, no,” she interjected sweetly. “He won’t be impossible to deal with. I already have human informants following his movements. Before the week is out, I will know *his* weaknesses.”

When the other two turned to stare at her in astonishment, she smiled, careful to cloak her triumph in modesty. “I simply don’t have the power you have, my lords. I have learned to make do with the kind of weapons mortals use themselves. There are many ways to wound the human heart, and I have learned most of them. All I need to know is what the young man Tannim cares for—and he will be powerless against me.”

She bowed her head a little, to hide the gloating in her eyes, for both the Bane-Sidhe and Vidal were still staring at her in a kind of awe. “You deal with the old man,” she finished. “Leave the younger to me. I will deal with him, Cold Iron and all—for Cold Iron will not save him from a pierced heart.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Tania sat in the farthest corner of Kevin Barry’s and nursed her mug of hot, milk-laden coffee between hands so numb she couldn’t even feel the cup. The weather had turned cold, out of nowhere, and despite Laura’s repeated warnings, she had decided to take a chance and come to Kevin Barry’s long enough to

look for the strange young man again. The hundred he'd given her was long gone for rent; she'd been eating once a day here for the last week, trying to make the tab last a while, but she hadn't found a single trick in a week of walking the streets.

She had to admit, though, that she hadn't really been trying hard. Laura hadn't bothered warning her about Tanim after that first night; she had troubles of her own. Jamie was mixed up with something. He came home with less every night, and usually came home high. Laura was worried sick about the night he'd done the "party"; she'd gotten him to go to County Health and take the HIV test, but they wouldn't know what the results were for another couple of weeks.

And meanwhile, with Jamie getting high so often, it was only a matter of time before he slipped up again.

In a way, Tania didn't blame him for getting high; it might be the only way he could face what he had to do out there. But he was making Laura miserable.

*And just maybe he's getting high because he can't face something else. Like his life. He isn't gonna be a cute young kid forever—and then what's he gonna do? He's already getting picked up by some really rough guys. He's come home with bruises or rope-burns the past three nights. The older he gets, the more of that kind he'll have to go with. And he says he'd rather die than get a MacDonald's job.* He'd told Tania and Laura grandiose stories about getting a job at one of the country clubs, like waiting in the bar, and finding a rich old bored lady to support him, but he wasn't fooling anyone. Buses didn't run out there—and he wasn't exotic or talented enough. Tania had seen the kind of kids the "country-club women" picked up; they were generally very dark and latino-handsome, and they could dance, sing, and pay inventive flattering compliments. Jamie couldn't dance (at least not upright) and his most flattering compliment wasn't printable. "Escorts" were intelligent, and could make some kind of conversation. Jamie was stoned most of the time, and his brightest comments usually had to do with sports.

Tania studied the cream swirling slowly in the coffee. Ever since she'd met Tanim, Tania had felt like she'd gotten slapped awake, somehow. What she had now just wasn't enough anymore. She'd started looking ahead, planning for something besides the next trick, or the cheap TV set at the Goodwill. If Tanim was for real, and not just a pimp with a creative approach—well, maybe she'd see what he had to offer. She wasn't sure *why* she had decided to take the risk, and she wasn't sure why she'd decided to act against Laura's advice. In fact, she didn't really understand what was going on in her own head since she met the guy. But whatever it was, it kind of felt good—and it was a helluva lot better than sitting around listening to Laura try to cry without making any noise, or hustling the dirty old men in expensive suits.

Maybe all he wanted was her. That would be okay, too. She wouldn't mind going to bed with him. He was kind of cute, and was certainly nice. He'd promised not to hurt her; she trusted that promise.

She did know one thing: she'd made the decision to come here today at least in part because it had been too damned cold to trot around the street in nothing but Spandex bike shorts and a halter. Now if Mr. Tanim would just show up. . . .

At least her hands were finally getting warm.

The pub had just opened for lunch a little while ago, but she really hadn't been that hungry when she first sat down. And in the last few minutes, as the place filled up, she noticed something kind of peculiar: although she'd have been glowered at for nursing a single cup of coffee instead of buying a meal or a drink anywhere else, no one was hassling her here. It had been that way every time that she had come in

to get something on the tab; the girls smiled at her and were nice, and no one gave her any trouble, acted just like the night she'd been here with Tannim, in fact. Right now no one had even bothered her about getting something besides coffee. They acted like she was someone important; someone who should be given privacy and space, if that was what she wanted.

Maybe that man had something to do with it. Maybe because he had taken notice of her, they had extended that "courtesy to a good customer" umbrella he seemed to travel under to include her as well.

Every time someone darkened the doorway of the dining room, she looked up, squinting against the light, to see if it was him. As lunchtime filled the place up, she -began to think she'd picked the wrong time, or day, or something. Even with the best wishes in the world, the waitresses were going to have to ask her to leave pretty soon, and let a paying customer have her table.

Of course, she could go ahead and order something. There was still enough cash left on the tab. And the aroma of the bean soup from the kitchen was enough to make a corpse hungry. Bean soup and bread—that wouldn't cost too much, and she could have some more coffee with lots of cream and sugar. . . .

She started to look for one of the waitresses, when movement at the door made her turn her head out of habit to see who it was. And there he stood, looking a lot like she remembered, only maybe cuter. A beat-up leather jacket this time, really nice Bugle Boy jeans and a hot brown-and-gray shirt—he could have been making an ad or something, he had that kind of style about him. She glanced down at her second-hand bike shorts and flushed a little. *She* was tacky. But it was the best she could do, and it was clean, anyway.

She looked up again. On second glance, the young man also looked tired, like he'd been working really hard.

*Maybe he won't notice my clothes.*

He squinted into the relative darkness, then started to turn away to go into the bar. She threw up her hand in an involuntary wave, then snatched it back, not certain now that she really *wanted* to talk to him again, after all. He might not be real happy to see her here, now. He might, in fact, be mad that she'd shown up, at least during the daytime.

Too late—he saw her signal, hesitant though it was; smiled and waved back, and started across the floor through the crowd.

But someone else had seen him too.

A really gorgeous dark-haired woman, dressed all in black leather and cream-colored silk, intercepted him at the entrance to the bar where she had just materialized as he crossed the room. Tania's heart sank. *This* must be who he was meeting. He hadn't come here looking for her. He hadn't even really seen her. He'd only seen the waving hand, and he'd thought it belonged to his lunch date. And God, she was incredible. The kind of woman Tania would have expected him to be seeing, not some tacky kid in Spandex.

She sidled up to him and put one hand on his shoulder, smiling brilliantly into his eyes. Her lips moved, -although Tania couldn't hear what she was saying. He continued to scan the crowd in Tania's direction, a slight frown on his face. She blushed so hard she felt hot all over, and wanted to sink into the floor in embarrassment; her eyes burned, and her throat tightened. In another second, she was going to cry, she

just knew it. And on top of looking tacky, she was going to get mascara smeared all over her face. She knew what he was looking for; now he wanted to know who had pretended to know him. Probably so he could make sure his lunch date with this fabulous babe wasn't interrupted by some scruffy little—

Abruptly, Tannim shook his head, said a few words, and brushed the woman's hand off his shoulder. His brow wrinkled just a little, and he stared directly into the woman's eyes. Then he drew his right hand up into a fist, slowly extended his thumb, and pointed it over his shoulder towards the door. The woman stood there, wearing the most stunned expression Tania had ever seen on anyone's face. He walked away from her as if she wasn't even there.

And as he got close enough to Tania to make out -exactly who she was, his face broke out in a wide, welcoming smile, so warm it dazzled her.

Tannim had the feeling he really ought to go to Kevin Barry's for lunch today . . . it was a very strong feeling, and Tannim never, ever ignored those silent hunches of his.

So, although Keighvin had assigned him out to Roebing Road with a brake-mod this afternoon, Tannim decided to take a long lunch break.

Once again, he endured the bone-rattling cobblestones of River Street. He kept his "feelers" out for an incipient gap, then spotted one. He took instant advantage of the opening, shoving the Mustang into a parking space, right on the tail of a departing Caddy. He grinned at the driver of a Beemer, a suit-and-tie executive type, who scowled at him in frustrated annoyance.

*Eat your heart out, buddy,* he thought in smug satisfaction. *Here you are in your tie and execu-cut, and here I am in my jeans and long hippie-freak hair—and I know I'm happier than you are. Why don't you just spend the rest of the afternoon trying to figure out what I know that you don't?*

He felt just a little smug as he grinned into the yuppie-type's scowl. He'd gotten one of the primo spots, too; hardly more than a wink and a nod from Kevin Barry's. As the Beemer pulled away in search of another place to park, he eased himself out of the car and headed for the door to the gift shop—for the tiny gift shop let directly out into the dining room side of the pub.

He waved at the lovely lass behind the counter of the gift section, and looked over the new shawls, letting his eyes adjust to the dim light. It was pretty dark in the stage/dining area, and really crowded for a weekday; it looked like half of Savannah had decided to hit the pub for lunch. All of the tables were full, and there was a line of about four people waiting for one to clear out. But after a moment, that sixth-sense tingled again, and he peered off into the far right-hand corner.

Someone waved tentatively at him from the very back of the room. Tania?

It might be; whoever it was, she was female and blond.

He started towards the corner, easing his way around tables surrounded by people obliviously chattering and munching away. But there was a huge group in the very middle; they'd put three tables together to form one big arrangement, and to get to the rear he would have to go past the pub entrance on the right-hand wall. Well, that was no problem, as long as there wasn't anyone *inthere* who wanted to have a chat with him.

Just as he reached the double-doors into the pub, someone pushed her way past the stand-up crowd at the bar, and intercepted him at the doorway.

Before he realized she wanted *him*, she laid her hand on his shoulder, forcing him to stop whether he wanted to or not. He turned involuntarily to look at her; she smiled at him as though she was an old friend. “Hello,” she crooned, in a voice just loud enough for him to hear over the babble of voices in the pub. “I’ve been hoping you’d be here today; I’m glad to see my intuition is working.”

She was stunningly beautiful: long, raven-black hair with a slight wave to it, huge brown eyes, sensuous lips and high cheekbones, and a flawless, rose-and-cream complexion. She was dressed in an ivory silk blouse and black leather skirt, both expensive, both understated in their elegance.

She was no one he’d ever seen before in his life.

Just before she’d touched him, all his internal alarms went off, for she had donned a glamorie that would have sent a Vulcan into heat. This was trouble, and all of his shields went up in full defensive mode.

While she spoke, he did a closer check, using mage-sight; as he had guessed, her appearance was nothing like her *real* self. There was no mistaking the white-blond hair, nor the cat-slitted, green eyes and the pointed ears.

Elven. One of the Sidhe. And since she was no one he knew, the odds were high that she was Unseleighe Court.

But she hadn’t done anything to him but stop him—at least, not yet. So she wasn’t declaring open warfare, not unless you counted attempted seduction as an aggressive act.

On the other hand, she could have assumed that Tanim was just as young and inexperienced as he looked.

*I don’t think so, lady.*

But this was neither the time nor the place to answer her with a challenge. If that was Tania back there, he didn’t want a kid to see him having even a verbal battle with a Sidhe. He calculated a dozen possible responses to her approach, trying to figure the one that would leave her the most stunned, and selected one by the time the last word had left her soft, wet lips.

He brushed her hand from his shoulder as if it was an inconvenient bit of dandruff.

“Your friends and mine don’t get along, lady,” he said, without the least bit of inflection. “Run along and we’ll leave it at that.”

He indicated the door, and watched the woman’s -energy fields fluctuate wildly as she tried to process this unexpected stonewalling. It was hard not to laugh, even dire as the repercussions might be.

There was a split-second of astonishment before the woman clamped down her mask of impassivity. He could still see her body stiffen in the universal posture of defen-siveness.

*Score more status from the Bad Guys. She’s trying to play it off, but she’s counting me as an equal, or a -superior.*

He then moved past her as though she was not there.

*I'll have to ask one of the girls what her face looked like to them. Heh.*

\* \* \*

Aurilia had perused the new agency's report very carefully. *This* one had quite a bit of new information, besides all the dossier nonsense that anyone with a phone and a lot of patience could pull up out of public records. -According to the detective, young Tannim favored one particular pub over every other establishment in Savannah: a pub called "Kevin Barry's."

Well, the lad was young, in his twenties, and if there was one thing a young man was susceptible to, it was sex. There hadn't been a young man yet that Aurilia hadn't been able to lead about by the nose, sooner or later. Generally sooner.

But just to make certain, she put a glamorie on herself that could make a corpse rise. Not even the pure Sir Galahad could have withstood her now. And she smiled to herself as she stood at the bar, sipping a glass of *uiskebaghe*, and waiting for the youngster to make one of his appearances. He would, too—she had that feeling, and her premonitions were never wrong.

*Those two fools were so busy persuading themselves that the only way they could dispose of the human was by combat that they never even bothered considering other options. Idiots. Why do anything with violence that can be accomplished subtly?*

She toyed with her glass, signaling the lady bartender for another, and considered what she would do when she had the mortal safely beguiled. *He might be useful, especially if he is any good as a mage. I could take him Underhill, to my own stronghold. . . . Yes, that might be the best solution. He'll be tended to in a gilded cage, and I can drain him slowly of power without the others knowing I have him.*

Movement of power at the edge of her shields alerted her that there was a mage within the confines of the pub; turning to check who had just entered, she saw to her immense satisfaction that the quarry had arrived. She left her glass, and quickly conjured a crumpled twenty, identical to the one she had kenned a few days ago, to leave beside the glass.

She intercepted Tannim just as he passed beside the door to the pub, placing one hand on his shoulder and whispering something innocuous while she exerted her glamorie. He stared at her for a moment, and she felt a flare of triumph. *I have him; I truly do. Now let's see what Vidal says about me—*

"Your friends and mine don't get along, lady," he said, brushing her hand off with an absent gesture.

*He blew me off. I can't believe it. . . .*

As she stared after him, stunned, he wound his way gracefully through the crowded dining-room without a single backward glance. He went all the way to the rear, where a tatty little teenager with badly bleached hair was sitting at a table for two—

Belatedly, she realized that not only had the young mage recognized her for what she was, he had broken her glamorie. Not only was she terribly conspicuous, he might well be watching her to see what she was going to do.

She melted back into the crowd as only a Sidhe could, and worked the opposite sort of glamorie—one to make her inconspicuous.

Then she retired to the gift shop and strained all her senses, trying to keep watch on him and his lunch guest.

In one sense she was frustrated; he had placed shielding about himself that he had extended to cover the table and the girl, so that she could not listen in on their conversation. But she could *watch* them, with a bit of the Sight.

After a moment she recognized the girl; she might have been the one in the blurred and darkened photo the new detective had included with his first report. Tannim had befriended the girl, who was evidently an underage prostitute, the first night the new man had been on duty. Then, as now, he had engaged her in conversation, and had bought her something to eat.

Well, that was interesting. What on earth could a teenage whore and a powerful young mage have in common? The report had been adamant that Tannim hadn't *done* anything with the girl, had in fact sent her on her way. Could it be possible that *this* was the weak point Aurilia had been looking for so fruitlessly?

The more she watched, the more certain she became. The girl did hold some kind of interest for him. Not sexual—but perhaps all the stronger for that. By the time the two of them paid the bill and left, she was filled with satisfaction. She had him. She had the vulnerable point. She didn't know exactly what she could do with it—yet—but she knew what it was.

Tania couldn't help herself; she smiled and blushed as the young man pulled up a chair and sat across the -postage-stamp table from her. "Hey, kiddo," Tannim said, looking meaningfully at her coffee cup. "That doesn't look like a very nutritious breakfast." Before she could reply, he signaled one of the waitresses. "My usual," he said, "for two." And as the girl disappeared, he turned back to Tania.

"I've been watching for you," he said, "and I was kind of afraid I'd scared you off when you didn't show up."

She looked down at her cup in confusion. "Laura told me you were probably a—" She stopped herself just in time, appalled at the way she had let her mouth run without thinking. If the guy *was* a pimp, he might get angry and take it out on her, and Laura too. If he wasn't, he might get offended. "—Ummm—somebody I shouldn't get involved with."

"What, a pimp?" Tannim asked. "Or a pervert? Kiddo, you have to know that most of the guys who pick you up are perverts. Nobody really straight would want to make it with a kid as young as you are. And, Tania, the hair and the makeup job aren't fooling anybody."

The straightforward reply—too calm and matter-of-fact to be an insult—brought her up short. And before she could think of any retort, he continued.

"Look, I'm not interested in sex. I've got that elsewhere. I just want to talk to you—and not dirty, either." He looked ready to say more, but the waitress arrived with two club sandwiches and two colas, and he waited until she was out of hearing distance.

She eyed the sandwich dubiously, remembering what Laura had said. He caught her at it, and laughed a little. “Go ahead, Tania, it isn’t drugged or anything, I promise.” And as if to prove his point, he exchanged plates with her and bit into his sandwich with hungry enthusiasm. Feeling a little stupid, she did the same.

“Look,” he said, when she’d finished half of her meal, gesturing with a potato chip, “I told you the other night that I liked seeing people able to dream—and I like it better when I can help them with those dreams. See, there’s some weird shit going on out there, and helping you keeps me balanced. Keeps me in touch with the ‘real world.’ Dig?”

That was just a little too near the bone. “What are you,” she asked defensively. “Some kind of Boy Scout or -something?”

He sighed and shook his head. “I’m just a guy,” he replied. “A plain old human being. Eccentric. Obsessive. Imperfect. I can’t do much, Tania—but I’d like to at least talk a while.”

She shrugged, uncertain and trying to cover it with bravado. “I suppose. I’m not really busy right now. You’re not my usual kinda client, but you ought to get something for your two hundred bucks, I guess—”

“Have you ever been on a picnic?” he interrupted. “A real picnic?”

Caught off-guard once again, she shook her head.

He took her hand and rose, pulling her to her feet. “Come on, then. Let’s see if I can show you a good time.”

Before she knew what he was doing, he had left money on the table for the bill, and led her outside into the bright sunlight. She squinted as he donned his Ray-Bans, and tugged her over to the River Street parking lot. The next thing she knew, she was sitting in the passenger’s side of his car, while he buckled himself in on the driver’s side, staring at a dashboard with more gadgets than a fighter-plane cockpit.

“Buckle up, kiddo,” he reminded her. “What do you want to hear?”

She was dazed, and replied with the first thing that popped into her head. “That music the other night—here—is there anything more like that?”

“Good choice,” he replied, popped in a cassette, then pulled out of the parking space before she had time to say anything else, like “where are you taking me—”

She could have hit herself in the head. If Tanim -really was a pimp after all, in spite of all his talk about “dreams,” she’d just put herself right into his hands. Willingly. How stupid could you get?

But he didn’t pull out towards the worst part of town; he just drove up the ramp, onto President. They crossed a couple of bridges, while Tanim rattled on about -music, and pulled up at a place called The Country Store. He left the motor running (and the tape playing) and dashed inside.

*This is nuts—I could take the car right now, drive away. Take my chances—*

But for some reason, she sat and waited, listening to Celtic harp and soulful voices as he returned with two white boxes, a large sack, and a couple of drinks in a paper carrier.



A faint aroma of food came from both boxes as he dropped them on the seat behind them, and Tania relaxed a little more. The idea of a pimp or drug-pusher buying a couple of box lunches was too ridiculous to contemplate. Maybe he was for real—

She yawned involuntarily while Tannin wedged the drinks into the center console. Last night had been long—and fruitless. She'd pounded the pavement until about four, then come home to find Laura in tears and Jamie too stoned to do anything but snore. Then she'd gotten up relatively early to come to Kevin Barry's—now the short sleep was catching up to her.

She must have dozed off anyway, for she came to herself with a start as Tannim turned the engine off. "Well, we're here," he said, with an expectant expression on his face.

She looked around, baffled. "Where's here?" she asked, not recognizing anything.

"It's a park, outside Fort Pulaski. This is a place I come with friends. That's one of the approaches to the docks—it's very deep here." He indicated the waterway before them. "See? There's one of the big container ships you see passing River Street." He opened the trunk of the -Mustang and pulled out a familiar item: a cargo blanket like she used for bedding. Some pimp: blanket over one shoulder, white lunchbox in each hand, and a goofy grin.

She shivered in the sea breeze, and Tannim slapped his forehead after laying out the food and blanket. "I should have given this to you before," he explained sheepishly, handing her the sack. "Sorry . . . hope it fits."

Tania opened the sack, and pulled out—a sweat suit. *Anice* one, with a puffy-ink Hilton Head logo and . . . a unicorn.

*He knew. How could he know? Oh, God, it's beautiful . . . it's better than anything I have now. I'd look like a tourist or a college student.*

She felt her eyes tearing up, and only her involuntary shivering broke her out of it. Tannim stood with a self-satisfied smirk, then sat on the blanket, his back to her.

*God, I'm a teenage hooker, and he gives me credit for modesty. Incredible. . . .*

She slipped the suit on over her speedos and immediately felt warmer. It was thick fleece. "I look like . . ." She let the sentence trail off.

"You look confident." He grinned, looking her over. "The unicorn design suits you. They're powerful beasts, very, very magical, and as graceful as you are. And just as capable of miracles."

Tania felt herself blushing. "I don't know . . . this is all so weird, I mean, this feels like some movie. It's stupid, this fairy-tale shit just doesn't *thappen*."

"Mmm. No. Normally it doesn't. It doesn't make any more sense than sunlight or trees. Or internal combustion." He gestured with a pickle spear "You turn the key, the car runs. Inside it, water runs through iron, lightning sparks fire, thousands of tiny firestorms, and all people ever think of is 'push the pedal and it goes.' But, Tania, people are like that. Complex, but so taken for granted, with all the powers of the elements in them. Sooner or later, even we forget how wonderful our internal machines are. All we need to be great is to remember how amazing we really are."

“Oh, God, you’re not one of those Scientologist people, are you?”

Tannim nearly choked laughing. “Oh my God! Give me some credit! I’m not *that* brain-dead!”

She smiled a little, sheepishly. “It’s just that what you keep saying all sounds like some feel-good pep talk to fat executives.”

The man had nearly stifled his laughing. He wiped his nose with a napkin. “All right. So it does. I just get enthus-iastic sometimes. Guess I’ve gotten used to things working out.”

Tania peered out towards the horizon again. The container ship there was four times larger, but still appeared no closer. “I haven’t had that kind of luck lately. The street takes away dreams. Makes them hard to even -remember. . . .”

Tannim nodded, as if he understood. Maybe he did. “Yeah. Yeah, I can imagine. But, well, like I said, sometimes all we need is a reminder that we can do about anything.”

She shook her head stubbornly. “But how come you’re doing all this for me? It doesn’t make any sense! You’ve got to have something better to do than—”

“Than spend my day with a teenage hooker?” he interrupted. “If you were any such thing, maybe so. But I don’t believe that any more than you *really* do. You know you hate it, but you think it’s all you are. We both know better. And, well, yeah, I could be working. I’ve got testing to do, but, hell . . . the machines can wait. You can’t. Not another day. Or else you wouldn’t have shown up at Kevin Barry’s looking for me.”

They were both silent for a moment, watching the huge ship at last move into the channel. It was at least twelve stories high, marked in a language Tania couldn’t identify. It bore a prancing horse atop a globe painted on one stack, above hundreds of multicolored boxes the size of tractor-trailers. Tannim stood up slowly and dusted his jeans off, then raised his arms and waved.

From beside a massive lifeboat a single figure waved back.

Tannim stood, grinning and satisfied, hands on hips. “There. A first welcome home.”

\* \* \*

Tania and Tannim talked for what felt like an hour. He was so easy to talk to, that by the time she realized what she’d done, she’d not only told him about herself, she was telling him about Laura and Jamie, too. She managed to keep from blowing everything, but from the bleak expression on his face, she guessed he was able to figure out most of it on his own. So she tried to change the -subject—

But he changed it for her, asking her first about what she liked to read. That got her on the subject of fantasy, and *then* she was spilling the whole story about the night her mother found her books, and what had happened, and she was holding back tears with an effort. . . .

He patted her hand, but didn’t try to touch her in any other way—which was just as well, really. She would have felt really stupid and afraid, both at the same time. Stupid, because she was crying over *books* , for chrissake; afraid, because if he touched her, he might try something more, and she *liked* him, she didn’t want him to be like another trick. But she wanted someone to hold her and comfort her, wanted it so badly it was a dull ache deep down -inside.

She stared out at the river as another ship appeared in the distance, and fought her tears down. Finally, after a long silence, he cleared his throat self-consciously.

“Don’t you think maybe you ought to go back to your folks?” he said cautiously. “I know it was bad, but—”

She shook her head, angrily. “No!” she replied adamantly. “It was like being in jail all the time, except I hadn’t done anything to deserve it! Hell, even in jail, people get to read what they want!”

“But—” he began. She cut him off with a look.

“I didn’t deserve being treated like a criminal, and I won’t go back to it,” she said firmly, relieved that anger had chased away the incipient tears.

“All right, so you won’t go back—but what about one of the shelters?” he replied. “That would get you out of that apartment into somewhere safe, and you could go back to school. You could even get a job if you wanted to; the shelter would help you.”

She laughed, sourly. “Haven’t been out on the street, have you?” she asked. He shook his head. “Well, the *good* shelters have waiting lists—or else they only let you stay a couple of weeks,” she said, bitter memories of checking the places out still fresh in her mind. “And the rest of them either have churches running them, or they’re always on your case about contacting your parents—and if you won’t, they will, whether or not you like it.”

He blinked. “Oh,” he said. “But—don’t you think it’s still better than—”

“I don’t need Jesus with my orange juice, thanks,” she snapped in irritation. “I don’t need getting told this was all my fault and I’m a sinful slut. I don’t need getting nagged at, and told by some stupid psychologist who never met my parents how much they really do care about me. *All they* ever wanted was something else they could boast to the people at the club about. They never cared about me, they only cared about how good I could make them look.” She shook her head. “By now they’ve probably put a Soloflex in my room. And they’ve figured out not having me around saves them enough for a weekend cruise to Bermuda every couple of months. I’ll stay where I am, thanks.”

Tannim just looked sad, and watched the ship grow nearer. “I never thought I’d wind up here,” he said, -after a while. “There was a time when I thought I’d stay in Oklahoma all my life. Now—sometimes I wonder if I’m ever going to really settle down in one place.”

“Why?” she asked.

“Because I like traveling,” he replied, and started off on a series of stories that lasted until the sun started to set. Some of them were so crazy they couldn’t be true—and she wondered about the rest. It was weird, like he was talking around something half the time. Surely nobody as young as Tannim could have done so much in such a short time, could he?

On the other hand, why would he lie to her?

She let him talk; while he was telling her stories, he couldn’t pry any more out of her. Finally, though, all the food had been eaten, all the stories seemed to have been told, and the sun was going down. She had work to do—

She found herself dreading it; going back onto the street seemed filthier than ever after this afternoon. But she didn't say anything, and when Tannim asked her if she wanted to go back to town, she just nodded and let him lead the way back to his car.

They were both silent on the way back to the city; it was as if they had forgotten how to talk to each other, or that they didn't know what to say. The silence was as awkward as the earlier conversation had been free. When Tannim asked her where she wanted to be dropped off, she replied, vaguely, "Wheaton Street, near Bee," and hardly noticed his wince.

But she did notice the worried look he wore when he pulled over to the curb and she got out.

"I wish you wouldn't," he said, and she didn't have to ask what he meant. She shoved her hands in her pockets, unable to look him in the eye—

And discovered that there was paper in there, paper that hadn't been there before.

She pulled it out. It was money, cash; several twenties. She wasn't sure how many, because she shoved it hastily back into her pocket before someone could see that she had it. "You believe in magic?" he asked. And before she could reply, continued, "Don't. It's unreliable. Make your own luck."

He smiled, reached over, and closed the door, then pulled out into traffic, leaving her standing on the corner.

With a pocket full of cash.

*Make your own luck*, he'd said. What was that supposed to mean? Or was it supposed to mean anything at all?

She turned to head down the street, pausing once in the shelter of a doorway to remove the cash again, and count it.

Five soft, old twenties. One hundred dollars. Exactly what he'd given her the last time.

*Make your own luck.*

Well, there was one thing she could do. She could get off the street for another night. Maybe even another week. That was luck enough for right now.

\* \* \*

"Sam, old lad, could ye hand me that wee driver?" The Sidhe-mechanic put a hand out from underneath the -computer-module, and Sam dutifully dropped a small screwdriver into it. An aluminum socket-wrench; Donal might be one of the three Sidhe at Fairgrove capable of handling Cold Iron with relative impunity, but it was only "relative." Right now Donal was doing something more than a bit dangerous: manipulating some of this computer equipment magically, altering it so that while it looked perfectly normal from the outside, and in fact would pass inspection by any licensed tech, what it would register was *not* what would be going on inside.

Which was, in fact, nothing at all.

But even the tiny amount of Cold Iron present in the screws holding various covers in place was enough to foul Donal's magic. Donal was taking them all out, placing them in an insulating container, then making his alterations -according to Sam's instructions. The Sidhe's body twisted about for a moment as he squirmed to reach the tiny screws, then was still.

"There now," Donal said, his voice muffled, but the satisfaction coming through plainly. "That should do it. Turn it on, old lad, and let's see if it lies to us proper."

"Are you sure you want me to do that?" Sam asked anxiously. "You're still in there—that's a direct 220 feed—"

Rob, Donal's human shadow, snickered. "Ah, don't worry about frying Donal's brains. He hasn't any to speak of. All you'll do is reinforce his perm."

"And who was it had to have his phone taken away, 'cause he'd order every damn thing K-Swell ever made?" Donal countered. "Who was it came t'me in mortal terror, 'cause he'd broken a chain letter? Who was it that told Keighvin he'd seen Elvis baggin' groceries at Kroger? Hmm?"

"Beats me," Rob said cheerfully, his round face shining with amusement.

"Well, Skippy, I think I'll take that as an invitation—" Donal started to emerge—fist-first—or at least made motions as if he might.

"All right, all right! So I get a little carried away!" Rob sighed dramatically.

"Turn on the juice, Sam," Donal repeated, suppressed laughter in his voice. "Ye needna worry about me. 'Tisn't electricity I need to worry about; that I can handle—'tis enough like magic as makes no nevermind."

Sam plugged the machine in and turned it on, setting it through its cycle, still worried despite Donal's assurances.

"Well?" came a muffled voice. "Is it lyin' to us the way it should?"

Sam nodded, forgetting that Donal couldn't see him. To all intents and purposes, there was a full-blown smelting operation going on—temperature was rising, the aluminum about to slag down, the vacuum building up preparatory to foaming the molten metal—even though there was nothing attached to the computer console.

Or maybe Donal *could* see him. "How much in the way of 'accidents' do ye want now an' again?" Donal asked.

Sam thought, making mental calculations. "With a process this complicated, I'd expect a fail-rate of fifty percent. I'd be really suspicious if it was less than that."

"Fifty percent it is," Donal answered. "Here, I'll gi' ye a taste of it." A moment later, alarms went off, indicating a catastrophic failure of the injection system. The system powered itself down.

Donal climbed out a moment later, and stood up, brushing his black coverall off. "'Twon't always be the injection system," he said, full of happy pride at his own cleverness. "'Twill alternate. And we may get five 'failures' in a row before we get a 'good casting.' Danaa's light, that's amusing! Wish I could do

this sort of thing more often.”

“What exactly *did* you do?” Rob asked. Donal smirked.

“Nothing you can dup, lad, nor your evil twin, neither. I just engraved a few extra circuits into the machine where they won’t show; built ’em on the sensor-connections, then programmed ’em hard. So even if someone comes in an’ changes the stuff they can see, ’twon’t affect the outcome.” Donal’s grin got even wider. “Have t’say I’m right glad ye showed me how those computer-things work, now.”

“Even though I had to drag you into computer literacy kicking and screaming,” Rob taunted. “So, all we have to do is have one of the kenning Sidhe standing by to -supply the evidence in the mold or in the furnace if we happen to have visitors, hmm?”

“Exactly,” Sam said, feeling a wash of contentment come over him, despite the threats of the morning. Donal and Rob had told him, over and over again, that Donal could make these invisible mods to the computer-driven casting equipment, but until he’d seen it, he hadn’t dared believe it.

“I hate to admit it, but you did good, *Conal*,” Rob told the Sidhe.

“Thank ye kindly, *Skippy*,” Donal replied, slapping the little mechanic on the back so hard he staggered. “Gents, I have t’ be off; I’ve got mods to put in on m’ brother’s car.”

“I don’t think we’ll need your particular expertise any more today, Donal,” Sam said absently, as he ran another “casting” through the system, and this time got perfect “results.” “Everything else Rob and I can fake without mucking with the computers.”

Everyone was behaving perfectly normally; Sam was taking his cue from the rest, in spite of the fact that -tonight would be anything but normal.

Assuming Vidal Dhu carried out his threats. He might not, according to Donal. He might simply have issued a challenge without intending to follow through on it -seriously.

“He’s done that before,” Donal had said, sourly. “ ’Tis worth it to him just t’ muck us up for a night, make us waste energy and magical strength to counter a threat that was never real. Make us jumpy, make us chase our tails from midnight t’ dawn, and all for naught.”

The tall Sidhe (who reminded Sam strongly of G.E. Smith from the Saturday Night Live band) turned at the door and sketched a mocking salute before heading for the main shop building. As Sam and Rob finished setting up the rest of the equipment, with Rob running the fork-lift and Sam supervising the placement, Sam finally had the chance to ask a question that had been plaguing the life out of him all day.

“What’s with this ‘Skippy’ business?” he asked, as they brought the second smelter up online and plugged its controls into the computer console.

Rob laughed, and rubbed his short black beard with a finger. “That’s from when I first came into Fairgrove,” he said. “They already thought I was nuts, ’cause I do imitations of televangelists and bad game-show hosts at the drop of a hat. But then I kept seeing this one Sidhe all over, like, within seconds of the time I’d seen him somewhere else. And half the time, when I’d call him ‘Donal,’ he’d glare at me like I was simpleminded and say his name was *Conal*. I thought I was going crazy. Then somebody finally told me that there were two of the bastards, they were twins, and they’d been having a good laugh at my expense.” Rob chuckled. “I didn’t mind, I mean, if they’d been human that’s the first thing I would have

thought, but who ever heard of twin Sidhe? The birthrate's so low I'd never have believed it."

"So?" Sam replied. "That doesn't explain 'Skippy.'"

"Well, I turned the tables on them. Half the time when one of them saw me and called me 'Rob,' I'd glare and say my name was Skippy. And when I was Skippy is when I'd do the really outrageous stuff, like try to sell Donal his own tool-kit or something." Rob's grin was so infectious that Sam found himself grinning in return. "They -actually started to think I had a really crazy twin myself, named Skippy. It was weeks before anyone ever told them the human bad-movie joke about 'the evil twin, Skippy.' I thought when Dottie finally broke down and confessed that they were both gonna hang me right then and there."

Sam joined in Rob's laughter. "I'm surprised they didn't," he commented.

"I'd rather have been well-hung!" Rob grinned, and made sure the smelter was staying cold even though the computer console said it was red-hot. "Those two have a lot better sense of humor than anyone except Keighvin. I think it comes from hanging around Tannim so much."

Sam's response surprised even himself. "A lot of good things seem to come from hanging around Tannim," he said softly, half to himself. Then, a little embarrassed, he glanced over at Rob to see if the young man had overheard him.

Rob was nodding, uncharacteristically sober. "They do," he said, then—

"Sam, I have to tell you, I've got this *great* deal on a set of Ginsu steak knives, and if you order now, you get a free bamboo steamer—"

Sam chased him out of the building, brandishing a broom.

## CHAPTER NINE

Although she had every sense at her command locked onto her quarry, Aurilia "lost" the pair to everything but sight the moment they entered Tannim's car—and she lost the vehicle itself to President Street traffic soon after. The protections on the vehicle might have been set by Keighvin Silverhair, but Aurilia doubted it. Whatever other powers the boy had, he certainly drove like a demon. Once again she found herself forced to admit to a kind of grudging admiration for one of the enemy. . . .

But not for long. The aggravation of losing quickly overwhelmed the admiration. *Damn him, anyway. Crafty little monster. Where did he learn all that? Surely not from Silverhair. If I didn't know better, I'd suspect they'd managed to find some devil actually interested in buying his skinny little soul. . . .*

Still, Aurilia hadn't practiced her own particular brand of subterfuge for so many centuries without learning -patience. She found herself an out-of-the-way spot in one of the little "pocket parks" and sat in her Mercedes. Tannim could cloak himself, and even his car—but once the girl left his presence, she would register to Aurilia's mage-senses. And the girl was really what Aurilia was after at the moment.

It took longer than Aurilia had thought it would, but towards sunset, the girl finally "appeared" to Aurilia's -inner eye. She quickly triangulated with a mental map of the town, and determined that the girl

was at the corner of Bee and Wheaton streets.

She reached out in thought, and seized mentally on the nearest pigeon, taking over what little mind it had with her own. Pigeons were possibly the stupidest creatures on the planet, but that stupidity made them remarkably easy to enslave. When she was done with it, it would drop dead of shock, of course, but that didn't matter. One more dead pigeon on the sidewalk would excite no one except a -feral cat or dog.

She sent the bird winging in a direct line to the area where the girl loitered. With sunset coming, a pigeon was perhaps not the best choice of slave-eyes, but it would do. A grackle would have been better, but like all the corbies, it would have fought back too much, wasting time and energy before she could take it. An owl was the best, but Silverhair used those, the bastard. And frequently owls were not what they appeared to be.

She caught only glimpses of what the pigeon saw; just enough to guide it to her target. Fortunately, the girl was fairly conspicuous with her bleached-blond hair, even from above. Though darkness had fallen, the shock of pale straw made a kind of beacon for the bird's dimmed eyesight. So although the pigeon was not much good at flying by street-lamps, once the bird had the girl in sight, Aurilia had it land on a rooftop, and follow her in short flights, from tree to phone-line, to rooftop again.

Even by daylight the pigeon's eyesight wasn't particularly good, as birds went, but Aurilia made out enough detail that she was forced to wonder what on earth Tannim saw in this appalling little creature. It certainly wasn't her looks. She was scrawny, underfed, a modern version of one of Aurilia's own Victorian Street-Sparrow constructs. Clean—well, Aurilia would give her that much. She was clean. And young, if your taste ran to children. But cheap, tacky—tasteless. Perhaps that was why her glamorie at the pub hadn't worked—maybe Tannim was only attracted to cheap tarts. Maybe he only enjoyed sex with hookers, children, or both. . . . But that didn't fit his profile, didn't fit anything she'd been able to learn about him.

Peculiar. Once she'd seen him, he hadn't struck her that way; in fact, his attitude towards the girl, so far as she had been able to make out, was positively chaste. In any case, the girl's parents had to know what she was doing, unless they were even stupider than the pigeon.

The girl wound her way farther and deeper into one of the bad areas off Wheaton. Well, now it wasn't much of a surprise that she'd had Tannim drop her back there on the corner. Aurilia didn't wonder now why the girl hadn't wanted Tannim to see where she lived; she was probably ashamed of her home. If she lived here, her parents couldn't be much better than what was locally termed "poor white trash." That might be why they didn't put any restrictions on her dress, her movement, or her behavior—they probably didn't care.

The girl suddenly dashed across a street and up an enclosed staircase, catching Aurilia by surprise. She sent the pigeon to perch in a tree outside the first lighted window she saw.

She peered short-sightedly at the window, trying to determine if the bird could get any closer, and discovered that luck was with her. The girl passed in front of it, showing it was the right one; and not only that, it was open, with no screen to keep her from perching on the ledge.

She moved the pigeon in a fluttering hop from branch to ledge, and poked the bird's head cautiously inside. The place was appalling: filthy, bug-ridden, falling to pieces, with the only furniture being pallets on the floor. There were two rooms to the place; the girl and two other youngsters were in this one, and voices from the door beyond proved that there were at least two more in the other room. There were no parents, no adults of any kind, anywhere in sight. Within moments of listening to the conversation



between the children, it was clear to her that there were no adults in residence in the tiny apartment at all. There were perhaps a half dozen children living there, and now Aurilia knew exactly why the girl had looked and acted the way she did—for she recognized one of the other children. There was a girlishly-pretty young boy on a pallet at the side of the room, sleeping the profound sleep of the drugged with his face turned towards the window. Aurilia knew him very well indeed; she had just spent the past week editing film that had his face—and other parts—all over it.

It had been the “bondage-party” film (now called “Birthday Boy” and with three thousand copies already on -order) that had featured five of their customers and one “pickup.” The boy, called “Jamie,” if she recalled correctly, was a free-lance hooker and a runaway.

Suddenly, given Tannim’s notorious do-gooder impulses, many things fell into place. That was the attraction, then. *Tannim wants to save the girl if he can—and that fits right in with his profile. Meddling fool. Typical hero-wishing. Save her for what? A life of food-service?* Well, if he wanted to waste his time and resources on dead-end losers, Aurilia wasn’t going to stop him. Particularly not when his little hobby fit right in with Aurilia’s own plans. Not only her plans, but the current projects for Studio Two.

She withdrew her power in a burst of triumph, abruptly, allowing the pigeon to tumble unnoticed to the ground.

Tannim had expected Keighvin to jump all over him when he got back to the Fairgrove complex. After all, he had been scheduled to run test laps at Roebing, not spend the afternoon watching container ships and lolling around on the grass, however noble his motives.

*Maybe if I just tell him the truth . . . edited. Emphasizing the need the child’s in, and leaving out the lolling on the grass and the picnic dinner.*

But as he wound his way through the offices, a change in the schedule posted beside the machine-shop door caught his eye. It would have been hard not to notice it; under the track schedule was a red-circled “canceled” notice.

When he read it, he had to grin. *The old luck comes through again. Excellent.* Some time between when he’d left for lunch and when he was supposed to return, Keighvin had changed the scheduling. The track had been closed this afternoon for repairs after some damage from a tire-test this morning.

*A tire-test? What the hey?*

He grabbed the first person he saw when he got into the shops. “What happened at the track this morning?” he asked.

The mechanic, Donal—one of Keighvin’s Sidhe, and Tannim’s oldest friend Underhill except for Keighvin—grinned wryly. “Hard to believe, eh? Wouldn’t have -believed it meself if I hadna seen it. We had a series of new tires for the GTP test mule—same mule you were supposed to check brake mods and suspension geometry on. Well, seems our mods or the tires or both were a little *too* good.” Tannim watched the elven man rock back on his heels, eyes glittering.

“So what happened?” he asked, since Donal was obviously waiting for him to make some kind of response.

“Well, the lateral gees put a three-inch ripple in the asphalt on one of the turns.” Donal’s grin got even wider, and Tannim didn’t blame him; Donal was part of the crew responsible for the handling. This was something of a coup—for a mule to hug the track that hard on the turns said a lot.

But—a three-inch ripple? That was a lot of lateral. His expression must have said something of his surprise, as Donal held up a hand as if he was swearing to the fact.

“I promise; I measured it meself. We all saw it—a three-inch lump, plain as Danaa’s light, ten feet long. We had to hire a steamroller to flatten the track. Took us the rest of the day. Keighvin figured you’d see the posting and take off.”

Now Donal raised an eyebrow, because Tannim *should* have known what had happened, since it had undoubtedly been all over the shop; Tannim just shrugged. He wasn’t good enough to lie to a Sidhe, so he simply told part of the truth. “You know there’s never anyone to answer questions around here in the afternoon. I had a picnic out at the Fort. So, where’s Keighvin?”

“With Sam Kelly, at the forge-shop.” Donal grinned again, showing gleaming white teeth, teeth that were a little feral-looking. “Now ’tis a ‘forge’ in more ways than one. Sam seems to have concocted a process that will pass muster, and he’s moved that molten-metal equipment we kenneed out to the other shop. Says we’ll be ready for a cast of thousands.”

“Ech, that’s awful. ‘Forged’ engine blocks, hmm?” Tannim indulged the Sidhe; Donal was fond of puns. “And a ‘forged’ process. Well, I’d better get out there and see what Keighvin wants me to do now.”

He wound his way through metal and machinery to the roofed passage that joined this shop to the formerly-empty forge building. He noticed along the way that a lot of the computer-driven equipment was missing; presumably it had been moved to its new home.

Keighvin *should* have been glowing with cheer; the mods that had warped the track had certainly proved successful, and now he had a “process” that would explain where his engine blocks and other cast-aluminum pieces were coming from. But when Tannim found him, supervising the set-up and activation of some arcane-looking machine by that insanely cheerful human tech-genius Skippy-Rob, he didn’t look particularly happy.

Tannim wondered if something more had gone wrong than he’d been told, but it wasn’t that kind of expression. He’d seen the Sidhe display all kinds of moods, and it was the “unreadable” ones that he feared the most. Keighvin was a gentleman by any creatures’ standards, but he had his breaking points, and when he was near one . . . Keighvin looked up and saw him lurking out of the way, then beckoned the young mage over.

“What’s cooking?” Tannim asked casually. “Anything wrong with Sam’s phony process?”

“With the process—nothing,” Keighvin replied, rubbing one temple distractedly. “But—Vidal Dhu showed up at Sam’s this morning. Not inside the house, but he blocked Sam’s driveway long enough to deliver a message.”

“I think I can guess the message,” Tannim said slowly.

Keighvin nodded, grimly. “A threat, of course. At least he didn’t say, ‘And your little dog, too.’ The worrisome thing is that he’s managed to recruit a corps of lesser nasties, and they’re putting pressure on

our boundaries. Nothing like overt warfare, but—don't go into the woods after dark.”

“Any things we haven't taken out before?”

“Nothing any worse, so far as we can tell. I don't like it. And I don't like Sam being outside our hardened boundaries. I'm setting up our spare rooms here as sleeping-quarters for anyone who can't protect themselves, including Sam.”

The man in question had come around the corner during Silverhair's little speech, and waited until he had finished before leaving the work crew and joining them.

“You're worrying too much, Keighvin,” the old man said comfortably. “I've been going over my old gran's stories. I think I can hold off the boggles; enough to permit the cavalry to come over the hill to rescue me, anyway.”

Tannim noticed that the old man was wearing what looked like an Uzi holstered at his hip; Sam patted it as he finished his statement.

Tannim frowned, rubbing his eyes. “Sam, I don't mean to rain on your parade, but plain old bullets aren't going to stop Vidal, and they certainly aren't going to do anything to a creature like a troll that can heal itself—”

Sam pulled the gun from the holster and handed it to him, wordlessly. Tannim took it—and it slobbered. It was one of the old Uzi-replica water-pistols, and not a real gun at all.

“One of your local geniuses prepared this for me,” the old man said. “That's salt and holy water. That should take care of a fair number of yon blackguard's friends. I've got rosemary, rue, and salt in my pocket, and a horseshoe nail with them. There's an iron plate across every door and windowsill of the house, horse-shoes nailed up over every door and the fireplace, and sprigs of oak, ash, and thorn up there with them. A lass here is preparing iron-filled .357 hollowtips for me Colt, and meanwhile, there's this—”

He touched the sheath on his other side, and Tannim saw the hilt of a crudely-forged knife. He had no doubt that it was of good Cold Iron. Sam wasn't taking chances on *asteel* blade.

“That's all very well,” Keighvin warned, “but it won't hold them for long. They'll find ways around your protections and mine, eventually.”

Sam holstered his water-pistol. “Doesn't have to keep them busy for long,” he countered. “It'll hold them baffled for long enough. All I have to do now is supervise your setup, put my John Hancock to everything and write up my part in this deal. That's a matter of a couple of weeks at most. The rude bastard can bluster all he wants. Once I'm finished, you don't need *me* anymore. You just need my name.”

“But what if something goes wrong?” Keighvin asked. “There's nobody here that knows the language—”

“But this Vidal character doesn't know that,” Sam -replied. “He's like some of the really old execs at Gulfstream, the ones who didn't understand tech. He may even be a technophobe, for all we know. That kind thinks that once something technological is set in place, it sits and glowers and runs itself with no further help.”

Both Keighvin and Tannim snorted; Sam shrugged. “I know it makes no sense, but that’s the way these people think. All he’ll see is me sitting back in my chair, and letting you run the show. He’ll figure going after me is a waste of effort.”

Keighvin shook his head doubtfully, and Tannim had to agree with the Sidhe. He wasn’t convinced that Sam was right, either.

But Sam was an adult, and perfectly capable of -making his own decisions. Besides, Tannim had other problems.

“Keighvin, I know this is coming at the worst possible time,” he said, reluctantly, “but we’ve got another problem, too.” Briefly he outlined Tania’s situation, and the plight of the underage hookers she lived with. He hoped to catch Keighvin’s interest, but the Sidhe-mage shook his head regretfully.

“Damn ye, Tannim, your timing sucks. I can’t do anything for them right now,” he said, plainly unhappy with the situation. “I’m sorry, but we’re up to our pointy ears in alligators at the moment. I can’t do anything for them out there—and you can’t bring them here. I can’t have a single non-mage mortal inside the boundary right now,” he continued, frankly, laying the whole situation on the table so Tannim could see it. “And I’m stretching things to include Sam, because he believes and he’s got a bit of the Sight himself. Who knows what these children would do if they saw a skirmish with one of Vidal Dhu’s little friends out there? If they panicked, they could breach the shields. If they were taken in by appearances, they could actually bring Vidal inside.”

Tannim had to admit, reluctantly, that Keighvin was right. He didn’t want to say it out loud, though. *Maybe, just maybe, I can talk him into changing his mind.*

“If I let you bring them here, they’d at best be targets and weak spots,” Keighvin continued. “Can’t do that, no matter how desperate their situation seems to be, my friend. Keep siphoning them money; that’s easy enough. They’ve kept their necks above water this long, Tannim, they can keep a little longer. When we’ve finished with Vidal Dhu, you can coax them in to us, but right now they’d just be in more danger with us than they are now.”

Tannim grimaced. He didn’t like it—but Keighvin was the boss at Fairgrove. This was his territory, and he knew the strengths and weaknesses better than anyone else.

*So be it, Keighvin. I’ve got more to call on than spells. There’s always the magic of folding green.*

Keighvin eyed Tannim with a very readable expression—one of tired worry. He could read moods as well as minds. Tannim figured that Keighvin knew what his current expression meant. He met Keighvin’s eyes squarely, and a little defiantly.

*Yes, I am up to something.*

But it was too late tonight to do anything about the situation. Tania was safe for the rest of the night, at least, and with any luck at all, that hundred would keep her off the streets for another couple of days. That would be long enough for Tannim to get Plan B into gear.

*Assuming nothing happens between then and now. Like one of her friends getting tangled up with a pimp, or on the wrong side of a dealer, or—*

He cut the thoughts short. There was no use worrying about the kids right now; he'd do what he could, when he could.

"Look," he said, running his hand through his hair, catching on more snags than usual, "I'm beat. If there isn't anything you need me for, I'm going home to get some shut-eye. Are we rescheduling those tests for tomorr—I mean, today? Or is it tomorrow?" He rubbed his eyes, wishing in a way that he could run them now. Although he was tired, he was also full of nervous energy, and he wished he had somewhere to go with it.

"No, Goodyear has the track," Keighvin said, his expression one of mingled relief and apprehension. Tannim had a shrewd idea of why the Sidhe wore the latter. Keighvin had to be wondering now just *what* it was Tannim had in mind to do about the kids.

*Keep wondering.*

"We have it after Goodyear," Keighvin added. "You *are* going to be fit to drive, I hope? And you don't plan on going anywhere tonight, do you? Sam should be safe enough here." The statement indicated that he wasn't necessarily worried about Tannim's involvement with the kids.

*He thinks I'm going to go spend the rest of the night guarding Sam, or trying to hunt down Unseleighe creatures or something. Does he really think I'm that foolhardy?*

"Don't worry, I don't plan on running out and hunting the kids—or Vidal Dhu—down tonight," Tannim replied with irritation. "I've got a little more sense than that. If the kids can wait, so can Vidal. He's not going anywhere. If he comes after us here, he's a fool, but you don't need me here to face him down."

Now the relief was so palpable on Keighvin's face that Tannim restrained himself from a sharp retort only by reminding himself that Keighvin didn't deserve it.

*It's not his fault that you can't hit the broad side of a barn when you're tired. And it's not being paranoid on his part to worry about having you around when you're wonky. Conal may forgive you in a couple of hundred years, but what if you'd gotten more than his hair?*

It was something Tannim didn't like to think about. And he hated being reminded of this new weakness of his. If only there was something he could do about it—

But Keighvin was waiting for him to say something; he managed a tight smile, and flexed his shoulders. "I'm heading straight for bed," he said. "You know where to find me if you need me."

Keighvin was too aware of his own dignity to give him a comradely slap on the back, but Sam wasn't. "We'll be seeing you some time in the afternoon, then?" the old man asked, as Tannim staggered a little beneath Sam's heavy hand.

Keighvin lifted an ironic eyebrow. "Aye, do check in some time, won't you? So we can let you know what the schedule is."

Tannim controlled his expression carefully, so that none of his guilt would leak through. *He's got a suspicion I played hooky. It's a good thing this isn't your normal business. . . .* "I'll call when I wake up, but I'd like to come in after dark, if that's all right with you," he said. "It may take that long to get recharged."

This time he wasn't quite so irritated with Keighvin's reaction to his implied exhaustion, since it was working in his favor.

"Take all the time you need," the Sidhe replied quickly. "I'd rather have you take a couple more hours to get into top form than to come in at less than full strength."

Tannim nodded, trying his best to keep it from looking curt. "See you later, then."

He turned and walked out, back through the darkened office complex, back to the safe haven of the Mustang. It would take more than Vidal Dhu to get through the protections on the Mach 1, and he relaxed a little as he slid into the seat and shut the door.

There were times he wished that he'd taken Keighvin's offer of an elvensteed to replace the Mustang, especially when he was tired. It was a great honor for a mortal to be offered an elvensteed, and it would have been really nice to have a car that could find its own way home.

On the other hand, there was enough Cold Iron in the Mach 1 to give any Unseleighe Court critter more than it cared to handle. Keighvin couldn't even ride in it without pain. Tannim was glad of the new "plastic cars" for the sake of his friends, but when it came to keeping his own hide safe, arcanelly and mundanely—he'd take good American sheet metal every time.

He thought, as he drove through the gates, that he sensed a lurking nastiness in the woods. But it was too dark to see much, even with mage-sight, and he was too tired to really want to risk a confrontation with anything. That nervous energy that had filled him was draining away a lot faster than he'd thought it would.

He drove carefully—and slowly, for him—back down the dark, near-deserted highway to his little rented house on the outskirts of Savannah. Normally he wouldn't have bothered renting anything as large as a house—but this place had some advantages that outweighed every other consideration. For one thing, it had a three-car garage almost as big as the house itself; whoever had built it must have been a real car-nut, or needed a hell of a workshop. The Mustang and all the gear Tannim needed to keep it in pristine condition no matter *what* he put it through fit comfortably inside.

But there were even more important considerations. The house and yard were hidden from the road by a thick ring of tall evergreens—which themselves were planted far enough from the house that while someone could have used them for cover, to get to the buildings an intruder would have had to cross a good-sized expanse of bare, weedy lawn, mowed short every week by the rental -company.

The ring of evergreens was perfectly circular. It was, in fact, a Circle of the protective variety, and had been that way before Tannim moved in. Possibly even long before; the trees were old, fifty, maybe as much as a hundred years old. Had they been ensorceled that long? It was certainly possible. Sorcery invested in living things, unlike that invested in nonliving things, tended to stick around long after the caster was dust—and could even grow and flourish on its own.

The house itself was much younger, but it had been built on an old foundation. Who had built the place this way, Tannim had no idea. The rental agency simply admin-istered it, kept things repaired, collected his rent. There had been protections on the house and garage, too, but since they had been based on dead wood rather than living, and the electricity had been off so that the protections cast into the circuitry had drained away, those shields had been faded by the time *he* rented the place. The agency had been pathetically grateful; evidently they'd had a hard time finding a tenant.

*Maybe the trees themselves kept out people they didn't like.* It was possible; there was the same feeling of semi-awareness about the trees as there was to the Mustang. Odd how he didn't even react to such things anymore.

Still, with the privacy and all, it was kind of odd that no one had come along that wanted to rent it before he saw it. On the other hand, for a house, the place was kind of small; too small for a family, and yet the rent was a little too steep for most single people. It was worth it—in an effort to find a tenant, the agency had installed new appliances. But the rent was still a little steep, even so.

For whatever reason, the place had stayed vacant for a couple of years until Tannim came along. The little one-bedroom cottage was perfect for him. The only other thing he wished he had was a Jacuzzi—and if he stayed, he could always install that in the garage.

He thumbed the garage-opener as he drove up the drive; his electronics weren't quite as fancy as Sam's, but then again, he wasn't as much of an engineer as Sam was. Twin floodlights came on over the garage door, two more went on inside, and the door rose majestically on a miniature equivalent of the Fairgrove shops.

The Mustang rolled inside, and the door descended again, noisily. It was a little noisier than most, because it was heavier than most: five joined slabs of steel. Bombproof, he would have said. The door predated his occupancy, too.

Every so often he wondered what on earth the owner had been into that he needed a garage door that would withstand a B-52 strike.

He opened the Mustang's door, then paused, as all of the strain of the past week came down on him with a rush. Up until today, the test runs out at Roebing Road had alternated with sessions on the mods, all day and into the night. And when he hadn't been working on the mods, he'd been working, magically, on Sam's defenses. They weren't as good as the ones here, and he wasn't going to stop until they were—

Or until they buried Vidal Dhu and his friends.

He dragged himself up out of the bucket seat, and stumbled towards the door into the house. Fortunately, it led straight into the kitchen, and temporary salvation.

He leaned up against the fridge door for a moment, until the hum of the compressor starting up jarred him out of his tired daze. He pulled the door open and reached inside, blindly taking out a brand-new, unopened bottle of Gatorade with one hand. The other hand groped on top of the fridge and encountered crackling plastic. He brought down what he had found, and looked at it blearily as he shoved the fridge door shut with his hip.

Corn chips. Close enough to food.

He got as far as the tiny kitchen table, dropping down into the chair like a sack of deer antlers. There was an entire row of brown bottles and jars on the back edge of the table against the wall; vitamins, minerals, amino -acids. He opened the bottle of Gatorade, ripped open the sack of chips, and began opening each of the bottles in turn, spilling out a couple of each until he had a little heap of pills in front of him. Then he began popping them into his mouth, methodically, washing them down with swigs from the bottle of Gatorade, alternating pills with a handful of chips until pills, chips, and Gatorade were all gone.

*Well, that takes care of the IOU to my body.*

He thought about a hot bath, stood up, and decided, when he went lightheaded, that the bath could wait. He turned off the kitchen light and stumbled into the bedroom, past the stark living room. The living room always depressed him, anyway—it looked so empty. There were two armchairs that had come with the house, a floor-lamp, and his old stereo. The good rig was in the bedroom; anyone who broke in would probably figure Tannim didn't have anything worth stealing. Which was mostly true; he hadn't accumulated much in his years of traveling. *Moving fast keeps you from hanging onto much.*

He flipped on the bedroom light; and there was The Bed—the single piece of furniture he had acquired and held onto through so many changes of address that he'd forgotten half of them.

It was the size of two king-size beds put together, and completely filled the bedroom. The basis for construction had been two orthopedic hospital beds, complete with controls, with a flat section in between. The bookcase-headboard behind it went up to the ceiling, and held mirrors, speakers, a lot of his audio gear, bed controls, and remotes for the TV and VCRs across the room on the shabby bureau. Plus a tiny bar-fridge and microwave. It had padded rails, and one section of the padding on each side flipped up like the armrests on a first-class airline seat; inside were tray-tables. When he was really hurt or sick, he didn't even have to leave The Bed except to hit the bathroom.

He'd found it (sans electronic gear, but wired with four power-strips and its own pair of breaker-boxes) in a Goodwill store in Dallas. It had been made in Germany, and he'd always figured its previous owner was one of the victims of the slump in oil prices. Occasionally he looked at it, and wondered why he'd hung onto it with such tenacity. It was a stone bitch to move, and holding onto any piece of furniture was so completely unlike him that keeping this monster was insane. But then he'd get hurt, or he'd have one of his days when he'd wake up after a race or a fight hardly able to move, and he'd *know* why he kept it. He'd never find another like it. And it at least gave him one constant in all of his changes of address.

Too bad that he seldom had anyone to share it with.

He edged into the clear slot at the foot, and peeled off his shirt. Beneath it was his body-armor; one of the other reasons he hadn't been overly worried about an ambush by Vidal Dhu. It looked like a unitard, but it was composed of thousands of tiny hexagonal scales, enameled in emerald green. As he slid his pants off, the cool scales slipped smoothly, silkily, under his hands. It had been a project he and Chinthliss had worked on for three months, to the exclusion of everything else.

There were no seams. That was because every scale was joined magically to every other scale, and it could be opened where and when he chose. Though if he was ever unconscious, it would take someone like Keighvin to get it off him. . . .

So he just wouldn't get in any accidents.

Right.

He crooked one finger, which was the only component of the set-spell to open the suit, and ran the fingernail up the front. The armor opened and he shrugged it off, -exactly like a dancer squirming out of a costume.

Beneath the armor were the scars.

Starting from the first, a knife-scar on the forearm he got protecting a potential mage, to the latest,



teeth-marks that marked his leg from hip to ankle, his body was criss-crossed with a network of lines. They ranged from the thin white lines of old wounds, to the red of the newly healed.

*I'm certainly not going to win any bikini contests.*

Without the added support of the body-armor, his leg ached distantly, his shoulders felt like knotted wire ropes, and The Bed looked more inviting than ever.

But there was one more thing to do before he collapsed for the night.

He reached to the nearest shelf, and took out the tiny jar of Tiger Balm he kept there. Actually, he kept more than one in there—there was nothing worse than reaching for the only thing that could ease those constant aches only to find the jar empty.

He sat down on the edge of the bed, on the padded rail. With habit that had become ritualized, he applied the salve over every aching muscle. Before he had finished rubbing it into his shoulders, the heat had begun to soothe his aching leg.

He sighed, put the jar back, and crawled into the bed's embrace, fumbling for the light-switch and dropping the room into total blackness, without even a hint of outside light. The electronic clocks of the VCRs bothered him though, enough that he briefly considered flinging a towel over them before deciding he could just bury his head instead. His last conscious thought was to pull the blankets up over himself and burrow into them, before the exhaustion he had been holding off with both hands won the battle and flung him into sleep.

## CHAPTER TEN

Sam glanced over at Keighvin as Tannim retreated. The young man had looked tired and worried, and Sam knew the “why” of both. Tannim had put in several after-hours sessions reinforcing the protections on Sam's house; that took a lot more out of him than mere loss of sleep. And there was no doubt that he was worried about the kids, Tania especially.

*He has reason to be. She takes her health, if not her life, into her hands everytime she walks the streets.*

Sam had more immediate worries on his mind, and so did Keighvin. There was something Keighvin hadn't told Tannim. The Unseleighe Sidhe had shown up this morning outside Sam's house with more than a personal warning. He'd delivered a warning to Fairgrove as well, in the form of a challenge; time and place specified for tonight, at the Fairgrove boundaries. And despite Donal's attempts at reassurance, Sam trusted Keighvin's judgment, and Keighvin was worried.

“It's traditional,” Keighvin had said. “You always warn your opponent before you attack—if they're of the Folk, that is.” Then he'd smiled, but without humor. “Of course, the warning can consist of sending back the pieces of someone, appropriately gift-wrapped.”

Sam had winced a little; it was one thing to hear about the bloodthirstiness of the Sidhe in a tale, and another to feel it so close to home. “What about mortals?” he'd asked. “Why did I rate a warning?”

Keighvin had pondered for a moment, as if the question hadn't occurred to him. "Probably because you were protected too well to attack easily. Mortals—well, mortals in general just don't rate any courtesy, Sam. I'm afraid the Unseleighe Court deems mortals one short step above cockroaches."

At that Sam had grinned widely. "Could be they forget what good survivors cockroaches are," he had offered. Keighvin had laughed and slapped him on the back.

As soon as Tannim got out of earshot, he asked the question that he couldn't voice while Tannim was around. "Why didn't you tell young Tannim about the rest of the warning?" he asked the Sidhe. Keighvin shrugged.

"He's too tired to be of much use to us right now," Keighvin said with resignation. "He plays hero too much for his own good, and he'd be right here pitching levin-bolts, exhausted or no, if we'd told him. I'd rather not have the lad at my back when he's this worn down." Sam looked at him quizzically, and Keighvin coughed, -embarrassed.

"Lately Tannim gets a little—erratic—when he's tired," the Sidhe said, carefully.

*Erratic, hmm? Just what's that supposed to mean?*

"How so?" Sam probed. "Level with me, Keighvin. What are we talking about here?"

Keighvin shook his head. "Truth to tell, Sam, I'd just as soon not have Tannim anywhere nearby when he's -exhausted. His intended targets are safer than his allies. Lack of endurance, I fear."

Sam didn't know whether to be amused or alarmed. It was funny now, but it might not be that funny later, if he found himself having to dodge—what?

"Is this bad aim just with his magic?" Sam asked. Keighvin sighed.

"Magic, fisticuffs, guns, 'tis everything, anything that requires aiming." He spread his hands. "The last time it happened, we were picking slugs out of the walls for a fortnight, and poor Conal still hasn't regrown the hair Tannim scorched from his scalp."

Conal, a few feet away, looked up at the sound of his name, and scowled from under the brim of his baseball cap. Sam recalled now that the Sidhe-mechanic had looked rather odd when he'd removed the cap to scratch his head. He'd had a swath about two inches wide shaved from front to back, in a kind of reverse Mohawk. Sam had wondered at the time if it was some sort of new fashion—many of the younger elves had taken to punk and cutting-edge clothing with a glee unmatched by any human over -eight-teen. Now he knew better, at least in Conal's case.

"A near-miss," Keighvin continued, "and damned lucky it wasn't nearer than it was. Eh. Poor lad never was very sharp with a gun anyway." He shook his head again. "Wish we could get that glittery friend of his with the odd name to magic him up some endurance, but I fear that's asking for a miracle. He hasn't been the same since he got that leg of his chewed on."

*That explains the limp.* Sam thought about asking about just what had been responsible for that injury, saw Keighvin's face, and decided against it. *There are some things man wasnot meant to know.*

Instead, he glanced at one of the many clock-calendars mounted around the shop. Not because anyone was on a timeclock, but because it was very easy to lose all track of time in here. Work continued every

hour and day of the week—there were deadlines to be met, and later, once Sam and Keighvin had convinced the world that Fairgrove was a reliable, legitimate concern, there would be production schedules for outside clients as well.

It was ten-to-twelve. The Unseleighe Sidhe's challenge had specified midnight as the hour of attack.

And even as he looked up at the clock, folk and Folk all over the shop were putting up tasks and taking weapons from the unlikeliest hiding places. Conal opened the top drawer of his rolling tool-chest and produced a matched pair of filigreed swords; a pretty little human girl Sam had thought no more than eighteen went to the first-aid kit on the wall and opened it up. She took out a closely-wrapped bundle and unwrapped the silk from what it contained: a gunpouch. Keighvin had explained the insulating properties of silk when he'd asked Sam to be sure and wrap anything of doubtful content in a square of the stuff from a pile kept beside the door before bringing it into the shop.

She opened the gunpouch itself, and the gleam of more silk showed Sam that the pouches had also been silk-lined, as double protection against the disruptive effects of that much steel inside the shop. The pouch contained a Glock Model 22. Everyone at Fairgrove that was a marksman used these nine-millimeters; that way all the ammo and magazines matched. Sam was the only exception, and there hadn't been time to find or get used to a new gun.

There was an entire row of those silk-wrapped bundles in the kit. The girl handed one to another mechanic, and slapped her acquisition into a shoulder holster.

Sam patted his water-Uzi to be sure it was still with him. His granny's tales had been very specific about the effects of salt water on some creatures, like boggles—and one of the mechanics, seeing what it was he had on his hip, had stopped him long enough to put some kind of pagan blessing on it. She'd said she'd made it into "holy water"—and Sam's granny had been quite adamant about how effective holy water was on the "bad Sidhe." It made him a little uneasy, though; he wasn't certain that was the kind of "holy water" Granny'd had in mind.

But then, again . . . maybe it was.

He also had a silk-wrapped bag of iron filings in his pocket, but unless he could find a way to use them safely, they were going to stay there. Using an area-effect weapon like the iron filings could be as disruptive to his friends as to the enemy.

*Like using a nuclear hand grenade.*

Keighvin had spoken of the elven trouble with magic near iron earlier that day as they walked around the Fairgrove grounds. It had surprised Sam that he'd treated it like any other conversation topic, only wrinkling that smooth, passive brow when he mentioned the effects of iron's contact with elven flesh. He'd explained that the Sidhe's bodies thrived on magic itself, as well as food and drink, and the touch of Death Metal was a poison—a corrosive one. Then he'd gone on. The touch of iron was like a lens focusing light—to burn. It seemed that iron in its purer forms attracted the "frequency" of magical -energy the elves used, much like a magnet, and warped it in ways that were often dangerous for the mage. Sam had said it was like a planet's gravity affecting every other heavenly body, always slightly tugging it off-target even from a distance, and Keighvin had nodded energetically. Then Keighvin leaned against a very thick fencepost, and said conspiratorially, "Therein's our advantage in the fight -tonight. We've discovered that different iron alloys warp the magic in different ways—and we know how to see the alloys now. Magically."

Then he'd leaned back, very obviously smug.

Sam was not going to be in the front lines for this little confrontation; Keighvin had been quite firm about that. He was to be in the second rank, with the archers and others whose distance-weapons could not be fired from hiding. The humans on the crew who were good shots would be firing from cover, or protecting mages from physical attack. The others would be wading in hand-to-hand with weapons of steel and Cold Iron.

Keighvin had produced a shining, blue-sheened sword from out of nowhere (literally) and headed towards the outside entrance. Sam followed the Sidhe out, and stood behind him as he conferred with two other Folk and an obviously retired GI employee. They pointed out sections of Fairgrove on a map, and likely avenues of attack. Sam got the impression they knew the grounds very well, and had a few hundred dirty tricks ready. They nodded to each other, traded code-words, and checked radio headsets. Abruptly, the four split up, and Keighvin motioned Sam to follow him, speaking tersely into his mouthpiece.

The two walked briskly into the parking area, where Sam realized he wasn't quite yet used to the mixture of machin-ery and magic at Fairgrove. Before him were a half-dozen figures; a few humans in Cats Laughing and Ian Falconer concert-tour sweatshirts and faded jeans strapped on -ballistic-cloth vests, and checked magazines and radio earpieces. The rest of the group stood among them, long hair in braids or falling like silvered snow over the intricate armor of the elven Courts, settling the same sort of earpieces into gently upswept, pointed ears. One of them carried a US Army-surplus first-aid kit duct-taped to his enameled armor; another swung a handful of aluminum baseball bats as she warmed up for the coming battle. He watched the Lamborghini and Dino ripple and shift into a pair of tall, glittering "horses." They stamped, and their hooves struck sparks.

Keighvin swept the sword suddenly in a great vertical circle, cutting a groove into the asphalt. Blue sparks traced along its arc, and followed the blade up, leaving a semicircular "mirror" suspended in midair. Images showed within the mirror immediately, lit in tremendous contrast. "Here is where they are now," he said, "and this is what we know of them. Janie on camera has picked out five boggles, and three trolls on their front line. Four rows of goblins, thirteen each, are after them, Danaa only knows why. Here is their leader." The image sharpened so quickly that a stab of pain shot through his head behind his eyes, and Sam took an involuntary step back from the thing he saw. One of the humans whistled in mock appreciation and a little fear; another human female snorted and pulled the slide on her gun.

"You know the routine—we've gone over it before. Plug your other ear, or make enough noise to disrupt its effects. Dottie, you shouldn't have too much trouble doing that for all of us." The woman giggled and let the slide smack back into place. The rest laughed along as she stroked the extra five magazines she carried affectionately. "Donal, take Sam with you, watch him and watch your back. Dottie, Jim, Cuil, follow me and fan on my signal. Take the creek oak, Kieru. Anything goes sour, medical is here, and -escape is by Thunder Road."

Sam ran through what he knew of Fairgrove. *Seven of the lot are medics; Thunder Road is what they call the driveway. Oh, Holy Mother.*

Two more elvensteeds appeared so suddenly that Sam was startled, and blushed in embarrassment over it. Donal jerked a thumb over his shoulder, and led the way inside again. He half-ran through the corridors to a well-lit room where scores of television screens glittered in the eyes of a single woman wearing a full headset, who spoke information so quickly it sounded like a chant.

"Keighvin, camera three shows the first and second ranks of goblins are splitting to let the leader

advance. Two trolls are flanking, past camera six, coming into camera twelve. Wire shows crossing at the creek—camera six shows the other two trolls now, following the first two. Camera twenty has all of the boggles moving as one unit towards the forge. Carrie, you show clear to intercept from the other side. . . .”

Even an armchair general could see what was going on. *These bogeymen havena’ plan atall that I can see. They’ve got a sorry lot to face these people.*

Donal leaned close to Sam and said, “Sarge Austin says a deployment like this shows the leader is such an egotist he thinks he can’t be defeated.”

“We still haven’t seen his second rank, or his reserve. Maybe he’s right,” someone muttered, sounding nowhere near as confident as Donal. Nods around the room echoed that sentiment.

On one screen, Sam saw Keighvin look directly into the camera, and unexpectedly smile and wave. He mouthed, “Hi, Mom!” and then moved on. It was obscenely absurd with the battle at hand and the odds so greatly against them, but despite himself, Sam smiled.

Donal only shook his head and said, “Danaa, he’s been around that boy Tannim too long.”

Janie paused for one long heartbeat, then spoke again: “Keighvin . . . their second rank just arrived. You aren’t gonna like it.”

Donal spat a curse in elven, and began running.

Panting and with a pain in his side, Sam came to a rest at Donal’s back after a sprint through the offices and garages of Fairgrove. They had only paused for a moment in the body shop, so Donal could find an earpiece for Sam; all they could find was an old, taped-up full headset with a battered power pack, stenciled with a SWAT logo. It crackled horribly when activated, but settled down after the initial protest, and then they were running again. Now they were outside, and Sam heard Keighvin’s voice in his ears.

“Janie, dim the cameras in five, then hit the spots. Ready on the Pinball.”

Donal crouched down and covered his eyes. Sam did the same, still wondering what this “Pinball” could be. An area-effect weapon? Some kind of spell? Keighvin had told him how all the iron around Fairgrove would disrupt any magic the elves used. . . .

The grounds lit up in brilliant light as hundreds of halogens came to life. Sam squinted against the glare and then gasped as he saw what they faced.

*Oh Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name . . .*

Caught in the daylike brightness were creatures out of his nightmares and old stories—although under that much candlepower, they looked only like so many special-effects puppets. All except their leader. It was unmistakably real, horrifyingly real, riding a creature that might once have been a horse, but now was tattered hide stretched over bone, fang-filled mouth, and evil, glint-of-fire eyes. The leader’s ragged clothing whipped in a wind that seemed to blow from Sam’s own soul, and he knew the Bane-Sidhe for what it was. Around it were rank upon rank of gray-and-green skinned goblins, wicked weapons drawn,

and great shambling trolls with glistening knobby skin. Virtually all of them were cringing and clutching at their eyes. Behind them, in the second rank, were—Sidhe. Tall, -silver-haired, dusky-eyed, identical to the Fairgrove Sidhe, and yet as different as a surgeon's scalpel and an assassin's dagger.

*Unseleighe Sidhe.* The first besides Vidal Dhu that Sam had seen. They carried some sort of weaponry that looked vaguely gun-shaped—all but four of the tallest. The quartet raised their arms and gestured, gathering sickly green light around their hands, and Sam knew the attack had begun.

“Come on, ye bastards,” Donal muttered. “A little closer. Just a little closer—”

They didn't immediately oblige him; instead, some of the skinnier goblins peered, squinting, through the halogen glare, and the Unseleighe Sidhe raised crossbows. They looked odd; when they fired them into the trees where the hidden humans with firearms were waiting, Sam realized why.

Fairgrove wasn't the only group to have pirated technology, and although this was a simpler level of tech, it was no less deadly. The Unseleighe Sidhe had armed themselves with compound crossbows, and the bolts glowed with the same evil green as the mages were gathering about their hands.

“Shit,” Donal spat. “Elf-shot. The pricks brought elf-shot.”

And from the sudden cries of pain in the trees, those bolts had found marks among the humans. Some shots rang out from the trees in answer, but the Unseleighe mages cast a curtain of deflecting energy across their front ranks, and four boggle-mages emerged from the woods.

*That'll be their attackers—*

Encouraged by their success, the enemy leader gestured his troops to move forward under the crossbowmen's covering fire.

The boggle-mages gestured, as if about to throw something.

Keighvin's voice came clearly, calmly through the headphones: “Janie, Pinball now.”

Then Sam realized why the elven leader had been so smug. The fencepost he'd leaned on earlier that day—and every other fencepost—cracked open along its top and revealed a dark metal bar, trailing shreds of silk cloth as they rose. The grounds-sprinklers popped up from the ground, refracting the artificial daylight in huge rainbows.

*The tricky bastards!*

The boggles unleashed their spells, and the bolts of searing energy careened madly across the field. One looped in a devastating arc, incinerating a half-dozen goblins before striking the boggle itself, who fell to the ground writhing in agony.

*The beautiful, tricky bastards, they built silk-wrapped iron bars into the fenceposts! Sam's mind swam with amazement. They ran lines to those posts when the sprinklers were installed, and it only takes turning one valve to raise the bars when you activate the sprinklers. . . .*

The bars themselves warped the paths of both the magical energy blasts and the enchanted elf-shot. And that was why it was called “Pinball,” he realized, as he watched the spell-bolts the boggles had unleashed tear through their own ranks like silver balls in an arcade game, until they ran out of targets to burn.

He could see the flashes of gunfire around him, and felt the dull thuds muffled by the earphones. There were bodies down on their side, but most of them seemed to be moving, at least—

And now the odds looked to be even; tech on the Fairgrove side, numbers and bloodthirstiness on the Unseleighe side, as the crossbowmen changed from elf-shot to plain bolts with dark, glittering heads, that flew through the Pinball field with courses unaltered. Keighvin and Janie barked information to the team leaders, and the lines of tracer fire mixed with the enemy's spell-bolt trails. Donal stood behind a wild cherry tree and fired a longbow, measuring his shots very carefully, felling one goblin after another. Then the spells from Fairgrove began, and the odds altered again, this time in their favor.

*Pinball. Good Lord they're brilliant.*

Keighvin had said that different iron alloys pulled elven magic—and Sam realized that those amounts could be *measured*. Like scientists used a planet's gravity to launch a satellite into orbit, the elven mages were *using* the known effect of iron on their spells to deflect their shots into their attackers, and destroy the enemy's accuracy!

Levin-bolts from human and elven mages lanced out from the buildings, the human ones tracking straight and true, the elven bolts arcing gracefully into their targets as they were pulled by the iron-alloy bars. The enemy's magickers launched spells back, and watched in horror as their attacks not only missed, but circled back out of control like unguided fireworks rockets inside the -perimeter marked by the fenceposts. Keighvin ordered someone to fire "the magnet," and began counting backwards. When he reached two, the spellfire of the defenders halted, and Sam watched a crossbow bolt strike the ghastly horse their leader rode a moment later. Although he couldn't hear it, he could see Donal shout "Yes!"

Then the spells started up again, and Sam realized why the layout had seemed so familiar as the bolts disappeared around the other side of the buildings—and reappeared moving faster around the other side, racing around the inside of the fenceposts in a league-wide stream of death. They accelerated.

*I'll be damned. Fairgrove's built like a simple electric motor—or a cyclotron. The posts are the electromagnets, the bolts the brushes. . . . I don't believe it! The more power you add, the faster the drum spins . . . and the magnet will—*

Sam never even needed to finish the thought, as he watched the spell-bolts swirling around the complex track in, one by one, on the single solid iron bolt embedded in the Nightmare's chest. There was a silent explosion, and a great coruscating ball of fire spread for a hundred feet. When it cleared, there was a smoking pile of shredded flesh and rags marking what had once been a Nightmare.

But the rider was still moving, and had pulled back its hood.

Its face was a contorted image of pain, hatred, sadism, every vile emotion a human could possess, magnified a thousandfold. Its eyes glittered with cruelty and hunger, desiccated skin wrinkling around the sockets as it opened its mouth to scream. A low, painful sound built in Sam's ears, like bone scraping concrete. It rose in pitch as the creature wailed, giving him a shooting pain that ricocheted in his head like the spell-bolts racing around the complex. Sam tried to concentrate on what Keighvin and Janie were saying, not wanting to ponder the fact that a few dollars' worth of surplus police equipment was all that was saving him from the deadly wail of the Bane-Sidhe.

Sam and Donal broke from their cover and ran to crouch in the bushes around the forge building, but the creature lashed out at them with a whiplike tendril of crackling green fire. The blaze caught Donal in the

chest, and heaved him off his feet, The Bane-Sidhe strode through the water-sprays, inside the lethal wall of spell-bolts, its head still tipped back in a wide-mouthed shriek.

Sam crouched over Donal while the monster -approached, and saw that he was still breathing—but barely. The breastplate had been breached in three places he could see, twisted and seeping a bright red fluid that looked as human as any blood Sam had ever seen. Sam felt a dog-like growl of anger rumbling in his chest, and he stood and pulled the Uzi.

*I'll be damned if ye'll get away with that, y'black -bastard.*

Narrowing his eyes, Sam trained the watergun on the horror stalking towards him, trigger pulled as he leveled it. It primed and fired when the Bane-Sidhe was only two arms-lengths from him, and the holy water struck and burned, burned like sulfuric acid. Its scream turned from one of attack to terror as it caught “fire,” deep channels burning into its flesh where the water touched, black blood streaming, and the last thing Sam saw in its eyes before it turned to run—was fear.

In a little pocket of Underhill chaos, hastily built into an island of protection, Vidal conjured another torrent of water. Once again, he sluiced the Bane-Sidhe down. The liquid poured over Niall, who lay face-down on the rubbery, soft floor, in a quivering heap of pain and suffering, rags plastered to his unnaturally thin body. Niall's howl had died down to a whimper, which was a blessing. It wasn't the purposeful scream of a Bane-Sidhe's vocal attack, but Niall's cries of agony had called up corresponding pain in his ally, even through Vidal's hastily-conjured earplugs of wax.

The ultra-pure water, carefully warmed to blood-heat, was having an effect. Finally, Niall's whimpers faded and were replaced by hoarse, exhausted breathing.

Vidal conjured a warm breeze to dry the Bane-Sidhe. He hadn't bothered to remove the creature's rags—he hadn't dared. He didn't want to know what lay beneath them.

Slowly, the Bane-Sidhe uncurled, as the rags dried and fluttered in his artificial wind. “Are you all right?” Vidal asked carefully.

“No,” the Bane-Sidhe whispered raggedly. “But I shall mend.” Then, as if the words had been dragged out of him unwillingly, “I thank you for your quick thinking. And you are right.”

“Right?” Vidal replied, surprised. “About what, pray?”

“Keighvin Silverhair.” There was no mistaking the venom in the Bane-Sidhe's voice now, the acidic hatred. “He has become contaminated with these mortals to the point that he is a great danger to us. He must be removed.”

Vidal nearly lost his jaw. Those were the last words he expected to hear out of Niall; the Bane-Sidhe's stubborn refusal to admit he was ever wrong was legendary.

“I will help—when I have recovered,” Niall concluded faintly. “But what do we do in the meantime? We have been routed.”

“Not necessarily,” Vidal said slowly, thinking of the silk-wrapped bundle he'd left Underhill. Aurilia had given it to him just this morning, after he'd issued the challenge.



“Keighvin and his fools have one strength,” she’d told him, handing the tear-gas grenade to him, after showing him how to handle the weapon with silk-lined leather gloves, and how to pull the pin by means of the nylon cargo-tie she’d fastened to it in case he lost the gloves. “Their pet mortals know our weaknesses and exploit them, and they’re using the mortals’ weapons whenever they can. You’d best get ready to do the same if you want to -defeat them.”

He’d laughed at her at the time. Now—

Now he was coming to the reluctant conclusion that she was brighter than he had thought.

“I think I have a way to even the score a little,” he said, slowly. “If nothing else—I think I can force one of the vermin out of its hole. The one, not incidentally, that got you.”

The Bane-Sidhe’s head turned sharply, and Vidal thought he saw the glitter of eyes inside the darkness of its hood, and despite himself, he shuddered.

“Do that,” Niall said tersely, “and every power I have is at your call, without reservation.”

Vidal held back the thrill of triumph, at least enough to keep it from showing on his face.

Sam unlocked the door and turned to lock it behind him—for although Vidal could not pop in magically, there was nothing stopping the Sidhe from walking in mundanely through the door unless Sam was very careful. The house was much too quiet without Thoreau padding up to greet him, but Sam was glad now that he had sent the spaniel to a kennel for safety until this was all over.

*That’s one non-combatant out of the way, anyway,* he told himself. He’d done everything he could to cover his tracks, too; he’d paid in advance, then registered the dog under a neighbor’s name, with her agreement, telling her he was going to be on a consulting job and might not be home for a while. It would take a great deal of investigation for the enemy to learn that Thoreau belonged to Sam. And by then, with luck, this would all be over.

He made sure that his new crowbar—one of six—was still in the umbrella stand by the door, and headed for the library. He still wanted to double-check something before he turned in for the night—what there was left of it.

Certainly the last thing he ever expected when he took this job was to get involved with elven warfare.

But the moment he reached the library door and turned on the light, something crashed through the window.

Glass shards flew everywhere. Something dark skittered and spun across the floor, banging into the furniture, skipping across the rug, spewing a yellowish gas from one end. It spun like a dervish, and Sam made the fundamental error of gasping in surprise.

The stinging of his throat and eyes told him how great an error that had been.

Tear-gas. Just like Belfast. Only this time he hadn’t gotten such a big whiff of it.

Coughing and choking, Sam covered his nose and mouth with his hands, and ran, stumbling, for the door. His eyes burned painfully, streaming tears, making it hard to see; and his lungs felt as if someone had poured hot lead into them.

He fumbled at the lock and wrenched at the door handle until it opened, slamming it into the wall. He dove through it, tumbling out into the cool, fresh air and dropping to his knees on the concrete, his lungs screaming for oxygen.

Falling to his knees was all that saved him from the knife that thudded into the doorframe above him.

He started back, then jerked his head around in the direction of the curse that came out of the darkness, just as the house alarms—which he had not disarmed—started wailing, and all the exterior lights flared on as the second line of computer-driven defenses activated.

Peering through tears, he made out the dark shape of the enemy Sidhe, Vidal—and only that single foe—as the creature threw up its arm to protect its eyes from the wash of powerful light.

*Vidal Dhu—you bastard.*

He knew then that he had a few seconds before the Sidhe recovered and renewed the attack—

He was praying under his breath, the old litany of “Hail Mary,” the words tumbling off his tongue in a high-speed gabble without his being aware of when he had started. And in the meantime, the rest of him was moving again, scrambling to his feet and making a desperate, tear-blurred, panting dash for the garage.

He reached it a breath ahead of the knife that clattered off the door, punched a key-code on the pad to open it, and ducked another blade that landed somewhere in the darkened interior of the garage. If he could just reach the back—

He did, falling to his knees beside his goal, as the Sidhe came charging through the door behind him. Sam glanced over his shoulder, seeing only the upraised arms, and that black and glittering sword.

*ThankyouMotherMary*—Sam reached for the switch on the powerful box-fan in the middle of the floor with one hand, and the loosely wrapped packet of iron filings in his pocket with the other.

Just then the Sidhe spotted him, crouched on the floor. The enemy shouted with triumph, cries audible even over the sirens from Sam’s alarm system, and raised his sword.

Sam switched on the fan, ripped the bag out of his pocket and dumped the double-handful of iron filings into the wind of its blades.

Howls of triumph changed abruptly to cries of pain, as thousands of tiny lances of Cold Iron bit into the Sidhe’s face and hands, penetrating and catching even in its -garments.

The Sidhe cried out again, threw his hands up to shield his face, and dropped the sword, which shattered into a thousand glassy bits on the concrete floor. Sam snarled, and rose to his feet, reaching blindly to the tool rack on the back wall, his breath wheezing in his lungs, his face still streaming tears.

Sam grabbed the first thing that came to hand; a solid, antique metal T-square, old and heavy enough to be made of steel.

He charged the Sidhe, swinging the implement viciously, like one of his peasant ancestors with a scythe. The Sidhe broke and ran, and Sam pursued, still swinging, to the end of his driveway. There he had to stop, for his lungs and legs both gave out—though he screamed hoarse curses at his enemy right up until the police first arrived in response to the commotion.

Neither Vidal nor the Bane-Sidhe were anywhere in the studio complex, which suited Aurilia just fine. She had work to do, and she couldn't do it if they were hanging around the studio or even the area of Underhill that had been sculpted to hold it. All they ever did was laze about, doing nothing useful, whining about some imagined grievance or other. Making constructs was tedious, exacting work, and she couldn't do it if there was someone distracting her, critiquing her, generally getting in the way.

The grunt work, of making the blanks, had already been done for her by an Unseleighe-mage who had gotten to play Messelina in the Caligula piece, trading work for the privilege of participation in their epic and a share in the results. They waited for her in their boxes in the Underhill workshop, in a work area Aurilia had pretty much to herself most of the time. The other two couldn't be bothered with sculpting constructs; Aurilia considered herself something of an artist in that area. It took skill to create something that would fool the clients into thinking it was a human being; skill and attention to detail. The latter required a patience neither Vidal nor Niall had, for all that they were powerful mages.

She hadn't planned on building her "extras" for another week, but the discoveries of this evening changed all that. She was working with a limited window of opportunity. Before too long, Tanim would extract his little pavement princess from her surroundings and get her away to safety. If he didn't succeed in that, the girl might be murdered by her own stupidity, or the kids might connect Adder's Fork with the young hookers who had already disappeared. The entire schedule for shooting "Deadly Doctor" would have to be moved up if Aurilia was going to be able to extract the maximum value from the potentials of the situation. That would take a lot of work on her part, but the end result would be worth it.

She opened the first coffinlike box. The creature waiting inside was not "alive" in the strictest sense. It was shaped rather like a store-front mannequin, the modern kind that was utterly featureless, with no eyes, ears, nose, mouth, or other orifices, just a blank face-shaped area. No hair yet, either, and it didn't breathe. If you cut it right now, it wouldn't bleed, for it had no circulatory system. It took all of its nourishment passively, like a plant, from the energy Aurilia channeled into it. If Aurilia didn't use it or feed it, within a month it would die of starvation and never even whimper in pain.

This construct was destined for another fate, however; one it would never understand.

Aurilia had already selected personas for this batch of constructs, and had clipped the pictures she wanted to use to the top of each box. This one would be a "Victorian Street Sparrow"; Aurilia's term for the underage thieves, pickpockets, and prostitutes that used to throng London's working-class districts.

*And humans treat teenage prostitution as if it's something new because now there are mortals with PhDs writing about it.*

She took the picture of the full-face shot in her right hand, and placed her left on the construct-blank's chest. The flesh was warm, but a little rubbery under her hand—and much too smooth to be human. That was all right; the clients weren't going to be paying much attention to the skin, after all. If it looked too perfect, they'd assume it was makeup or lighting.

The face would be the first; it was the hardest. She chanted the first words of the spell, calling into being the features in the photograph she held: square chin, slightly undershot jaw, petulant lips. The flesh writhed and obeyed her, clearing away from jawline and neck, mounding up to form the lips, cheeks, and chin. The nose was next; nothing hard there, since the basic shape was already in place. Then the eye area. But there were no eyes there yet; the lids closed over round, featureless balls at the moment.

She selected another photograph and chanted to the body, giving it high, small breasts, a slightly protruding belly as if it was a little bit pregnant, broad hips. Then she sang hair into being, head and pubic; she had intended brown, but it grew up auburn. She decided to leave it the way it was. Sometimes the constructs took on slightly different characteristics than she had intended, though she never knew why.

What she had done up until now was pure sculpture. Now began the hard part; the part that required kenning. She removed her hands from the construct, and flexed them, then cupped them over the body in the box.

She sank herself into deep awareness and her chant changed; the rhythm pattern shifted, until it replicated the beat of the human heart. The words shifted, too, becoming heavier, more potent in sound if nothing else.

But they were potent in other ways.

Now the skin of the construct heaved and rippled, as beneath it, Aurilia created organs, bones, and a primitive nervous and circulatory system. The latter didn't have to actually do any work; its main job was to carry "blood" to places where the construct was going to be hurt. If Aurilia hadn't been in so much of a hurry, she could have created an exact duplicate of a human, something that would stand up to anything but a tissue analysis—but there was no point in being that thorough.

*In the old days, that was why so many changelings sickened and died; no matter what they were fed, the food didn't nourish them and they wasted away. Why create something well made? We wanted the changelings to die. So did the Seilighe fools, though for entirely different reasons. . . .*

Lungs were made the same way; mere bellows to simulate breathing and provide air for speaking and -screaming. However; the construct *did* need a good pain-nerve net; it was going to have to react appropriately to painful stimuli. That meant a basic spine and some brain -functions.

Within an hour, she had her "extra"; one of the -creatures destined to die in front of the camera. She'd created dozens of constructs in her time; so long as the raw material was there, it was no strain anymore.

Bending over the box for a close look, she made the creature blink, simulate a variety of expressions, breathe. She fished a long, slender crystal from a pouch at her waist. It looked like a half-melted icicle, but was warm to the touch. This was the key to making her "extras" truly convincing; it was a condensed memory-crystal, containing the reactions of every human who had ever been inside -either of the studios. She placed it point-down on the construct's forehead, and pushed it into the "brain." When her palm touched the skin of the forehead, the eyes suddenly snapped open.

The construct screamed itself awake.

She hushed it with a word and a motion.

The creature blinked, looked at her—and cowered away.

Satisfied, she put it to sleep with a thought, closed the lid on the creature's "coffin" and moved on to the next box.

She was half done when Vidal entered the complex, so immersed in her creations that she honestly didn't notice he was there until he knocked something over in the Studio Two bathroom and it broke. That startled her and broke her concentration, and she sensed his presence. She waited impatiently for him to put in an appearance and disrupt her work.

But he didn't; in fact, he stayed right where he was. She heard him moving about the bathroom, but very slowly—unnaturally so.

*What on earth is wrong?*

She finally left the workroom, too puzzled to continue working. When she entered Studio Two, she realized that the sound she had attributed to the background of disturbing noises that was a constant in the Underhill chaos-lands was actually nothing of the sort; it was the sound of Vidal moaning.

She strode over to the bathroom door, her high-heels clicking on the stone of the floor, and jerked the bathroom door open.

She had half expected to find the Sidhe drunk, or other-wise incapacitated with self-indulgence. She certainly did not expect to find him wounded, bleeding, and suffering from Cold Iron poisoning. His face looked like a bloodied sponge.

"By the dark moon!" she exclaimed, shocked, and too startled to keep from showing it. "What happened to you?"

Vidal just groaned. She clamped her mouth shut on further questions, kicked off her shoes, and used the last of her energies to conjure handfuls of silk and bone instruments, tweezers and probes.

When she was finished, Vidal lay on the couch in the old Roman set, swathed in bandages, and she had a bloodstained, silk-wrapped bundle containing a handful of tiny iron fragments. She would have to take it across the Gate into the human side to dispose of it.

She shoved it aside for the moment with her foot. "What happened?" she asked flatly, fearing that Vidal had done something irrevocable. "I thought you and Niall were -harassing Keighvin, I thought you'd issued a challenge—"

"We were," Vidal said, after a long moment of silence. "We were. But the bastard brought the humans into it, and the humans brought their own weapons. One of them got Niall with blessed water—the *old* blessing, the touch of the sun and the full of the moon—"

"*What?*" she exclaimed. "I didn't think anyone knew that this side of the ocean! Did he—"

"He's all right," Vidal said, sullenly. "He didn't get hit with a great deal, and I managed to get him back Underhill before it did too much damage to him. I—"

The shiver of Power behind her warned her of Niall's approach. "He did the best he could," the Bane-Sidhe said hoarsely, as she whirled on her knees to face him. Filmy white rags—much cleaner than they had been—fluttered as the creature gestured expansively. The charnel odor wasn't as bad, either.

*Too badhe doesn't get doused with holy water more often.*

“He did more than most. I pledged my full power if he could remove the mortal beast that struck me down. I had come to see if you had triumphed,” Niall concluded.

“It was wiser than I had thought,” Vidal said bitterly, raising himself up onto one elbow. “It was craftier.”

A hiss of rage emerged from the hood cloaking the Bane-Sidhe’s features. “So I see,” it replied.

Aurilia held her breath. Uppermost in her mind was the fear that now the Bane-Sidhe would revoke its promise. Without Niall’s aid and magic, she would not be able to restrain Vidal Dhu. He would fling himself at Keighvin’s pet mortals until they destroyed him—and with him, her plans for vengeance.

The Bane-Sidhe raised itself up to its full height. Aurilia shrank into herself; Niall towered over her, emanating a kind of cold hatred. He seemed to pull all the light into himself—the very air grew dark, thick, and oppressive, while he himself glowed a faint, leprous blue-white. She shivered, and her breath caught in her throat. She had never experienced Niall’s full power before this, and now she understood why mortals died of fright on simply seeing him.

“This cannot be borne,” Niall said hollowly. “Mortals have never confronted us and won. This cannot be permitted. If more of them discover our weaknesses, they may learn also how to travel Underhill and confront us here as well.”

That had never occurred to her; and the thought was as chilling as the full effect of the Bane-Sidhe’s Presence.

Then she realized what Niall had not said. He was not removing himself and his power from their alliance. He was not insisting that they leave Keighvin and Fairgrove alone. In fact, he seemed to be advocating the very oppo-site. “But—” she began, feebly.

The cowl bent to regard her, and she shivered again. “We must eliminate Keighvin Silverhair and his mortal allies,” the Bane-Sidhe said grimly. “He is the champion of those of the Seleighe Court who wish to integrate their society with that of the mortals. That must not be! I pledge to you, I shall drain every drop of my power to see him defeated and destroyed!”

“But we must be careful,” she replied, quickly.

Niall paused for a moment, and then sighed, shrinking back to his normal size as he exhaled, releasing the light. Aurilia sighed with him, but with relief. If she never had to face the Bane-Sidhe in his anger again, it would be perfectly fine with her. “We must be careful,” Niall agreed. “Our present state is the direct result of carelessness and overconfidence.”

Vidal grunted; Aurilia assumed it was in grudging agreement.

“Thus far,” Niall continued, shifting from side to side, restlessly, “the only one of the three of us who has brought plans to fruition scathlessly is you.”

“Well,” she replied, with a certain amount of hesitation, “I don’t know about that.”

*If Vidal gets his nose out of joint about this—*

“The Bane-Sidhe is right,” Vidal growled. “It will take the three of us to achieve our goals, working together. We cannot afford to hare off with separate plans.”

*It’s about time you figured that out, she thought sourly. After all the work I’ve put in here.*

“Since you have been working here for hours, I assume you *have* a plan,” Niall said pointedly.

Now, if ever, was the time to seize leadership, while momentum was behind her. Vidal was temporarily incapacitated and might be influenced; the Bane-Sidhe was -already on her side, She gathered her composure, steadied her nerves, and nodded with all the authority she could command.

“Yes,” she said. “I do.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tannim woke three or four times during the night as random sounds threw him out of dreams, but that was all that they were, pure random sounds, and he drifted back into sleep again. When he finally woke for good, he lay watching the darkness for a while, thinking about getting up for a long time before doing anything about it. Bed felt wonderful, and he wished, selfishly, that he could stay there for the rest of the day. He felt rested, and at the same time, tired—as if he had gone off sleep-fighting, or something. He’d had some strange dreams last night; images of fairy-tale bogeymen mixed up with a Tokomak accelerator, of Nightmares getting hit with Cruise missiles and exploding, and of Sam on a S.W.A.T. team, guarding a rainbow.

*Weird.*

There was no light at all in the bedroom, other than the clock on the VCR. The lighted numerals said 4:23—which meant it was about eleven. He hated having the damn thing blinking “12:00” at him, so he always reset it to some arbitrary time whenever the power went off or he had to unplug it.

There didn’t seem to be any windows in the room. There was one, but he also hated daylight, which was why the floor-to-ceiling headboard blocked the window entirely, so that nothing could leak through.

So, it was about eleven. If he got up now, he could shower, shave, eat—pick out an appropriate outfit—and by one, when the people he wanted to see were in their offices, he’d be ready to see them.

He ran a systems-check on himself, first. About the only thing still not right was his leg, which twinged a little when he flexed it. It had healed about as much as it was likely to, so it always felt like that, except when he was in a hot-tub, so he ignored it and reached for the light in the headboard.

He fumbled around a little before his hand encountered the proper little round knob. It was on a dimmer-switch, which he brought up in microscopic increments. His last live-in lover had hated that, insisting on having bright light instantly in the morning. It was one of the reasons they hadn’t stayed lovers for long, although they had parted friends.

His stomach growled impatiently, reminding him that it had been a long time since lunch—most of which he’d pushed off on Tania—and that corn-chips and vitamins were not an adequate substitute for dinner.

Chinthliss railed on him constantly about his admittedly horrible diet. He pried himself up out of the bed and headed for the bathroom.

*Being a mage means you're never out of hot water. . . .*

One very long, very hot shower later, he felt a little more like a human, but not up to choosing clothing. Magery was a very diverse avocation, and some mages could change their form with a thought—but Tannim was not one of them, and so clothing was the closest to shape-changing he was going to get on this world. His choice of garments today would make all the difference in the success of his still-nebulous plan, if he was going to get the maximum clout with a minimum of questioning. He put off the decision and pulled a Salvation Army print caftan over his head. Making a selection that important should be done on a full stomach. Time to invoke the spirit of the -microwave.

His last lover *had* been an excellent cook, and had left the freezer full of marvelous microwavable goodies for him, knowing that he would never cook for himself, and knowing that he often forgot to shop as well. Tannim had been making them last for a while, but now, if ever, was the time to dip into the stash. He poked his head into the freezer and contemplated the neatly calligraphed labels.

*Calzone, Chicken Kiev, Veal Scaloppini, Chicken Cordon Bleu, Gad. Eggplant Parmesan, ick. That can't have been meant for me. Unless I was out of everything else and couldn't move. Maybe that was the idea. Ah, Huevos Rancheros. Perfect. But it needs something to go with it. Should end in a vowel . . . There, three-cheese zucchini. That'll do.*

The microwave *beeped* five minutes later, and he fished clean dishes out of the dishwasher, poured himself a big glass of Gatorade, plucked an old t-shirt off the back of a chair and wrapped it around his hand, then pulled his breakfast out of the nuker. He took a forkful and blew on it to cool it, while he stared at the Ninja Turtles cavorting on his glass for a moment. *Maybe that's what I can tell my mother about what happened to the leg. "There was this glowing ooze, Mom, and—" Nah. She's probably seen the movies.*

Besides, right now he shouldn't be thinking about how to explain his scars to his mom. What he really needed was to figure out a persona for his meeting with the shelter directors. Something where he could plausibly fling money at them with a condition attached. They might not care for the condition—that they take in Tania (and her friends, if he could get them to come in with her) with no questions asked, and no pressure on any of them to contact parents. Counseling, yes; pressure, no.

*And no sneaking off behind their backs, either. Whatever drove those other kids into hooking, it had to be worse than hooking. If it was, I'm not going to let them go back to it. Tania's folks were trying to make her into a good little Type-A overachiever drone by killing her spirit and imagination. She seems pretty sure it was worse for her than hooking. I don't know if they've learned their lesson yet, since she ran off, and I won't send her back to them until they have.*

Getting them into a shelter would get them off the street long enough for Keighvin to clear up the little war with Vidal Dhu. Once that was taken care of, they could all go Underhill while Keighvin's spies found out whether the various parents were worthy of the privilege of having children. If not—Underhill they stayed, like half the humans at Fairgrove.

But meanwhile there was that matter of keeping them safe for a couple of weeks. The way he had it figured, if he threw enough cash at one of the shelters, more than enough to pay for the keep of Tania and all of her friends, they'd take in the strays just as fast as he could deliver them. The shelters were hard up for support; they couldn't afford to turn him down. But he needed that persona to make the offer.



*It can't be a Suit. They'd smell Corporation and want to know too much, maybe get greedy, certainly want to see some I.D., which I don't have—except for Fairgrove, and I don't want to leave that kind of trail for Vidal Dhu to find. It can't be my usual look, or they'll want to know where I got all the cash, maybe call the cops on me, figuring me for a pimp or a pusher trying to recruit on their turf, or dumping some poor kid too gone to be useful anymore.* He finished his breakfast quickly, hardly tasting it. Then he gulped the last of the Gatorade and went back into the bedroom, flung himself down on the bed, and turned it into a lounge chair while he pondered.

*Teacher? No, where would a teacher get that kind of money? That lets out cop or social worker too, plus they'd want to see credentials; ditto psychiatrist or grad student doing research. I could try forging credentials, but if they double-checked, they'd find out I was phony.*

He idly flicked on the TV to fill the silence; it was set on MTV already, and the picture and sound came up in the middle of the old “Take On Me” video from A-Ha, where the girl and her comic-book lover are being chased by the comic-book bad-guys. It was one of Tannim's -favorites.

*Now if life were just like a comic book—*

Then it hit him. The perfect answer. He jumped out of bed and ran to the closet, ignoring the protests of his left leg, and dug through the jeans and soft cotton shirts until he came to an outfit he'd only worn once. He dug it out, and looked at it, then smiled.

*Perfect.*

Tannim lounged at his ease in the shabby waiting-room, his clothing at violent odds with the tacky plastic sofas. A young woman in her early twenties, with no makeup and her brown hair in a wash-and-wear bob eyed him warily from behind the shelter of her beat-up gray metal desk.

This was the first shelter on his list; the best, the cleanest, and the one least inclined to put pressure on kids. There were rules: you had to go to school, stay clean and off the street, do your homework, pass your courses. There were rules about boy- and girl-friends (group dates only), extra-curricular activities (supervised only), and sex (none). The kids got straightforward lessons in sex-education, and a thorough medical exam when they came in, including the HIV test. They had to spend time with a counselor every day. But if a kid couldn't bring himself to actually talk, he didn't have to—there were counselors who spent whole hours with utterly silent kids every damn day.

And the kids didn't have to give their real names -until they wanted to. A big plus in Tannim's book. Understandably, this was the shelter with the longest waiting list. If they wouldn't go for his little bribe—well, then he'd try the next, then the next. . . .

If none of them swallowed the bait, he'd hit Keighvin up for some duplicated gold coins, cash them in with a collector who knew him, and come back to try again, with a new set of clothing, a new face, and a new story. Sooner or later, somebody was going to get bought.

*Just as long as they're getting bought for a good cause, taking my conditions to have a chance to help more kids.*

He settled the shoulders of his dark-red, full-length rayon jacket over his black silk shirt a little

self-consciously. This was a lot more flash than he usually wore. So were the heavy silver-and-turquoise choker and matching *ketoh* bracelet and concho belt. Those he usually didn't wear at all except to pow-wows or when he was with Mike Fighting Eagle and the rest of his blood-brothers out in Arizona.

He watched the young woman at the desk without seeming to look at her; it was easy enough, since she couldn't see his eyes through his Ray-Bans. She was a little nonplussed by his appearance; she obviously wasn't used to having close to a thousand bucks worth of clothing stroll up to the door of Shelter House unless it was a pimp looking for a stray. She scraped the legs of her plastic patio chair noisily against the worn brown linoleum as she tried to find a comfortable way to sit.

*Little does she know everything on my back was either conjured by elves or a gift. Never thought this outfit would come in handy a second time.*

"Mr. Cleveland will see you now, Mr.—ah—Burgundy," the case-worker currently manning the front-desk said, with only the slightest hesitation. Tannim walked past her into the equally shabby, but pleasant, office. The window blinds were wide open to the sunlight, and there were plants in clumsy, handmade pots on the sill. The wallpaper had faded until the yellow roses were a pale cream, and the leaves a ghost of emerald. The decor was Goodwill-reject; the art on the walls was all posters, posters of rock, sports, and movie stars urging kids to stay in school, to stay off drugs, and to read. The notepad was a giveaway from FedEx, and the letterhead stationery on the man's desk had been printed upon a very spotty dot-matrix printer, probably donated. Obviously this place wasn't wasting money on gold-embossed stationery and collector artwork—or even interior decorating. The dark, harried-looking man behind the desk stood up, surprise flashing briefly across his face before he covered it with a smile. Obviously he wasn't used to seeing clothing like Tannim's, either. He reached a hand across the desk to Tannim. "AlyxBurgundy," Tannim said, taking the hand immediately, and shaking it.

"Harold Cleveland," the director replied, with an equally firm handshake. "What can we do for you, Mr. Burgundy?"

Tannim sat down in one of the three visitors' chairs. Vinyl with an aluminum frame, they were as uncomfortable as they looked. "Mr. Cleveland, my boss sent me over here on his behalf. He's a horribly busy man, but he has the best of intentions. I'm sure you'll understand my -being direct. I've got a donation with some strings attached."

Harold Cleveland eyed him with some suspicion. "What kind of strings?" he asked.

Tannim shrugged. "My boss wants to make sure that a little girl and maybe a couple of her friends have a safe place to go. You've got a waiting list—by the time you got around to them, they might be in real trouble. But—you also need money. My boss is very well-known in the music business, and very, very wealthy. He and the girl met -after one of his shows, and they started talking. He likes her." Tannim paused for effect. "We'll take care of that money problem you've got right now if you'll move her and her friends to the top of the list." He presented the envelope of cash he'd withdrawn from his bank earlier, and fanned its contents on the desk—a thick stack of fifties and -hundreds.

Harold blanched as he ran a quick mental count. Emotions warred on his face, and his hand flinched -towards the money.

But the man had integrity. "I don't know," he said, slowly, controlling his immediate impulse. "I'd like to say yes—but *wedo* have a waiting list. And I don't know where this money is coming from. . . ." He narrowed his eyes. "If your boss has this much to play around with, why isn't he taking care of this girl himself? Just because we're a charity, that doesn't mean we have no rules and no standards. If I may be

so forward, Mr. Burgundy, why is he wanting *us* to take this girl in?"

Tannim sighed, as if exasperated. "My boss—and I'm sure you understand that I cannot reveal his identity—is in no position to do so. It's because she's underage—and as you probably figured out for yourself, right now, she's an underage hooker. My boss is in the public eye—every moment, you might say—and whenever he turns around there's somebody trying to come up with some kind of dirt on him. He feels sorry for the girl, but he can't risk some cop—or a smear sheet—putting two and two together and coming up with 'contributing to the delinquency of a minor' when all he wants to do is get her off the street and back in school."

He allowed his eyes to flicker up to one of the posters behind Cleveland's desk. There were several rock-music idols up there—but only one group was on tour in the area. He watched as Cleveland's eyes followed his "slip," and felt a bit of satisfaction as the man's mouth softened a moment. Good. Tannim hadn't lied. Let the man make his own conclusions—even if they were wrong. Given *that* particular star's reputation as a good-guy, Cleveland should now be very sympathetic. "The guy wants to get a good kid out of a bad situation, but you know what the tabloids would say if they found out."

He grimaced, and Harold Cleveland nodded.

"I see. This is a most . . . unusual proposal, Mr. Burgundy. On one hand, it's hardly fair to the children waiting that we take your three ahead of them. On the other hand, with just the money you have here—" he touched the stack "—we could afford to take in your three and a half-dozen more for a couple of months."

Tannim could see by his aura that he'd accepted the offer. Now it was only a matter of completing the dance.

"Mr. Cleveland, I appreciate your position. It's a tough call." He shrugged, making it look helpless.

Harold Cleveland sighed. "I don't see how we could refuse, Mr. Burgundy. We've got no money to speak of, really. Too few donations, and the problems are getting worse. We'll take the offer."

Tannim nodded, then bowed his head.

"Good. Good. Her name is Tania, and she will be here with her friends within the next couple of days. I hope. She will have a lot to talk about—but nothing relating to my boss." He handed over a small polaroid. "If your outreach workers see her, I'd appreciate it if they talk to her. She might be shy about coming."

"Sworn to secrecy, I assume? To protect his reputation?"

Tannim looked back up, through the Ray-Bans.

"My boss is also my friend. When it comes to kids, he's a pushover. He's spent his life trying to understand them, and be like them, and make things easier for them. He said before I came over that he had a good feeling about this place. I am constantly amazed at his faith in human nature. Times like this—" he said, palming from a pocket "—I understand why. Thank you for being suspicious, Harold, and for being kind. This one's from me."

Tannim left a paper-clipped roll of twenties, stood and smoothed the jacket, and walked out smiling.

Tannim swung himself into his driver's seat, and indulged himself in a moment of self-satisfaction. *So much for Part One of Plan A. Now for Part Two.*

He closed the door and sat quietly in the Mustang for a moment, searching for a particular energy track, drawing on the energies stored in the car and on the faint traces still lingering about the passenger's seat. Negotiating with Harold Cleveland had taken longer than he expected, though it had been worth every second spent. Cleveland's outreach people would be looking for Tania now, as they made their rounds of Savannah. If they spotted her, they'd try to make contact and tell her there was a bunk for her and her friends. Tannim really didn't think they'd spot her before he found her, but there was always a chance, and one he couldn't pass up.

Sunset created a brilliant sky right out of a Max-field Parrish painting over the marshes to the west. He sought through a maze of energy patterns as brightly and as subtly colored as the patterns in the sky, searching and discarding—

Then he found it; less red-tinged than before, and shading more towards the blue of intellect and acceptance, and away from the vermilion of anger and unreasoning emotion. But full of the warm gold of earthy good sense, too, which hadn't showed before, and the tingle of humor—

Tannim started the car, and pulled out of his parking place, which was filled as soon as the Mustang's tail cleared it. He scarcely noticed; he was too intent on tracing that energy trail back to its source, in the real world as well as in the spirit world. It wound through all the other traces, touching briefly at River Street before drifting on, heading off past the edge of Savannah.

After a little while, he got a sense of distance as well as direction, and realized where the trace was leading him. *Oatland Island, huh? Never figured Ross for a wildlifefancier. But then, I never picked him for a punster, either.*

Now that he knew where he was going, he was able to take a more direct route than following the trace through Savannah. By full dark, he was at the gates of the Oatland Island Education Center, parking before the carved wooden sign. A little conspicuous—but that could be remedied.

He turned off the engine and got out of the car; placed his hands palm-down on the warm fender, and frowned with concentration, activating one of the permanent spells that was as much a part of the Mustang now as its paint. He straightened after a moment, satisfied that the eyes of any passerby would simply slide right over the car without ever noticing it was there. That spell—which he had dubbed "Hide In Plain Sight"—was one of the most useful he'd ever come up with.

He stretched, flexing finger and neck muscles, taking deep breaths of the cool, sweet, air. Ross Canfield wasn't likely to be as hard-nosed a negotiator as Harold Cleveland; with luck, he could get this over quickly and get back to Fairgrove before Keighvin started to get annoyed.

He pulled a sucker from the inner pocket of the expensive jacket, unwrapped it, and tucked the cellophane back into the pocket before stowing the candy in his cheek. The flavor startled him for a moment. *Pina-colada? Where'd I—oh, that's right. Donal thought I ought to have fancy suckers to match the jacket. Elves.*

He sat himself cross-legged on the warm hood while the crickets chirred in the grass beside the road, glad that the pants were a practical set of Bugle Boys instead of the unwashable dress-slacks Donal had

wanted to put him into. One snag, and they'd have been ruined—

He relaxed all over, and began a low chant, drawing more power up from the stores invested in the Mustang. He had no intention of going for a spirit-walk this time, though. Not tonight, especially now that Vidal Dhu and company knew he was a player in the game. This time, all he intended to do was to call, sending out a very specific identity-sign along a specific trace. And if Ross Canfield was still willing to keep that promise he'd made—

The crickets stopped chirping. “Didja know that bluejays sing like damn canaries?” said a gleeful voice in his ear. Tannim jumped.

“Uh—” he said, cleverly, telling his rattled nerves that this had *not* been an attack and he didn't need all that adrenalin, thank you. And no point in yelling at Ross; the spirit didn't know about Vidal Dhu's vendetta, or that Tannim was one of his planned targets. “No, Ross, I didn't. I thought all they did was scream.”

Ross sat himself down on the hood beside Tannim, a big grin on his face, oblivious to the shaking he'd just given the young mage. “They do,” Ross said gleefully, as if he were imparting the greatest wisdom of the universe. “And starlings are 'bout the only birds that'll eat Junebugs an' Jap'nese beetles, an' bears have their cubs while they're hibernatin', an' there useta be cougars around here, an' gray foxes c'n climb trees—”

“Whoa!” Tannim held up his hand. “Now I know why you were hanging out here! Ross, why the sudden interest in wildlife? Or is it sudden?”

Ross grinned, not at all embarrassed. “Always wanted t' be a Park Ranger when I was a kid, but they gotta have college degrees an' my folks couldn't afford college. So—” He shrugged, then brightened. “Now, shoot, I can walk right up t' birds, sit practically on their tails an' watch 'em—found out about this place an' been hanging around listening t' everything. Better'n goin' t' college, 'cause there's nobody givin' tests! So, what can I do for you? I don't s'ppose this is a social call. Some'a my new buddies know you pretty good, an' they told me that when you said you was kinda busy, you weren't tellin' more'n half the truth.”

Tannim blushed, unaccountably embarrassed. “Yeah, well, you can't believe all you hear, either. But no, this isn't a social call, I'm sorry to say. Wish it was, actually. I've got a favor to ask you.”

Ross scratched his head, and Tannim noticed that he looked a lot younger—and definitely slimmer—than the last time they'd met. He'd noticed that effect before, with spirits that had adjusted well.

*Being a ghost seems to be agreeing with him.*

“Ask away,” the ghost said. “I told you, I owe you.”

“I don't know, Ross,” Tannim replied slowly. “You might not want to do it once you've heard what it's all about.”

“Try me,” Ross suggested, and sat patiently while Tannim explained everything he knew about Tania, the trouble she was in, and how he needed someone to keep a close eye on her until he could get her into the shelter, and from there, to Keighvin and Fairgrove.

Everything was fine until Tannim worked up to telling Ross that the girl was a runaway—and a hooker. Then the ghost frowned, and scratched his head again. “I don’t know, Tannim,” he said, reluctantly, and Tannim’s hope slipped a little. “I mean, that’s the kinda kid I’d’ve said was a punk an’ a tramp—before—but—”

That “before” gave Tannim reason to let his hopes rise again. “But?” he prompted.

Ross wrinkled his brow. “Well—I kinda found out somethin’. I can kinda see when people get worked up. I found out there’s a lotta things goin’ on, stuff I useta think were just media people makin’ up stories t’ sell papers. Lotsa kids in trouble out there, Tannim. Heard a couple of stories from ones that wound up—out here. They didn’t have a reason t’ make things up, y’know?”

Tannim nodded; Ross had changed, in more ways than showed in his aura. “She’s not mixed up with drugs, Ross—and I don’t think she will be—voluntarily. But if she gets picked up by a pimp before I can find her and talk her into the shelter—”

Ross scowled. “Yeah. That’s what one of them kids out here said. Damn pimp picked her up at the bus stop, made all friendly, gave her what she thought was just grass—next thing she knows, she’s hooked on crack with the bastard sellin’ her for a hundred bucks a shot an’ makin’ her do all kindsa pervo kinky stuff—” He shook his head, and his aura swung into the bright, clear red of suppressed and controlled anger, anger carefully focused. Genuinely righteous wrath. “If I could make a ghost out *that* bastard, I would.”

“So would I,” Tannim said sincerely. “I know it’s not a lot of comfort—but you ever noticed there aren’t a lot of *old* pimps and pushers? His lifestyle is real likely to get him killed—and Ross, when *he* comes over to your side, there are going to be a lot of things waiting for him. Remember what I told you about things that might try to eat you? Well, they think that low-lifes like him are mighty tasty, and they’ll actually hang around, waiting, on the off chance that somebody’ll put a hole in him.”

“So that’s what they were doin’—” Ross mused, half to himself. Then he shook his head. “Okay, Tannim, I’ll see if I c’n find this girl an’ keep an eye on her for you—though I don’ know what help I could be if she got into trouble.”

Tannim folded his arms over his chest, and grinned. “More help than you think, Ross. You been practicing what I told you about affecting the real world?”

Ross nodded. “Been learnin’ some. Ain’t fallin’ through the hood, am I?” he replied, with a chuckle. “But that’s *me* lettin’ the real world affect *me*. When it comes t’ me actually doin’ things, I can’t do much more’n flip a bottlecap.”

“That could be enough,” Tannim told him. “One thing you could do, you could come get me if the kid’s in trouble. If you can’t get me,” he paused as he called up an image of Sam from an open palm, “you go to this man. His name is Sam Kelly, and he’s a friend. He should be able to see you. But remember—not everybody can. Moving a bottlecap at the right time could make a big difference; you just have to start thinking on your feet.”

“Easy for you to say,” Ross grumbled, but he was smiling a little when he said it.

Tannim let out the breath he’d been holding in a sigh of relief. “Thanks, Ross,” he said, sincerely. “When this is over and Tania’s safe, I’ll owe you.”

But Ross shook his head emphatically. “No way, partner. I think I got one thing figured. You kinda gotta earn your way upstairs. I didn’ earn it when I was alive, so now I gotta do somethin’ about it. What’*dyou* think?”

Tannim had to shake his head, laughing. “Damn if I know. Never had a chance to talk to somebody who’d been there.”

Ross laughed. “Well, if I turn up missin’ when all this is over, you can figure I was right, huh? So show me what this kid looks like, and I’ll get outta here.”

Tannim called forth an image of Taniaas he had last seen her and projected it into the spirit world. Bad bleach-job, too much makeup, Spandex shorts, and all. Ross studied the image for a moment, then nodded, and Tannim let it evaporate.

“Poor kid,” the ghost commented. “Looks like trouble lookin’ for a place t’ happen.”

“Yeah,” Tannim said. “That’s what I figured. Oh, and another thing. I have friends at the police department I give tip-offs to. You see anything from your side I could use, let me know.”

Ross nodded, paused for a moment, then said, “Done. Well, I’m outta here. Got what I need. See you later, Tannim.”

And with that, he was gone, instantly. Tannim stared at the place he had been, and snorted. The crickets started back up again.

“ ‘Been learnin’ some,’ my ass! That was a teleport, or I’m the Pope!” Then he chuckled. “Ross, you’re a good man, and a sneaky bastard. Glad you’re on my side.”

Tannim stretched again, climbed down off the hood, started the Mustang and drove off into the night, heading for Fairgrove, and another set of duties.

Now if he could just keep them from becoming conflicting duties. . . .

Ross Canfield hadn’t teleported, no matter what Tannim thought. He’d *dtranslated*— or at least that was what The Old Man had called it, explaining that the literal meaning of “translate” was “to change one thing into another.” What Ross had done was to change from being partially in the real world, to being completely in the spirit world. Or, one of the spirit worlds, anyway; he’d gotten the feeling from The Old Man that there was more than one, but this was the place that folks that were something like him wound up, until they were ready to go off elsewhere. Whatever, wherever “elsewhere” was. The Old Man wouldn’t say anything more about that than Tannim would. Ross had started to think of it as being like tuning a -radio station—sometimes you were right on the frequency, sometimes you drifted between them.

It was a peculiar sort of “place,” not really a place at all. But it was a lot easier to find other ghosts from here. It was no use looking for The Old Man, though; Ross never found *him*, he found Ross, when and where he chose. Sometimes he taught Ross things; sometimes he just said something that only made sense a lot later. Sort of like that David Carradine movie his wife had liked so much. Ross was even starting to understand that now, though every time she’d played it on the VCR when he’d been alive, he’d gotten mad, ’cause it didn’t make any damned sense.

He'd figured on doing what Tannim had suggested, looking her up, trying to come to terms with what had happened. And he'd run into her all right, but not when and where he'd expected. Turned out she was married to Marty now, looked happier and younger, more like the girl he'd married, and she had a kid, a little baby, about six months old. He hadn't thought he'd be able to forgive either of them, but they'd shown up at his grave and left flowers—

That was where he'd first seen them, as he was standing by the headstone, wondering what he should do next. It had been kind of a shock; he'd just stood there, staring at them, while they left the flowers and talked about him. And they hadn't said anything mean or spiteful, either. He'd listened to them for a long time, and had to conclude that the girl he'd thought he'd married, and the one he really *had* married, had been two different people.

He'd felt a lot better when he'd realized that, as if he'd got rid of a poison that had been in him. That was the first time The Old Man showed up, right after they left; taught him a couple of things, like how to *translate*, and vanished again. He'd left the grave and hadn't looked back.

Right now, Ross was looking for Vanessa, the kid-hooker he'd told Tannim about. He figured that if anyone knew where the other hookers would be operating, it would be her. Once he knew the streets to look on, he'd be a lot likelier to find this Tania kid.

When he'd first run into Vanessa, she'd been scared as a little baby bunny, with some of the annoying things that liked to pick on the weak and the frightened mobbing her. The damn things were cowards, even if they did look like some kind of deep-sea horror, and he and his new buddy Foxtrot Xray had scared them off. He wasn't sure what Fox was; he was native to the spirit world, and he changed his appearance all the time, sometimes more-or-less -human looking, sometimes no more human than a ball of light. Called himself by that name 'cause it was military-talk for FX, and since he was kind of a spirit-soldier and kind of a special effect, it fit.

He wished he could enlist Fox's help on guarding Tania, but it wasn't Fox's kind of thing. Oh, Fox would be willing enough, but he could only operate in the spirit world, though, so he wasn't going to be any use on this job.

Not like when they'd found Vanessa under siege, and he and Fox had chased off the bullies. Ross had stayed around to give Vanessa a hand, and a shoulder to cry on; taught her about being newly-dead, like Tannim had done for him, and how it wasn't so bad.

He sometimes wondered if she thought of *him* as The Old Man. Maybe for her, he was.

Moving around in the spirit world was pretty easy; you just had to think of who you wanted to be with, and unless they had you blocked out (which you did by thinking you wanted to be alone and felt like putting up walls), you were there. He found her wistfully hanging around a radio--station control-room, watching the DJ and listening to the music. He wrinkled his nose a little; not his kind of -music at all, but it was making her happy, so what the hell.

"Hey, Vanessa," he said, quietly, so as not to startle her. She startled easily.

She looked up, big brown eyes wide, from under an unkempt mane of raven-black curls, her aura draining to muddy yellow-green. There was fear in her eyes which quickly faded, and she smiled shyly, the colors of her aura coming back. "Hi, Mr. Canfield," she said diffidently. "Mr. Xray, he was here an' showed me how t' find the radio station when I said I missed rock'n'roll."



“Honey, you c’n go backstage of every concert there is now, y’know,” he reminded her gently. “No reason t’ miss out on stuff now. Ain’t nowhere y’ can’t go if y’ want.”

She shook her head. “I can’t. Not yet. It just—reminds me too much—makes me mad ’cause all those kids are alive an’ I’m not—

He nodded, understanding perfectly. “When you’re ready, honey. Listen, I got a question for you. Friend of mine needs t’ find a girl, ’fore she gets herself into trouble. You got any idea where the areas are that the hookers hang out?”

Vanessa’s eyes widened. “Bull, President, an’ the alleys between President an’ River Street,” she said promptly. “Mr. Canfield, she’s not—anyone I know, is she?”

He shook his head. “Don’t think so, honey. She’s workin’ alone, but she’s just a little bitty baby, like you was, an’ we need t’ get her somewhere’s safe.” He didn’t add, *before she winds up like you*; he didn’t have to.

Vanessa’s hands balled into fists, and tears welled up in her eyes. “I wanta help,” she whispered hoarsely, “an’ I can’t. I wanta do somethin’ an’ whenever I try’n get near Bull, the world just sorta goes away—”

Fox said that Vanessa had died on Bull street, victim of a heart attack brought on by one too many hits of crack. She still hadn’t come to terms with her life, much less her death, and Ross sighed with helpless frustration.

“Look, honey, you just now helped, okay? An’ someday you’ll do better. Right now, you gotta learn to stand up f’r y’self, fight back, don’t let nobody push you around. Then maybe you c’n do more.”

Vanessa scrubbed at her eyes, and sniffed. And just when Ross began to feel really badly, wanting to comfort her, but needing to go find Tannim’s girl in the real world, help showed up in the guise of Foxtrot. Today Fox looked like a cartoon hero, pipestem legs and wild hair. He just appeared out of nowhere, like always, and Vanessa looked up at him and smiled through her tears. Somehow they both always recognized Fox, no matter what he looked like.

“Heya, lady!” Fox crowed, as if there was nothing wrong. “Got something I want to show you.” Then he looked over his shoulder at Ross, and grinned. “Sorry old man, no fossils allowed. It’s just for people who believe in the magic of rock’n’roll.”

“Ah, go on,” Ross said, relieved. “You wouldn’t know good music if’n it sat up an’ bit your ass.”

“That wouldn’t be where I’d want something to bite me,” Fox replied insolently, and reached for Vanessa’s hand. She took it hesitantly, and they vanished in a glittering shower of sparks.

Fox was a pistol, all right. Maybe he’d picked Vanessa as his vixen of choice.

Ross smirked, then furrowed his brow in concentration, picturing Bull Street . . . building it up in his mind . . . then, *deciding* to be there.

Then he *was* there. Now *that* was a teleport.

He grinned widely. It was also his first teleport.

But there was no time to gloat about it; he had a girl to find, one who might be getting herself into trouble she couldn't get out of right at this very moment.

He sharpened his real-world focus, bringing himself as far into the world of the living as he could without interacting with it; he wanted to be able to walk through people and things if he had to. He had noticed that he no longer had any trouble seeing even in the darkest places; the street was as bright as daylight to him, with every person on it outlined with his or her own little glow of colored light. The faces were the clearest, but it was as if every living creature carried its own little spot-light with him—and from the way the females tended to be dressed and act, it was pretty obvious that there was no lack of “professional -ladies” on this section of Bull. They ranged in age from teenagers in punk gear to women with a fair amount of mileage on the meter. He noticed that their glows were all in muddy colors, sullen and angry; dirty red, murky yellow, dirt brown. Just like Vanessa, when she first came over. Her colors were clearing now, but she had a long way to go before she looked like Ross—and he was no match for the clear, blue-white light of Fox or The Old Man.

He spotted the pimps right away, too—and interestingly enough, the colors of their glows were sharp and less muddied, but acutely painful to look at. Reds and yellows that swirled together in eye-hurting combinations, screaming, clashing pinks and yellow-greens—and the intensity was somehow *too* much; a fluctuating, pulsing brightness, as if they were burning themselves out with every heartbeat. There were little ribbons of evil yellow connecting each pimp to his “ladies,” and Ross wasn't sure just what that meant; was there some kind of emotional or mental dependency there? And if so, who depended on whom? And there was something else, too. Just as Tannim had said, there were *things* lurking about the pimps, vulturine creatures of shifting shape and shadow, watching and waiting with infinite patience. One of them looked in Ross's direction as if it felt his eyes on it, but its glance was indif-ferent, as if he was of no use to it. It blinked leprous-silver eyes and turned away, back to the pimp. He shuddered anyway. If these jerks only knew what was waiting for them. . . .

But none of the girls he saw, in their tinsel and flash, short skirts and glorified underwear, was Tania.

He drifted along Bull Street for about a mile, seeing no sign of her. When he noticed that the street had gotten emptier, that the girls he saw were no longer plying the trade, he realized he must have come to the end of the “district,” and turned back, taking the opposite side of the street.

It all was pretty different from what he had expected. There were no “Irma la Douce” girls here, no “Pretty Women,” or “Happy Hookers.” This sure was a far cry from the way most movies portrayed street-walkers. There was nothing playful or cheerful here. Most of 'em looked like whipped dogs, spirits broken, minds numbed. Oh, there were a few who were different, but none of *them* were hooked up with pimps. It looked to Ross as if the best these kids could muster was the same blank business-like approach as the kids in the fast-food places, selling burgers. No wonder Vanessa had called a night on the job “hanging on the meat-rack.”

Suddenly, his musings were broken into by a glimpse of blond hair with the streetlight shining off of it, and the arch of a nose and cheekbone that seemed familiar, an aura that wasn't as muddy as most. The girl moved, and he got a better look—

It was her, all right. Then something else caught his eye, and he realized that he wasn't the only person hunting her.

There was a man stalking her; a man in a suit, with an aura that was completely black, and a swarm of

shadow-creatures around him that was three times the number around any of the pimps.

Ross moved in on the man, quickly, fearing the worst. But before he could reach the girl's side, the man had already maneuvered so that he was between her and the rest of the people on the street. And just as he got within touching distance, the man managed to crowd her into an alcove, where she pressed herself back against a locked doorway, a look of fear and shock on her young face.

“What—” she said, her voice tight with panic. “What do you want? Leave me alone! I don't have any money, I don't have any drugs—”

Ross crowded in, trying to think of something he could do. He couldn't hit the guy, he couldn't drag him away, or even shout in his ear to distract him. And suddenly there didn't seem to be anyone else on this side of the street, as if the rest of the denizens of Bull had sensed the trouble and evaporated.

“It's you I want,” the man said, in a cold, utterly expressionless voice. “If you come along, there won't be any trouble.” He pulled back his coat, and terror spread across Tania's face as she saw the gun he was reaching for. “But if you won't be a good little girl—I'll have to—”

Ross didn't even think; he just grabbed for the gun, desperately, reaching right through the kidnapper's back and somehow getting his hands on the gun-grip and the trigger. And realizing that he couldn't take it away. That in fact, there wasn't much he could do. Except—maybe—

His next move was pure instinct. He cocked the hammer, and, as the kidnapper started in surprise at the telltale *click*, pulled the trigger.

The gun went off in the shoulder-holster, the bullet tearing its way through the leather and down his side, with a roar and a muzzle-flash that would have blinded and deafened Ross if he had been alive. The jacket blew away like a rag in a hurricane, and the man's body whip-cracked against the opposite wall of the alcove. Tania jerked back, screaming, then spun and bolted for the street.

The kidnapper clutched at his side, nearly doubling over as his legs and torso went slick with hot, red blood.

Tania made it across the street, just as the firefight began. Gunmen appeared from nowhere, the pimps and pushers he'd seen before, firing wildly; and Ross realized as he ducked out of sheer reflex that none of them knew why they were shooting. But they certainly knew what they were shooting at; the kidnapper, as the originator of the first shot.

The kidnapper went down, blood spraying, in the crossfire; Tania ducked into an alley, and sirens began to wail in the distance.

The firefight continued as Ross dashed across the street after her, while the red and blue flashes of approaching cop cars lit up the sky in both directions.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Tania's side was afire, pierced with pain, but she ran anyway, gasping for breath as her lungs ached and her throat rasped. Behind her, sirens split the night air with unearthly wails, though the *crack* of gunfire no

longer echoed down the alley. She didn't care; or rather, she had no room in her mind for anything but the desperate need to run, run until she was somewhere safe.

She couldn't see at all; her eyes were still dazzled by the flash when the gun had gone off. She lost her balance when she stumbled over a trash-can and fell face-first in the slimy alley, ripping the knees out of her tights and scraping the skin of both palms. She was up again in the next heartbeat—dashing out of the alley and into the lit street, across it, and into another alley again. She ran into a dumpster she hadn't even seen, pushed away from it, and stumbled off into the dark. At the end of this alley she slowed, then stopped, doubling over with one hand on the brick of the wall beside her, sucking in huge gulps of breath, her belly heaving as if a dull knife carved at it deeper every time she breathed.

Panic ebbed, slowly. Her palms burned, and so did her knees. She stood up, slowly, as the blinding white light of pure fear flickered and went out, freeing her mind, letting her think again.

This wasn't the first time she'd been approached by a pimp, but they'd never *come after her* before. No one had ever pulled a gun on her. If it hadn't gone off like that—

She started to shake, and not just from reaction to her narrow escape. The gun—the gun had gone off, in the guy's holster—before he even touched it. He'd just pulled his jacket open to show it to her. *He had* been reaching for it, but he hadn't actually gotten his hand on it, when the hammer had gone *click*, he'd gotten a startled look on his face, and the gun had flashed and roared.

It had misfired. She had to think that. Anything else was too weird.

Besides, she didn't want to think about it at all. All she wanted, she realized desperately, was to get home. Back to the apartment, where she could soak her knees and hands before they got infected, soak her tired body in a hot bath, hide in her bed with a book, and never, ever come out again.

She stood up, still shaking but determined to get home, knees and palms sending little stabs of pain up her arms and legs every time the raw skin flexed.

She ignored that, and the distant ache in her side, and stepped out into the dim light from the streetlamp, trying to muster a show of courage. She couldn't help but glance over her shoulder, up and down the street; trying not to be obvious about it, but looking furtively to see if there was anyone else likely to make a grab for her. It wasn't just that she was afraid of another muscle-boy coming after her. In her current disheveled condition, she knew she looked like prey, easy prey. Even someone who might ordinarily leave her alone could be tempted to go for her the way she looked right now. And there were muggers, rapists, kids just looking to make some trouble, and she was all too obviously a good target. She started to shake again.

She saw only a couple of people on her side of the street, and neither of them looked terribly dangerous. One was an old bag-lady who tottered down the street peering into corners, clucking and muttering to herself; the other, of indeterminate gender, wandered all over the sidewalk, clutching a bottle in a paper sack.

That didn't mean there wasn't someone lurking around the corner, or in the mouth of an alley; someone she couldn't see. But at least she'd see them and have a head start if they came after her. . . .

She started up the street, in the direction of the apartment, forcing herself to walk normally, with her head high. The wino stared at her as she passed him, but he didn't seem to really see her; the bag-lady ignored her entirely in favor of an old sneaker she'd just found.

Nothing happened; no one jumped out of shadowy doorways to grab her, and no one pulled any more guns. One or two kids, alone, dressed in variations on jeans and gang-jackets, looked her over carefully, but evidently -decided she wasn't worth hassling.

By the time she made it back to the apartment, she was ready to pass out from fear and from exhaustion. But at least tonight there was a lightbulb illuminating the staircase, however faintly. There was no way that there could be anyone lurking on the landing, waiting to ambush her. She took the stairs slowly, carefully, pausing every few stairs to catch her breath. It took her a long time to fumble the key out of her tiny purse, and even longer to unlock the door.

The apartment was completely empty.

In a way, she was glad; that meant she wasn't going to have to explain what had happened to anyone until she'd managed to sort it all out herself. But the emptiness of the apartment meant she was going to be alone for a while. What if that pimp had friends? What if they knew where she lived? What if they'd been following her?

They couldn't know where she lived, she told herself, as she shut and locked the door behind her. All she had to do was stay away from the windows, and not turn on any extra lights that might be visible from the street. That wouldn't be too hard.

The sound of her own heart was so loud she was certain that if anyone did break in, they'd find her by that alone.

She edged her way around the first room. Tonio, Joe, and Honi were nowhere to be seen, and the bedding hadn't been slept in. She kept between the wall and the light, so that no betraying shadow could fall to tell anyone watching that there was now someone inside the apartment. The bathroom was dark, and once in its comforting shadows she heaved a sigh of relief. She stripped off the ruined tights, whimpering as she pulled the fabric away from abraded flesh. They were useless now; huge runs had already started unraveling the black knit, and by the time she got the tights off, there wasn't much left of them but a weblike snarl of threads.

*My best tights, too,* she thought, angrily, tears in her eyes. They'd cost her a full two dollars at Goodwill, and had been brand-new, out of a batch donated by some store or other. SCAD students had snapped up the rest; she'd practically had to fight to get this pair. And now some goon with a gun had ruined them. Her knees started bleeding again, and she caught the blood with a hastily grabbed wad of toilet tissue. She probably ought to let the scrapes bleed for a while, to clean them out.

She waited until the bleeding slowed, then wrung out a wash rag in hot water, and sat on the toilet in her panties and cotton minidress, carefully dabbing at her knees and the palms of her hands, trying not to get any blood on anything else. Each touch of the damp cloth brought an involuntary hiss of pain from her, and she rinsed the cloth and wrung it out, over and over, then dabbed at her knees again, wondering if she ought to use the peroxide Laura did her hair with on the scrapes. But soap and water were free, and peroxide cost money.

Finally the scrapes looked pretty clean, and the bleeding stopped. Her knees looked awful, though. She could hide the palms of her hands, but how was she going to cover up her knees? She still had to hustle tomorrow, if not tonight.

She finally decided to wear the black garter-belt and the black opaque stockings for the next couple of

days. Men never asked her to take those off, not even the suits. And if she never told them that the hose were a little old Italian lady's black support hose, they'd never guess. Those stockings were dark enough she could tape her whole leg and they'd never know it.

A great Goodwill find, courtesy of Laura, who could see potential in anything.

It was easier thinking about what to wear than it was to think about what had just happened. She filled the tub with hot water and slipped out of the rest of her clothing, then climbed in, hissing a little as the water set her knees and hands afire. The pain didn't stop, it only leveled off, and she relaxed back into the tub with a sigh and closed her eyes.

The pimp was dead; she had no doubt at all about that. The minute his gun had gone off, he had been dead. There were enough pimps and pushers nearby to start a small war; they all went armed, and they were all as paranoid as hell, especially the pushers. The minute a shot rang out, every muzzle on the street would have been pointed in her would-be kidnapper's direction, and a microsecond later, every one of the triggers would have been pulled. The law on the street was, "assume they're shooting at you." That was why she'd run for cover, hoping to reach the protection of brick and concrete before the fire-fight began.

She'd kept running once she was out of the line of fire because she also couldn't afford to get caught up with the dead, wounded, and witnesses when the cops came. Somebody might remember the guy was trying to grab her—might even finger her for the one who shot first. The Savannah cops were some of the best. They'd never let a private little war go on for long; she had to be out of there before they arrived and sealed the area off.

But who was that man, and *what* was he? Was he a pimp himself, or somebody's muscle? She didn't recognize him, but that didn't mean anything. New pimps moved in every week; he could have been someone new trying to expand his stable. She knew why he'd try for her; she was working alone, which made her a tempting target. Blondes, especially young ones, were always in demand. That was what Laura had told her when she'd insisted on bleaching Tania's hair.

But he hadn't looked or acted like a pimp; he'd had none of the flash, none of the surface style and smoothness. Hired heat was more like it—but if he'd been hired, who had done it? Why hire muscle to bring her in—was she that valuable, or was it just that there was just a scarcity of young blondes worth recruiting? And would they try again—or hunt her down and take the loss of the muscle-boy out on her?

Her head swam, and not just from the heat of the bath. It was all too complicated . . . and none of it made any sense.

She'd have to wait until Laura got home. Laura knew the street, Laura would be able to help her sort it out, and decide what to do.

*I ought to at least change my territory*, she thought drowsily. *That's a good idea. I could start working President Street.* It would be a little hazardous to move into a new area, since she'd be competing with girls who -already had established territories, but maybe she could trade one of them for her old beat on Bull.

Or maybe she could see if she could hit Tannim up again—

But what if *Tannim* had sent the muscle?

The thought made her sit up straight for a moment. It was possible. He knew where her beat was; he knew when she worked. He'd already advanced her three hundred bucks and gotten nothing for it. Maybe he'd decided to collect. . . .

The thought made her sick. She'd trusted him. But wasn't that how the really sick people operated? They got you to trust them, and then they did horrible things to you.

Maybe *he* was the one behind some of the disappearances that had been going on for the past couple of months—the hookers that went off somewhere and never came back. The ones that weren't in the shelters, hadn't been busted, and hadn't moved to Atlanta. Maybe she wasn't the first kid he'd approached; maybe she was just the latest one in a series. She'd read a discarded newspaper's article about serial killers the other night; about how they always chose the same kind of people, that they seemed real nice until they were caught. Regular people; folks you'd never suspect.

She could only sit in silence and cry, her shivers making ripples in the steaming water.

The minute Tannim pulled up to the gate and keyed it open, he knew that there was something wrong. The -radar detector on his dash whined as the gun hit it, but the run-lights didn't come on.

Suddenly he recalled his dreams last night; all of them had been about Unseleighe critters attacking and being countered. And he remembered the careful way Keighvin and the others had handled him before he'd left last night. There had been something about to go down—and they'd been keeping it away from him.

He flushed with anger, half tempted to turn the Mustang around and go home, his good mood vanishing. They were treating him as if he was some kind of invalid, a risk, just because he was a little tired and his aim got a little erratic—

Unbidden, the memory of Conal and the near-miss during the last little altercation rose up before his mental eye, and the flush turned to a blush.

He had been more than a "little" tired last night. It had been all he could do to get home and into bed. And his aim was worse than erratic when he was that weary. The last near-miss had been funny, but if someone from Fairgrove got plugged by Tannim's friendly fire, it would be a lot worse than Conal's hair-loss. Last night he'd been too exhausted to have been any use magically—it would have been firearms, then, and no mage-fire shield would deflect a steel-jacketed slug if the mage wasn't expecting one to come winging in.

But he was in good shape now . . . and he'd better get up there and see what Keighvin had for him.

The radio announcer finally ended his commercial spiel, and the first notes of the next half-hour's series of songs started.

There was no mistaking *that* horn riff, even without the lyrics. "Dead-man's Curve," by Jan and Dean.

With a shiver of ill-omen, Tannim snapped the radio off before the singing started.

The radar detector continued to whine as he pulled up the drive, at exactly two miles per hour under the posted limit of thirty. Whoever was on the cameras—probably Janie—would know by that speed that

the car she was tracking was a friend and not a stranger or an enemy.

The glare beyond the trees told him that the parking lot was lit up like the yard of a maximum-security prison. In fact, all of the halogens were probably on tonight. Whatever had gone down, it must have been big. . . .

He cursed his own weakness. He should have been there. He should have. He longed to floor the Mustang and race up the drive, to get there all the sooner—but that would give Janie and everyone else heart failure.

Instead, he pulled sedately into a parking lot so brilliantly illuminated that every stray pebble showed clearly. It was a good thing the lot was square, or pilots would be mistaking it for the runway at the airport.

Sam's old Mark IV Lincoln presided over an otherwise empty lot. There were no other cars there, elvensteeds or otherwise. Of course, most of the other Fairgrove humans would be gone by now; the few that were left tended to have gift-steeds, presents from their foster-parents, like the Diablo and the Dino. And any elvensteeds would have gone back to native form for a fight. Still, the empty lot gave Tannim the shivers again.

He parked and locked the Mustang—normally he never locked it here, but there was no point in giving anything to the enemy. If the enemy was still here.

Once he was outside the Mustang's protective shields, there didn't seem to be any sign that the Fairgrove complex was still under siege. There was nothing in the air but the scent of honeysuckle and wet grass; no tremblings in the power-flows betrayed any disturbance of the protections around the place.

But out beyond the parking lot, there were more glares of halogen lights. The lights at the fence were blazing at full power, so there was something going on at the borders tonight.

He gave up on speculation and headed for the shop. Whatever had happened, he'd find it out a lot quicker by just going in.

The shop was quiet, with no one working on prototypes. No elvensteeds waited in car-form for someone to suggest modifications to their lines to add to verisimilitude. There was a huddle of bodies, standing and sitting, at the far corner, beside the prototype Victor he and Donal had been working on, and Tannim headed that way at a limping trot.

Sam looked up first, and his wide grin of relief was a welcome sight. Keighvin finished whatever he was saying to Sarge Austin, then turned his own emerald eyes up to greet the young mage.

"We had a visitor last night," the Sidhe said without preamble.

"And a fair horde of his friends," Conal said with a grimace of suppressed pain. "He'd sent a challenge with yon mortal, but we hadn't reckoned on his bringing as many as he did."

Tannim glanced around the circle, and came up quite a few names short. And there was a gloom about the Sidhe, combined with the reddened eyes of the humans, that spoke volumes.

*We lost somebody. Shit.*



“Casualties?” he asked carefully.

“Donal,” his twin replied, and the lack of expression in his voice told Tannim just how deep and raw the wound of loss was. Tannim closed his eyes briefly, and extended a tentative mental “hand” to his elven friend. It was clasped, and Conal accepted the comfort that flowed across the link.

“And one of the fosterlings,” added Kieru. “Rob van Alman. Dinna fret yerse’ lad, ’twouldn’t have changed matters if you’d been here. The black bastard sent a Bane-Sidhe, an old, powerful one, and he’d gi’en his lesser Sidhe compound crossbows loaded wi’ elf shot. ’Twas the shot that got yon Rob, and the Bane-Sidhe that did for puir Donal. Ye’d ha’ been no use ’gainst either one.”

Tannim kept his eyes closed for a moment more, as he mentally ran through every swear-word he knew twice over. None of them were enough. Rob had been the most cheerful guy he’d ever known, always ready with a joke at his own expense, keeping the place laughing at the worst of times and under the most stressful conditions. And Donal—the Sidhe driver was Tannim’s own replacement as mechanic on the SERRA team. He’d taught Donal everything he knew, and he could always count on Donal being there at the track whenever he ran—ready with a cold towel and a squeeze-bottle of Gatorade—

His throat tightened. He opened his eyes, and asked, hoarsely, “And wounded?”

“About a score,” Keighvin replied with the carefully impassive expression of a war-leader. “We know that they’re learning from us now; we won’t underestimate them again.”

Tannim took a deep breath to force his throat open, then another. He’d have his own private mourning session later. Maybe, once it was safe, he’d try to visit them on the other side. . . .

“What do you want me to do?” he asked.

“Mine-sweeping,” Phil Austin said.

He blinked, puzzled. “But we don’t—”

“What Sarge there means is that there’s bits of steel all over the grounds,” Sam stuck in. “Bullets that missed, that kind of thing.”

And none of the Folk would be able to do any precision magic except in the protected rooms until the stray metal was gotten rid of. He nodded. “And when I’m done?”

“Reinforcement on the perimeter,” Keighvin replied decisively. “I want a shield ye couldna bring tank nor mouse through.”

He nodded, and turned to go.

“Take Sam with you,” Keighvin added. “There was enough ordnance flyin’ about last night ye’ll need four hands, an’ he can tell ye the full of the story.”

And that was definitely toned as a dismissal. Tannim’s liege he was not, but the young man knew that the Sidhe’s terseness was caused by pain, and not the arrogance of a nobleman. They walked out to the lighted perimeter, with Tannim stopping long enough to pick up a couple of chisels to dig bullets out of trees with, from the silk-lined tool locker where steel implements were kept. A half-dozen other humans

prowled the grounds already, most of them sporting stained bandages, but none of them were mages. They were looking for bullet holes by eye alone; digging the steel-jacketed rounds out, and marking the hole with a splash of paint. Others were wrapping the Pinball bars in their special silk sheathes and shoving them down into the fence-posts. Someone with her face obscured by a bandage—Dottie, he recognized after a confused -moment—came up and handed him a can of paint and a brush.

“Glad you’re here now and not earlier,” she said. “I just sent Fred home and you’re the best mage we’ve got. Fred found all the easy ones; we know there’s more out here, but they’re probably buried in the dirt or twenty feet up in a tree.”

Tannim nodded, a little relieved. He wouldn’t have been any use, earlier. The presence of the other rounds would have obscured the ones that were harder to find.

“If you find something in a tree, dig it out, and slap this stuff on it real good,” Dottie continued tiredly. “There’s fungicide, wood-sealer, and growth-hormone in it. The least we can do is make sure the poor trees have a fighting chance after the way we damaged them.”

“Are you all right?” Tannim felt impelled to ask.

“What, this?” she replied, touching the bandage. “Just a graze. Bled like hell and hurts worse, but I’m good for duty.”

Unspoken—that there were plenty who weren’t. Tannim nodded again, and as she turned back to her own task of putting the Pinball bars to bed, unfocused his eyes and reached into himself for the spell that would let him detect any amount of iron and steel, however small.

Sam asked quietly, “Uhm, lad, can you call up any of your friends to help?”

Tannim absent-mindedly sniffed the paste, and closed his eyes. “No . . . no, Sam. I’m not going to call in any favors for something we can do ourselves.”

*We may need them later.*

While Sam waited in silence, he gathered power from inside himself, chanted in a mechanical drone to set the spell in place, then triggered it with a hissed syllable only Chinthliss would have recognized.

There was a bullet not ten feet from him—straight up. It didn’t take a prophet to predict a lot of climbing -tonight.

“So,” he said, waving to Sam to follow him and handing the older man the paint and brush to hold as he climbed the tree, “tell me what went down.”

Sam took a visible breath, and began.

The tiny office was too small to contain Aurilia’s rage. “*Youfool*,” Aurilia stormed at Vidal. “You empty-headed *witling*. I told you that I had a plan, that it involved the child-whores, especially Tannim’s chosen slut; why couldn’t you wait until I got the girl here?”

Vidal Dhu glowered and sulked, but Niall stood behind Aurilia, radiating cold anger, and finally Vidal

deflated, slumping down into his seat. “I thought it would be better to act directly,” he muttered. “I thought that if we left the girl out on the street, anything could happen. She might decide to return home, she might decide to go into one of the shelters, she could even get herself killed being stupid.”

“And *you* nearly got her killed!” Aurilia snapped. “Now you’ve frightened her; she’ll be twice as wary as before! You’ve undone everything I built, in a single moment of genuine idiocy!”

“Maybe not,” Niall rumbled thoughtfully. She turned to stare at him.

“How on earth can you say that?” she asked. “This—man—sent out a stupid human to kidnap the girl. He died trying to coerce her, and she was so frightened she ran, the gods only know where! You say he hasn’t undone everything I worked towards?”

“Think a moment, child,” Niall replied, as she chafed at being called a “child.” “The girl has been affrighted, it is true. She may keep herself from the street for some time, it is also true. But you know who one of her friends is. And it seems to me that if she were offered a chance of employment that appears to be safer—at least, safer in the light of the attempted kidnapping—than whoring on the street, she may well take it”

Aurilia licked her lips thoughtfully. It was true, she did know the boy called “Jamie.” It would be easy enough to find him in the course of a night. And if she offered him another “movie job,” not only for himself, but for a -female friend, he might bring in the girl. The ploy might not work the first time, but if Aurilia made it tempting enough, and added offers for other friends, sooner or later, she’d get Tannim’s protégé, especially when the “movie work” was mild bondage, some sado-eroticism with only the trappings, not the actuality, or perhaps a staged “satanic ritual” -before the cameras; nothing that would frighten them. It would mean a delay in her plans—for she had expected to go directly to where the girl was, and make the “movie -offer” in person, but it wouldn’t be too great a delay. Right now if anyone or anything approached the girl directly except her trusted friends, she’d bolt—and Aurilia wasn’t certain she had the resources to try and catch a fleeing child without -complications.

“I’m going to explain what I have in mind clearly this time,” she said waspishly to Vidal Dhu, “so that there will be no mistakes, and no ill-advised attempts to anticipate the capture. I will find the boy I used in the party-film. He knows the girl. I will offer him more work, work for himself and a female friend. If he brings the girl in the first time, well and good—if *not*, we will be patient. We will offer him another night of work, this time with two females, and ask him if he has any more friends. Eventually, especially after we gain their trust, the girl will come of her own accord.”

“Then we send Keighvin Silverhair a special little tape, or perhaps some pictures,” Niall rumbled in satisfaction. “But—do we bring him here? That could be dangerous—this place is full of the kind of machinery and creations of Cold Iron his humans use so well. Even if it is on our own ground—”

Aurilia shook her head. “No, we will let him think that we have the children on our ground, Underhill. He will bring humans and Cold Iron weapons there trying to thwart us. We will ambush him, but more than that, we will portray him and his dogs to the Seleighe Court as a danger to us all. His position is tenuous enough; this violation of custom will have even his supporters against him. If he survives our ambush, he will never be allowed to set foot in the human world again.”

“Leaving this place open to our hunting—” Vidal breathed in surprise. She nodded.

“And leaving us the children to dispose of in front of the cameras, accomplishing two tasks in one.”

She smiled at Vidal's stunned expression. *You never gave me the credit for that much intelligence, did you?* she thought with viperish satisfaction. *When Keighvin is a memory, and I no longer need you, I think I shall challenge you, Vidal Dhu. With Niall's backing, I will not only humiliate you, I may even be able to destroy you.*

But she allowed no hint of her thoughts to appear in her speech or her body-language. Vidal studied her for a moment, but evidently read nothing, and shrugged.

"Very well then," he said. "I will go and prepare the ambush site. I can still conjure or cajole more than enough underlings to take on Keighvin and all of his allies—"

"Just be certain you do not underestimate him," Niall said coldly. His eyes glittered red within his pitted face. "As you did the last time."

Aurilia watched Vidal seethe with anger, but he held his tongue. "This time the confrontation will be on prepared territory of *our* choosing," he replied, just as coldly. "There will be no mistakes this time."

"I will find the children," Aurilia said quickly, sick to death of their posturing. "After all, I know what they look like."

Niall sighed gustily, breathing a wash of air straight from the grave over her. "And I shall ready the studio," he said. "I am weary, very weary. That is ample employment for me at the moment." Then he added as Vidal Dhu turned to go, as if in afterthought, "And Vidal, if we are able, I would like very much to have the destruction of Silverhair on videotape."

Vidal reddened again, but said nothing. Aurilia smiled.

George Beecher stared at the report on his desk and ground his teeth in anger and frustration. Bad enough that everything he'd collected on this "Tannim" character showed him to be the kind of guy George could easily have been friends with. But when he'd mentioned his client to an old buddy in Vice, hoping to find something that would make him dislike the guy, if not something he could take to the bitch, Terry had given him a strange look.

"You know I don't mix into your business, bud," he'd said, "but I think maybe you took the wrong client this time."

George had wondered about that remark—and now, today, *this* had arrived in the mail. A copy of a police file, with a note, "Burn this when you get done, okay? T."

Slim, as police files went, it nevertheless held more than enough to make George seethe with rage. His client, that charming, lovely young woman with the face of an old-world madonna, was up to her pretty little ear-lobes in a porn ring. And not just plain old garden-variety smut, either; George wouldn't have cared about that. She was definitely linked to S and M, B and D—and tentatively to kiddie-porn and snuff-films.

Whatever hold she wanted over Tannim, George wasn't about to give it to her. If he hadn't been dead sure that not even Terry could cover for him, he might have been tempted to go put some large-caliber holes in her wide, smooth forehead.

Now he was in an ethical quandary. He'd just gotten paid for his last invoice; he had a couple of days' worth of hours on the new one, but nothing he couldn't live without. If he hadn't already deposited the cashier's check, he'd have been in an even more serious quandary; as it was, the bills had all been paid and there was no way he was going to get the money back to throw in her face.

*And I wondered why you always paid with a cashier's check. I thought it was so ex-hubby wouldn't know you'd hired me.*

Bitch.

He chewed on his lip and stared at the police file -lying in the pool of light cast by his desk lamp, and made some hard decisions.

He couldn't do what he *wanted* to do; go to her -office, throw the file down on her desk, and tell her she could keep her damned filthy blood-money. For one thing, that would throw Terry's investigation. For another, these people never operated in a vacuum; she could have mob contacts and bosses, and certainly could hire muscle herself. If she knew *he* knew, it wouldn't take more than five hundred bucks to erase George Beecher, P.I., from the face of the earth.

So, no dramatic gestures.

No gestures at all, in fact.

With his jaw clenched, he swiveled his chair to face the old Smith-Corona on the typing stand beside his desk and laboriously typed out a letter on the agency stationery.

*Ms. Morrigan: In light of the fact that I have uncovered nothing substantial in my investigations, I voluntarily dissolve our contract with no further payment expected. G. Beecher.*

He dated it, folded it carefully, slipped it into an envelope, and left it for the secretary to mail in the morning.

And there was another thing he could do; he knew Tannim's address. Not that the kid hadn't lost him a million times when he'd tried to follow, but there were other ways of finding someone than tailing them. When the City Directory had come up dry, and the phone company proved uncooperative, he'd turned into a prospective creditor and called American Express. The kid had a Gold Card, after all. And he'd been oh, so puzzled, because Mr. Tannim didn't seem to have a first name . . . this amused the person on the other end of the line, who'd confided that Mr. Tannim was very eccentric in that regard.

Bingo; name, address, phone, current employer, and the fact that the kid paid all bills in full on time.

So he had Tannim's address. Now for a little anonymous letter to ease his conscience.

*Sir: I wish to advise you that you are being investigated by a Ms. Aurilia Morrigan, of no known address, who operates a business from Hangar 2A at the Savannah Regional Airport. I do not know why Ms. Morrigan has chosen to have you investigated, but her motives are suspect, since confidential information given me reports she herself is under investigation for possible involvement in illegal activities, including child pornography. Please be advised that she may be dangerous, and take what seem to you to be sensible precautions.*

There. That was all he could say without blowing his cover. This letter would not be entrusted to the

secretary; it would be hand-delivered.

He folded it and inserted it into a plain, white envelope, turned off his desk lamp, and took his coat off the back of the chair. He knew where Tannim would be -tonight: Kevin Barry's pub. He was probably looking for that poor little teenage hooker again. So, while Tannim was at the pub, George Beecher would be slipping this warning under his door.

It wasn't much, but it was something. And a damn sight better than doing nothing.

He flipped off the office lights and picked up the -police file, leaving it and the copy of his letter to Aurilia Morrigan on the boss's desk. In the morning when he came in, there'd be a new case on his blotter, the files would have quietly disappeared, and no mention of the case would ever be made again. There was a little calligraphed piece in the boss's office, where he could see it when he sat at his desk.

*Responsibility. Accountability. Integrity.*

It wasn't the agency motto, but it might as well have been. Nice to work for someone with a bottom-line like that one. Yeah, the boss was a good man to work for. Even if sometimes it meant that you sweated a little at the end of the month. Better sweating a little money than not being able to sleep at night. Being a hardworking, average joe with a relatively clean conscience wasn't a bad way to live.

George flipped the latch and closed the door of the office quietly, patting his coat pocket to be certain that the letter was still there, and looking forward to a good night's sleep.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tannim drummed his fingers idly on the phone-tap detector, and waited for his police contact to pick up. There had been a few too many coincidences lately for comfort—and his nerves told him that anything could be a setup. This anonymous tip in his mailbox reeked of an inept trap.

On the other hand, why would any of his enemies be that inept? Unless it was to throw him off, and make him think it was too inept to be a trap—

*Circular reasoning like that is gonna make me too dizzy to see in a minute.*

At last a voice answered. The detector showed nil.

“Yeah?”

“Hiya, Terry? This is Greeneyes. Hey, look, you need a good bottle of scotch? I need a fingerprint check.” He crossed his fingers and hoped Terry wasn't busy . . . or rather, *too* busy. Vice was always busy with something. Terry sounded annoyed, but not angry. “Aww, jeez man, you *know* I hate to do those! They take freakin' *forever* .”

Tannim sighed. The balance sheet was a little too tilted in Terry's direction lately. He'd have to do something about that, later. Maybe when he got Tania safe he could talk her into fingering some pimps or pushers. “I know, I know, it's just that there's something weird going down, and there are a couple real young civilians in the middle of it. Dig?”

The growl Terry produced sounded only halfhearted. “Damn Boy Scout. All right, three bottles of Amaretto and a Bob Uecker card.”

Well, that was an easy bribe, and just a little too quick for something off the cuff. Tannim had always suspected Terry of keeping a list of items he wanted for doing -favors. “Done. Thanks. Here’s the story: got an anonymous letter in my mailbox, no address or postage, tipping me off to the whereabouts of Bad Guys. Letter says these Bad Guys are into everything that pushes my piss-off buttons. All I’ve got to go on is this letter, and I don’t know if it’s genuine. If it is, well . . .”

Terry snorted. “If it is, we’ll find out about it after you’ve played vigilante, same as usual. Dammit, Greeneyes, this covert hero-crap of yours is going to sink us all. You and your friends’re gonna get shot by a cop one of these days while you’re out being white hats. You dig that?”

Tannim bit his lip. It *wasnot* the most encouraging thing he could have heard at the moment, but Terry had a good point. The police were damned good at their job in Savannah, and a lot of Tannim’s activities could look mighty suspicious if someone that wasn’t a friend happened upon them. He could picture it, too. His armor could stop a bullet, but he’d still lose a couple ribs from the impact, and then there were the explanations. . . .

And there was nothing armoring him from a head-shot.

“Greeneyes? You there?”

“Yeah . . . yeah, I’m here. I’ll be careful, Terry. And look, you’re right. If things get too rough, I’ll call you for help.”

Terry produced something that was closer to a bark than a laugh. “If it’s that bad, I’ll bring an ambulance.”

Tania rubbed sleep from her eyes, her mouth tasting like her sweat-soaked, musty blankets. She’d tossed all night in half-sleep, haunted by images of gun-toting maniacs forcing her against grimy walls, and awakening was at best a hollow improvement. The creaking from the apartment’s warped steps had snapped her into attentiveness—but she’d calmed as she heard a familiar voice. It was Jamie, high as a kite, staggering up the stairwell.

*Oh, God. Not again. This is too much. . . .*

Tania pulled the strands of hair from her mouth—that always seemed to happen when she slept, no matter how short her hair was. Jamie giggled uncontrollably, amused beyond belief by how difficult it was to get his key into the lock. Tania heard the unmistakable sound of his forehead thumping against the door, but the giggling didn’t stop even then. He was wasted but good this time.

Laura was not waking as readily as Tania had; the two had spent the wee hours hugging and comforting each other before finally crashing. Laura had seemed unusually tense over the threat to Tania, and it had amazed her no small amount that the normally suspicious, cynical girl could be so open about her fears when Tania’d confided in her. Both of them had talked about suicide as some solution to put the street out of their minds forever, but neither could do it. There was something, somewhere, to live for, and they could cry in hope over it—and if nothing else, they had each other.

And they both agreed that Jamie was in trouble. The drugs, the recklessness, his frailty . . .

By the time Jamie had gotten the door open, Tania had pulled her sweat suit top on, and was pulling the bottoms on over her still-stinging, scab-caked knees. Laura had roused, too, and had pulled on a tattered black shift. She'd obviously had better nights herself, and gave Tania a significant look as the door came open.

Jamie stumbled in, a red scarf around his neck despite the sultry night, tight jeans torn at the knees and a wad of something in his pocket. Dozens of rubber junk--jewelry bracelets covered his wrists, falling down his forearm as he hung his keys on an exposed nail. He turned heavily dilated eyes to his roommates.

"Heya! Miss me?" Another fit of giggling overtook him, and he made a great show of trying to control it. "Okay. Okay. Before you ask--no, I did not mug Ed McMahon." He turned his pocket inside-out, and a shower of crumpled twenties fell to the rotting floor.

With them fell a pair of tiny plastic bags full of white powder. Laura's breath hissed when she saw them. Tania's heart froze.

Jamie fished a last bill out of his pocket, smoothed it carefully, and dropped it onto the floor with the rest. He then tottered off into the kitchen and turned on the tap, and splashed his face obsessively. By the time he returned, Laura had picked up the money and counted. She'd avoided touching the bags as if they were pit vipers.

*Three hundred forty dollars.*

"Jamie, how'd you get this money?"

"You oughta be in pictures . . . you oughta be a star. . . ." Jamie sang off key. "I'm in show business, baby. Big time mooo-vie star Want my autograph?"

Laura's brow was knotted up in rage. "What ah wanta know is what's goin' on, Jamie. What d'you do for all this cash?"

*. . . And how much was there before you got stoned . . . ?*

He gestured wildly. "I have starred . . . in a major motion picture, clothing optional. I agented myself and found my contract agreeable."

Laura's fist clenched, white-knuckled, on the cash.

"I was so very surprised to find that acting was so easy. Heels in the air and speak into the camera—it was so much like my day job I may go full-time." He snickered again, and bowed.

Tania tucked her knees up into her chest and rocked slowly on the mattress. This was the worst Jamie had ever come home wasted. It was like seeing your little brother slice at himself with a dirty knife, and laugh at the -spectacle.

"Did they give you the drugs, Jamie?" Tania asked softly.



“Oh no. No. They don’t like drugs on the set, baby. They say it affects the quality of the performance. I got my buzz later. I like to celebrate. Party, ’arty, ’arty . . .” His voice trailed off.

Laura stashed the bills in Jamie’s pocket and took his face in her hands. “You are effed-up, boy.”

“Yeah, but I’m rich. Money, money, money for hooking easy.” Jamie smiled, the kind of look he’d give with a birthday present. It was like sunlight through thundercloud. “And they want girls, too. Money for you, and it’s in cash. Straight sex, some kink, a little bondage, but not worse than street johns, and they even call you a cab when you’re done. You wanna come?”

Laura was still far from happy, but Tania knew that chilling look in her eyes. It was the same look she used sizing up johns, or buying clothes at Goodwill.

Tannim leaned back in the vinyl chair in Terry’s office, and gazed in wonder at the hundreds of baseball and football cards in frames covering every wall. This was the first time he’d been allowed inside the Sanctum Sanctorum, but Terry had insisted he show up in person. Behind a coffee-stained desk cluttered with file folders, Terry jawed on the phone with one of his team. After a few minutes of mind-numbing technical talk, he insulted the caller’s sexual prowess, then hung up grinning.

Tannim looked around conspiratorially, winked, and withdrew three bottles of Amaretto, a small paper bag, and the plastic-wrapped letter from his backpack. With a flourish, he opened the bag to reveal a colorful card between two thick slabs of Lexan.

“But it’s not a bribe, of course,” he said, grinning.

Terry nodded. “Of course not.”

“That would be illegal.” Tannim held it out. “I’d never do anything illegal, and even if I thought about doing anything illegal, I’d never, ever ask you to do anything illegal.”

“Heaven forbid.” Terry leaned over the desk, took the card-holder, and held it up to the light. “Thirty-proof Uecher.” He put it down on top of the file-folders. “A token of your undying esteem, I’m sure.”

“Naturally.” Tannim somberly handed over the letter. “Here it is, pretty much as I found it. My prints are on it, of course.”

Terry took it out of the plastic and unfolded it with a pair of tweezers, and glanced at the contents. Then he snorted and passed the note back to him without taking the same elaborate precautions. “Greeneyes, I don’t have to run prints to know who sent you that. It’s legit, from one of the most principled P.I.’s I know. He’s a buddy, and he managed to acquire a little confidential information from the usual impeccable sources. And he was really pissed off about working for this woman once he had the dope on her.”

Tannim raised an eyebrow. “The impeccable source was someone for whom I have undying esteem? You’re investigating her?”

Terry went stone-faced. “Can’t answer that. You just watch yourself if you go anywhere near her. She’s not only pretty poison, she’s gonna find herself hip-deep in alligators real soon now. And I’d hate to see

a friend caught in the alligator pit.”

Tannim nodded. He knew Terry had grown up on cop shows where the good guys worked outside the letter of the law. That was the only thing that had kept the cop in him from pushing Tannim away for interfering in -police business, any number of times. Terry knew there was something strange about his friend “Greeneyes,” and that favors could one day be called in. After all, he’d tipped off Terry to some goings-on around town before, ones that by-the-book police work would never have revealed. The baseball card bribes were only part of the dance.

But that meant there was another debt that needed to be put to rest. “All right, credit where it’s due. He take a personal check?”

Terry opened a worn Day-Timer, then scribbled on stationery marked “From The Desk Of Hank Aaron.” “Here’s his address. His rate is fifty-eight an hour plus expenses, and he has a car to pay off. You were never here, I never saw you, pay no attention to the cop behind the curtain. Later.”

Tannim took the note. “Just let me know when you’re in need of another token of my admiration.”

“Out,” Terry ordered. “Let an honest cop get some work done. Go.”

Tannim went, whistling “Take Me Out To The Ball Game.”

\* \* \*

Tania tried, but couldn’t erase the image of twenties falling to the floor. They fell in slow motion, or in sharp detail, and crept back into her thoughts no matter how hard she tried to forget them by reading.

Laura and Jamie were her family now, like it or not. All three of them knew they were too young to be trying to survive out here on their own, that the world was a cold, uncaring place that made no allowances for their weaknesses. It was never more plain than the past few days, and going through all of the old magazines she’d collected only reinforced how hopeless the future looked for her almost-family. Page after page showed perfect teeth, made-up faces, clothes that cost more than Tania had made in a year. Here on one page was a cigarette-smoking model, showing how glamorous a stick of burning weeds could be. On this page was a bare-chested -Adonis in designer jeans. On this page . . . Tania closed the magazine on the camper ad. Was this the way the real world was, or was this what the advertisers expected people to be? The Suits at the ad agency hyped what their demographics told them to: that upper middle-class whites were their target audience, blue-eyed, clean-cut, blond. . . .

*Like my family . . . was. . . .* And there they were, laughing and happy, in their pressed slacks and forty-dollar haircuts, mocking the decay around Tania from glossy pages.

Tania chewed on her lower lip. That, among other things, was something her mother had nagged her about constantly, calling it a “bad habit,” or “unladylike.”

*I wonder if she chews on her lip now when she thinks of me. She probably told the social clubs that I was kidnapped, and milked her grief for the attention. The neighbor-hood probably used my disappearance as an excuse to double their security patrols, while setting up a -politically-correct fund to find me. Papa probably bought that third BMW he wanted with it, and the money he’s saved on my French tutor and racquetball coach. . . .*

It all would have been so much better with one less imported luxury car, and a camper instead, out in the

woods once in a while, where there were no neighbors to impress.

It seemed like a ragged lifetime ago, those days when her posture and manners were always on her mind for fear of verbal punishment later. There could always be somebody watching, her parents had drilled her, and looking like you were everything they wanted to be would make them do exactly what you wanted. Now, Tania was in a world where invisibility was what one desired most; trying to be unnoticeable to the ravagers.

Money was one thing her parents had that she envied—but all that ready cash hadn't kept her from running. If money hadn't kept the all-American yuppie dream family together, how could it help a trio of tramp runaways?

It hadn't escaped Tania that their shared poverty was the glue that kept them together. If each of the three had enough money to live independently, wouldn't her new family dissolve?

*God, I wish they were back.*

The other three roommates hadn't returned yet, either. In fact, they hadn't been seen in a couple of days, not here, nor on the street. Tania's imagination painted grisly -images of what had happened to them, none of which were likely, but still—they had probably only hopped a train, or stolen a car, and were in another state by now.

*Or gotten shot by a—*

Enough. Worry about how to pay the rent if they'd gone for good, not about what might have happened to them. You couldn't worry about everybody. *Save the worrying for the people you care about.*

Tania opened one of the books in her small stack of paperbacks. She was bright enough to know that escapism was a myth; she read now to find solutions. The science fiction and mystery writers she loved the most were the ones who taught as well as they entertained, and whose characters understood human nature. There were heroines and heroes, aliens with kind eyes, fire-breathing dragons and silver unicorns. . . .

*Like the one on the sweat suit Tanim gave me. . . .*

And there *he* was in her thoughts again. Maybe she had believed a few too many fantasy stories. Maybe she'd been tricked by her own wounded heart into believing there could be someone who did good things for no other reason than that they needed to be done. Why would anyone do that? It didn't make any sense at all. . . .

*No more sense than treating a kid as property.*

There was the burden of proof: if her world were cruel enough to make her an alien to her own blood, then it had to have another extreme to the good. One crusty, drunken old john had babbled about odds last week, saying that if something hadn't happened yet, it was statistically likely to happen soon. He called himself a gambler, but he'd never gambled with disease and death the way a streetwalker did. Maybe Tanim was the long-awaited proof that a human being could be kind for kindness' own sake in a risky world full of self-serving pricks.

If her world was one of insane gambles, then Tanim's brand of insanity was the better.

And, no matter how restricted she had been in Research Triangle Park, her life had never been in danger. Her folks had always seen to it she'd had the best health care their money could buy. She'd never had to worry about guys with guns coming after her on the street . . . or someone with a knife waiting for her on the landing with the lights out.

Maybe they'd changed once they'd lost her. Maybe. People changed—God, people changed. Maybe they'd welcome her back and have things her way, now that they knew what assholes they'd been. They'd forced her to run by not giving her enough credit, but Tania was damned if she'd be that insulting even to them. Anyone could change if they were kicked hard enough.

And that, Tania knew, was the single good thing that being on the street had done for her. She wasn't the mewling brat she saw herself as a couple of months ago, she was a hardened survivor. If they were going to get her back, it would be on her terms. She'd have her privacy, her room inviolate, her own choice of clothes, her own choice of books. . . .

*And their love. . . .*

Tania sat a few minutes, and realized a smile had come to her face. The dream the ads showed could be real, if everyone loved everyone else, and gave them the choice to be themselves.

Her brow furrowed as she realized that was why Jamie had gotten the way he had, though—she and Laura had wanted so much to stay out of his business that they'd let him get progressively more out of control. He was just as much a kid as she was, and he needed someone to say “no, stop that, you're screwing up” once in a while. The three all loved each other, even though they'd never said it. The way Laura and Jamie had insisted she stay home until whoever was looking for her got tired of looking was proof of that. And, as his family, the two girls were obligated to help him out of the drugs and danger, just as they were obligated to help each other improve their lives. Maybe the money could keep them together after all.

A car engine outside roused her from her thought. She rose, knees protesting, and edged next to the window. She peeked around the frame, and saw a glossy yellow taxi at the broken curb. Jamie and Laura were getting out, wearing new outfits, and laughing. The taxi left as they climbed the stairs, and Tania met them at the door, an expectant look on her face.

Laura arrived, sailing through the door like Marilyn Monroe at the premiere of *The Seven Year Itch*, her face aglow. “Hey, sugah! We're baaack! Jamie here picked a good one, honey. Ah been keepin' his sweet tush outta trouble.”

Jamie blushed, and giggled a little self-consciously. Laura got in his face and pinched his cheeks, saying, “Jamie-wamie, you'se the best lil' studmuffin ah ever been gigged by.”

Tania stammered, taken aback by their happiness. And Laura being sexed by Jamie? That was a first—none of the three had ever had sex with each other. It must have been some gig indeed.

“S-so, what was it like? You both okay?”

Laura twirled in place, making her bright red mini-skirt flare. “Honey, we're better than okay. It's easy tricking, soft kink, and they'se payin' enough I ain't gonna rag on 'em about rubbers, 'specially since it's with mah Jamie, an' we know he's clean. Lookie lookie.”

Laura opened her clutch purse and thumbed open a roll of twenties. “Three hundredeach, sugah. And

they need another girl.” She licked her lips and winked. “Baby-doll, I think you’re exactly who they’re looking for.”

*“She turned about her milk-white steed, and took True Thomas up be’hind, and aye whene’er her bridle rang, the steed flew swifter than the wind. For forty days and forty nights he wade thro red blood to the knee, and he saw neither sun nor moon, but heard the roaring of the sea.”*

Tannimlay back in the worn driver’s seat of the Mustang, hands caked with dirt, clutching the three dozen or so slugs he and Sam had dug out of the trees and grounds. “The Ballad of True Thomas” came unbidden to him, one of many songs and fables he’d learned to fascinate and entertain the Folk Underhill. He closed his eyes, seeing neither sun nor moon, and the breeze washing over the car sounded like the sea.

*“For forty days and forty nights, he wade thro red blood to the knee. . . .”*

It hadn’t just been fatigue that had kept him down the night before, he’d surmised. Conal or Keighvin had no doubt influenced his sleep, playing on his own desires to deepen it. He remembered, now, the other elements of his dreams: the lover that had come with him into a room of green and gold, and laid him down . . . they had no doubt arranged that, too, to occupy him, keep him in the dream for as long as it took for his body to heal itself of the strain he’d been putting on it. And in the room with them had been a sleeping golden eagle, and a tapestry of a kind dragon holding a child, gently, as a parent would.

Oh, the dreams of mages. They were sharp and powerful, second only to the waking world, but just as real in their influence on the mage. The lover had been that *woman* that had plagued his dreams for so long; the one he’d seen while with Chinthliss, so far away. He had seen her a half-dozen times, but never spoken to her; black hair, green eyes, grace beyond words, cheekbones. . . .

Little wonder he had been enthralled by her, and by the dream. Even with all that had just happened, she still could dominate his thoughts.

*The Queen of Air and Darkness. . . .*

But she wasn’t Sidhe, he was certain of that, not even Sidhe in disguise; there was too much of mortality about her, a mortality that made her beauty all the sweeter. . . .

*More to be done.*

With the slugs in the car’s protective envelope, the Sidhe could resume their great magics on the grounds, and safely call up the Lesser Folk to assist. The grounds would be changed, from above and below. Although it might look the same to a casual observer, below the surface would be thousands of tricks and traps that not even the souls at Fairgrove would know completely. That was for the better, too—anyone could be broken, and made to betray their friends, when magic and guile were involved. Tannim didn’t *want* to know the place’s secrets; he had too many weak spots that could be manipulated. Chinthliss had laid him bare one time, to show him how easily it could be done, then helped him build up defenses against the most likely attacks. Tannim had countered by dissecting him with words. The great creature had twitched uncomfortably as he repaid the test, using no magic at all. It had been the most trusting moment of Chinthliss’ life, and his best friend had never forgotten the lesson his human friend had taught him.

There were many ways to destroy someone—with magic, knives, or scalpels of language. Nothing could save a victim from a determined and resourceful enough foe. Nothing could save a human trapped by the Unseleighe Court. Or one of the Seleighe Sidhe, for that matter.

*It couldn't save . . .*

Enough.

There were two boxes still in the back seat, aside from the tape case; both of them had been gifts from Donal. One was a CD player that Tannim hadn't had time to install since it had been given to him eight months ago.

*"So that you may stop fearing for your precious songs, my friend. These little disks cannot be harmed by the passing of spirits."*

Oh, Donal.

The other was . . .

He reached back with one hand, cupping the spent slugs in his lap, and brought the small box up into the front with him. He thumbed it open, and pulled from it an emerald green silk scarf with edges of silver and gold. A birthday gift from one of the Fair Folk, one that showed great trust and friendship. Silk, spun and woven Underhill, with all of the magic of Underhill twined in its warp and weft. A single shred of this could open doors into Underhill for Tannim that few mortals had even guessed at.

*God, Donal, this is never what you intended it for. Danaa watch over you, dear friend.* Tannim solemnly placed the bullets on the scarf and tied it into a bundle, then nestled it on the dashboard.

*A reminder to me of what you have to pay for, Vidal Dhu.*

Tannim drew the crowbar from its resting place, and slipped it into its leather and silk sheath. The gooseneck crowbar was one of the most elegant designs ever, he'd always thought. A single piece of simple formed iron, direct and unadorned, flat blade at one end, strong hook at the other. No one he knew of besides himself had ever used that hook quite the way he did. He'd found that it would fit comfortably over a shoulder, and never be noticed under a loose jacket even when you were shaking someone's hand.

Chinthliss and his other friends had warned him about his temper. Told him how mages affected everything in the area when they became emotionally upset. How he had to be in control all the time. How he couldn't let revenge be a motivator.

*Good thing they can't see how much I want to crease Vidal Dhu's skull with this crowbar right now.*

But they were right, and he knew it. If he let the rage inside him take over, let the grief overwhelm him, he would be operating at less than peak performance. Vidal Dhu was a past master at seeing weaknesses that were waiting to be exploited, and his own anger was just such a weakness.

*"When you're angry, you aren't thinking, you're feeling,"* Chinthliss had said. *"That's all well and good when you're putting power behind something, but it spells disaster in a fight."*

Yeah, well, the old lizard was right. He ran his hand through his sweaty hair. He had to calm down; he had to. He wasn't ready for any kind of a fight in this state.

Drive. He could just drive, and let the thrum of -motor and highway be his absolution. Actually, that was not such a bad idea—there was tension by the bucket at Fairgrove right now, and some of it might be the result of ordinary hunger. A quick burger run might do everyone a lot of good.

Tannim started the car with the key and the foot-switch under the brake pedal, and pulled onto Thunder Road, not even thinking of making a speed run. His head was filled with replays of what had happened lately—the fights and intimidations, the pain of little Tania. Vidal Dhu's incessant vendettas. The dreams. Donal. There they were again—Donal and Rob. Damn. So much of this could be dealt with by calling Chinthliss and teaming up with him, but his friend and mentor had problems of his own, and was just as likely to call for Tannim's help. So, no dice there. That familiar feeling was back—of having all the pieces but *not quite* fitting them together yet.

*Keighvin's building like a volcano. Conal's suppressing his grief for his brother, but it won't hold for long. Skippy-Rob's death is hurting us all, and Dottie's out of it along with a half-dozen more, easy. Sam's turned out to be stronger than we'd thought, but Vidal knows it too—plus, whatever's left of the Bane-Sidhe will want a piece of him. The production schedule's at a complete standstill. Janie's probably been on the phone all day letting the rest of SERRA know what's happened, so there'll be help soon, but if anything happens before then, we're sucking fumes.*

The overcast skies didn't help his mood any, and the drive-through burger order was in a monotone, not his usual cheerful banter. The girls at the window, who -usually flirted with him, could tell there was something wrong, and mercifully said nothing while Tannim sat and stared through the Mustang's front glass, eyes unfocused, chewing on his knuckles in concentration.

*That's not even considering what this is doing to me. My concentration is going straight to hell. Fighting Eagle could probably snap me back into shape with a sweatlodge, but that's a couple thousand miles away. I'll have to call in allies before this is done, and I'm running out of bribes for them. No Guardians around either. I'd call that P.I., but he's a civilian. First sign of magic and he'd freak. Can't call in the cops, or Terry would catch it but good, plus they're civvies too, at least where magic is concerned. My power reserves are okay, plus what's in the car, but against pissed-off Sidhe? Hard to say.*

A polite cough startled him out of his thoughts. The cheeseburgers and chicken were ready, and the drive-through girl waited patiently with all six bags. Tannim sheepishly took the bags, and used the old trick of seatbelting them in place before driving back towards Fairgrove.

*Get a grip, man. You could be broadsided by a Peterbilt and never see it coming in this state. He shook his head and began paying more attention to the road, before he ran into someone. Never drive angry or distracted. Rule one, boy. Innocent people out there . . .*

Innocent people. Damn, with all of this going on, he hadn't had time to get word to Kevin Barry's about Tania and her friends having a place at the shelter! Tannim again regretted not having installed a cellular phone—it would have made that a moment's work. Instead, he had to pull over to a pay phone and root through the phone book for the number.

Before his hand could touch the receiver, a psychic blow slammed against his shields. He whirled and flared out his shields into a barrier, scintillating and probing in the light ranges humans couldn't see.

Before him stood Ross Canfield, hands curled into fists, ready to strike at Tannim's shields again. Tannim leveled a blade of magical force at the ghost's throat, and held it there until Ross relaxed.

"Jeez, boy, come on! Just trying to get your attention. Ya couldn't seem t'hear anythin' else I tried!"

"You got it, Ross. Bigtime. What's the damned problem?"

Ross backed off—evidently, the young mage was projecting irritation like a bad country station. Tannim reduced his shields after checking Ross over, and nervously ran a hand through his hair for the umpteenth time that night.

"It's your little girl, Tannim. She's in bad trouble. She . . ."

Tannim looked around a moment, then gestured at the car with a thumb. "Get in."

The shields around the car turned transparent for a moment, and Ross slipped into the passenger's seat and waited, food-sacks visible through his body. Tannim sat down next to him and fastened his harness, then started the engine and pulled away from the pay-phone.

"Sorry, Ross. Lost a couple friends last night. Still on edge over it."

Ross nodded; could be the news of the fight had made it over to his side.

"Tania?"

"I've been following her. Last night, a real nasty fella tried to kidnap her. I stopped him. Today, she's gone off with her friends to be in a porn movie. A limo picked them up, and as soon as they stepped in, I couldn't see them anymore. There was just something about it that wasn't right—a wall, like you've got on this car."

"Oh, shit." Pieces were falling into place. The car -accelerated.

"Fox is watching her now. Last time he talked, he was furious. I haven't heard from him in a couple'a minutes, though an' I'm startin' t' worry. She's—"

"Fox? Who's this Fox?"

"A friend of mine from the other side. Foxtrot Xray, he calls himself. Smartass shapechanger. Powerful. Anyway, the limo lost me, but Fox could follow it. I came to you, soon as I could."

The gates of Thunder Road were coming into view. As the Mustang rolled up, Tannim could see that there were three of the Fairgrove crew, including Conal, standing around a foot-wide smoking hole. They turned at the sound of Tannim's approach, and Conal walked a few steps to stand next to the open driver's window.

"What's the burn-spot?"

"A messenger," he spat. Conal peered into the Mustang, noting the burgers and the ghost at once, and appeared unimpressed by either.

"The ghost is with me. That"—nodding at the hand—"must be bad news."



“Aye, you can bet your last silver on that.” He handed the envelope to Tannim. It bore the black seal of Vidal Dhu.

The main bay was eerily quiet. There were no screams of grinders, no buzz of technical talk or rapping of wrenches. There was no whine of test engines on dynos coming through the walls. Instead, there was a dull-bladed tension amid all the machinery, generated by the humans and the Sidhe gathered there.

Tannim laid the envelope on the rear deck of the only fully-operational GTP car that Fairgrove had built to date, the one that Donal had spent his waking hours building, and Conal had spent track-testing. He’d designed it for beauty and power in equal measure, and had given its key to Conal, its elected driver, in the same brother’s-gift ceremony used to present an elvensteed. Conal now sat on its sculpted door, and absently traced a slender finger along an air intake, glowering at the envelope.

Tannim finished his magical tests, and asked for a knife. An even dozen were offered, but Dottie’s Leatherman was accepted. Keighvin stood a little apart from the group, hand on his short knife. His eyes glittered with suppressed anger, and he appeared less human than usual, Tannim noticed. Something was bound to break soon.

Tannim folded out the knifeblade, slit the envelope open, and then unfolded the Leatherman’s pliers. With them he withdrew six Polaroids of Tania and two others, unconscious, each bound at the wrists and neck. Their silver chains were held by *some things* from the Realm of the Unseleighe—inside a limo. And, out of focus through the limo’s windows, was a stretch of flat tarmac, and large buildings—

Tannim dropped the Leatherman, his fingers gone numb. It clattered twice before wedging into the cockpit’s fresh-air vent. Keighvin took one startled step forward, then halted as the magical alarms at Fairgrove’s perimeter flared around them all. Tannim’s hand went into a jacket pocket, and he threw down the letter from the P.I. He saw Conal pick up the photographs, blanch, then snatch the letter up.

Tannim had already turned by then, and was sprinting for the office door, and the parking lot beyond.

Behind him, he could hear startled questions directed at him, but all he could answer before disappearing into the offices was “Airport!” His bad leg was slowing him down, and screamed at him like a sharp rock grinding into his bones. There was some kind of attack beginning, but he had no time for that.

*Have to get to the airport, have to save Tania from Vidal Dhu, the bastard, the son of a bitch, the—*

Tannim rounded a corner and banged his left knee into a file cabinet. He went down hard, hands instinctively clutching at his over-damaged leg. His eyes swam with a private galaxy of red stars, and he struggled while his eyes refocused.

*Son of a bitch son of a bitch son of a bitch. . . .*

Behind him he heard the sounds of a war-party, and above it all, the banshee wail of a high-performance engine. He pulled himself up, holding the bleeding knee, and limp-ran towards the parking lot, to the Mustang, and Thunder Road.

Vidal Dhu stood in full armor before the gates of Fairgrove, laughing, lashing out with levin-bolts to set off its alarms. It was easy for Vidal to imagine what must be going on inside—easy to picture that smug, orphaned witling Keighvin Silverhair barking orders to weak mortals, marshaling them to fight. Let him rally them, Vidal thought—it will do him no good. None at all. He may have won before, but ultimately, the mortals will have damned him.

*It has been so many centuries, Silverhair. I swore I'd kill your entire lineage, and I shall. I shall!*

Vidal prepared to open the gate to Underhill. Through that gate all the Court would watch as Keighvin was -destroyed—Aurilia's plan be hanged! Vidal's blood sang with triumph—he had driven Silverhair into a winless position at last! And when he accepted the Challenge, before the whole Court, none of his human-world tricks would benefit him—theirs would be a purely magical combat, one Sidhe to another.

To the death.

Keighvin Silverhair recognized the scent of the magic at Fairgrove's gates—he had smelled it for centuries. It reeked of obsession and fear, hatred and lust. It was born of pain inflicted without consideration of repercussions. It was the magic of one who had stalked innocents and stolen their last breaths.

He recognized, too, the rhythm that was being beaten against the walls of Fairgrove.

*So be it, murderer. I will suffer your stench no more.*

“They will expect us to dither and delay; the sooner we act, the more likely it is that we will catch them unprepared. They do not know how well we work together.”

Around him, the humans and Sidhe of his home sprang into action, taking up arms with such speed he'd have thought them possessed. Conal had thrown down the letter after reading it, and barked, “Hangar 2A at Savannah Regional; they've got children as hostages!” The doors of the bay began rolling open, and outside, elvensteeds stamped and reared, eyes glowing, anxious for battle. Conal looked to him, then, for orders.

Keighvin met his eyes for one long moment, and said, “Go, Conal. I shall deal with our attacker for the last time. If naught else, the barrier at the gates can act as a trap to hold him until we can deal with him as he deserves.” He did not add what he was thinking—that he only hoped it would hold Vidal. The Unseleighe was a strong mage; he might escape even a trap laid with death metal, if he were clever enough. Then, with the swiftness of a falcon, he was astride his elvensteed Rosaleen Dhu, headed for the perimeter of Fairgrove.

He was out there, all right, and had begun laying a spell outside the fences, like a snare. Perhaps in his sickening arrogance he'd forgotten that Keighvin could see such things. Perhaps in his insanity, he no longer cared.

Rosaleen tore across the grounds as fast as a stroke of lightning, and cleared the fence in a soaring leap. She landed a few yards from the laughing, mad Vidal Dhu, on the roadside, with him between Keighvin

and the gates. He stopped lashing his mocking bolts at the gates of Fairgrove and turned to face Keighvin.

“So, you’ve come to face me alone, at last? No walls or mortals to hide behind, as usual, coward? So sad that you’ve chosen *now* to change, within minutes of your death, traitor.”

“Vidal Dhu,” Keighvin said, trying to sound unimpressed despite the heat of his blood, “if you wish to duel me, I shall accept. But before I accept, you must release the children you hold.”

The Unseleighe laughed bitterly. “It’s your concern for these mortals that raised you that have *made* you a traitor, boy. Those children do not matter.” Vidal lifted his lip in a sneer as Keighvin struggled to maintain his composure. “Oh, I will do more than duel you, Silverhair. I wish to Challenge you before the Court, and kill you as they watch.”

That was what Keighvin had noted—it was the initial layout of a Gate to the High Court Underhill. Vidal was serious about this Challenge—already the Court would be assembling to judge the battle. Keighvin sat atop Rosaleen, who snorted and stamped, enraged by the other’s tauntings. Vidal’s pitted face twisted in a maniacal smirk.

“How long must I wait for you to show courage, witling?”

Keighvin’s mind swam for a moment, before he remembered the full protocols of a formal Challenge. It had been so long since he’d even seen one. . . .

*Once accepted, the Gate activates, and all the Court watches as the two battle with blade and magic. Only one leaves the field; the Court is bound to slay anyone who runs.* So it had always been. Vidal would not Challenge unless he were confident of winning, and Keighvin was still tired from the last battle—which Vidal had not even been at. . . .

But Vidal must die. That much Keighvin knew.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

There could be no mercy this time. Those mortal folk who had raised Keighvin in the tradition of the mortals’ forgiving God had been wrong—there came a time when there could be no more forgiveness.

But neither could Keighvin afford to accept Vidal’s Challenge. In a straight mage-duel right now, he was no match for Vidal; and in his current state of physical exhaustion he could not even best his enemy blade-to-blade.

That left only one thing he could do: stall for time, trigger the trap when Vidal was not looking, and hope that someone or something would intervene and tilt the balance back his way.

Pray for luck, in massive quantities—to Danaa and the humans’ God, who also cherished children—that all the pieces could somehow come together at once and Keighvin could save himself, Fairgrove, and the hostage children.

“Why here, Vidal?” he asked, keeping face and voice impassive. “Why now?”

“To prove to Seleighe and Unseleighe Courts alike that you’re a fool, a brain-sick, soft-headed fool, Keighvin Silverhair,” Vidal snarled, scarlet traces of energy crackling down his hands as he clenched them, his pitted face twisted with sick rage. “You and your obsession with these mortals, with their works and their world, when you should be exploiting them!”

So far he hadn’t noticed that Keighvin hadn’t formally accepted the Challenge. Until the Challenge was accepted, with the proper words, any means of defeating Vidal was legal. Until Vidal noticed, Keighvin intended to keep stalling, while he tried to think of some way of alerting his people back at the complex to his need.

From a half mile away, his sharp hearing picked up the burbling growl of a high-performance engine; a particularly odd growl, closer to the sound of a racing plane than a car. Long familiarity let him identify it instantly as Tannim’s Mustang. And a plan occurred to him with a blinding flash of insight.

All he had to do was keep stalling, for a little longer. The trap would not be needed after all.

*Blessed Danaa, thank you. Sacred Mother of Acceleration be with us. . . .*

He swept his arms wide, flinging his cloak to either side as if he had unfurled wings; at the same time he magically keyed the gate-control behind Vidal, so that the twin panels receded and locked in the “open” position.

“Oh, impressive,” Vidal mocked. He had not noticed that the physical gates behind him were open; all his attention had been centered on Keighvin’s extravagant gesture—precisely as Keighvin had hoped.

Behind Vidal, the engine-sounds screamed and dopplered as Tannim gunned the Mustang and turned her. Vidal Dhu had not noticed the telltale noises at all; or if he had, had thought it was another car on the highway somewhere in the distance.

Or perhaps, in his arrogance, he accounted the things that mortals did of no importance.

He sneered, and the vermilion glow about him -increased. “What is your next trick, Keighvin Witling? Do you make an egg appear from your mouth? Or a coin from your ear?”

The engine’s growl pitched up; and behind Vidal’s back, the speed-run lights flashed from green, to yellow, to red.

\* \* \*

Pain from Tannim’s abused knee sent streaks of red lightning across his vision. It felt as if someone had driven a glass knife into his kneecap, and his leg got heavier with every step he took. Very much more, and his leg wasn’t going to hold him.

*Just a few more steps. . . .*

Light. Light from the parking lot ahead of him, through the office windows. The Mustang was close enough to “hear” the remote now.

The keys were in his right hand, although he didn’t remember groping for them. With his left hand clutching his thigh just above the knee, he thumbed the remote while staggering for the door, and was

rewarded with the growl of the engine.

*A few more steps. . . .*

The door, the last barrier between himself and the Mach 1. He hit it, hoping it would open, hoping it hadn't quite caught the last time someone had come through. It flew wide, spilling him onto the concrete outside. He tried to roll, but didn't quite make it, and his left knee struck concrete, leaving a red splotch of blood where he'd hit.

*JEEEEesus!*

Gasping for air, he got to his feet again, and made the last few steps to the Mustang. He fell inside, sobbing, unashamed of the tears of pain.

He hauled himself into place with the steering wheel, and stole a precious few seconds to jerk the harness into place, yanking it tighter than he ever had before. As he reached over for the door-handle and slammed it closed, he averted his eyes from the hole in his jeans and the mess underneath. If he didn't look at it, it might not hurt so much.

*Oh God, don't let me have taken my kneecap off, please. . . .*

And he was profoundly grateful he'd followed an old cop friend's advice—that he “couldn't shoot and drive” without an automatic tranny. Right now, there wasn't enough left of his leg to manage a stick-shift.

He reached blindly for the T-shifter and threw it into reverse, gunning the engine at the same time. The rear of the car slewed wildly, spinning in a cloud of exhaust and tire-smoke and a screech of rubber, until the nose of the Mustang faced the driveway.

He smoked the tires.

Gees threw him back into his seat, and his leg howled in protest; tears blurred his sight, but he knew Thunder Road like he knew the colors of his magic, and he kept it straight down the middle.

*Fifty. Seventy. Ninety.*

The Mustang thundered defiance, getting louder as it built up to speed, the war-cry of the engine thrumming through the roll-cage, vibrating in his chest, filling his ears to the exclusion of any other sound. The trees to either side were a blur, made so as much by acceleration as by his watering eyes.

*Hundred ten.*

The road narrowed, and he felt every tiny irregularity in the asphalt in his tailbone—and his knee. The passing-lines down the middle started to strobe—then seemed to stop—then appeared to pull away from him. It was one of the most unnerving optical illusions of high-speed driving, daring the driver to try and catch them. He clamped his hands on the steering wheel so hard they hurt, and still the tiny corrections he was making sent him all over the road like a drunk.

And the road got awfully narrow when you were -going this fast. . . .

The Mach 1 shuddered and vibrated, as its spoiler and ground-effects fought against lift. Now would not be the time to research a Mustang's airspeed velocity.

*One thirty.*

The trees on either side seemed closer—much closer. The speed made them bend right over the road, cutting off the stars above the road. There was light from the streetlamps at the end of the tunnel of trees. The gates were open. He keyed in his mage-sight.

His mouth was dry. His knee still screamed pain at him, but *he* was no longer capable of feeling it. Somewhere, deep inside, he knew he was going to pay for this later—but that was later and this was now, and he was in the grip of his own adrenalin.

The speedometer had already pegged, and he was -going to run out of road in a few seconds.

Keighvin counted under his breath, keeping himself and Rosaleen squarely in front of the gates, occupying Vidal's complete attention. The Unseleighe Sidhe was still blissfully unaware of the engine-howl behind him, but Keighvin saw the tiny dot of Tannim's Mustang growing larger, and knew that his timing would have to be exquisite.

*He's going to have to start braking soon. . . .*

One heartbeat too soon, and Vidal would escape the trap, for Keighvin's jump would warn *him*. One too late, and he and Rosaleen would go down with the enemy.

*Better too late than too soon*, he thought, and felt Rosaleen, the darling of his heart, agreeing silently with him.

*:I could jump for him:* she added, mind to mind.

*Blessed Danaa. . . .* It was a brilliant notion. Vidal would probably not interpret *that* as either an attack or an -attempt to escape something coming up behind him. It would certainly get his attention. And it might look as though Rosaleen had bolted out of nervousness or battle-anger her rider couldn't control.

But Rosaleen, as strong and clever as she was, would not be able to make the jump in one bound. She would have to take a second leap at the very last instant to clear the Mustang, and that would leave her wide open to an attack by Vidal.

*:So be it,* she said, and then it was too late for second thoughts—the Mustang was braking, the engine-howl was near enough that even Vidal was likely to sense something wrong, and there were only seconds left—

Rosaleen leapt.

Vidal started; shouted in contempt. "Idiot! It'll take more than one horse to—"

Rosaleen gathered herself a second time, muscles bunching beneath Keighvin's legs, and Keighvin heard Tannim inexplicably hit the gas—again.

Rosaleen threw herself into the air, as high as she could, flinging herself *over* Vidal, and over the Mustang. But the Mach 1's sudden acceleration threw her timing off—

She strained—tucking her hooves as high as she could—

One trailing hoof caught on the Mustang's roof, sending a shower of sparks up, just as Vidal whirled, and saw a silver horse below two flaring nostrils—framed by a hood the deep red of heart's blood—and his mouth formed a scream he never had time to voice.

Tannim pumped the brakes furiously, pleading with all powers that they wouldn't lock up. He looked *past* the gates for the first time.

There was something blocking his way.

The glow of magic—flavored unmistakably with the screaming scarlet of Vidal Dhu.

*Screw it.*

The foot went down again—on the accelerator. Vidal turned, sensing something wrong—his eyes grew wide in horror—

And Tannim saw, over the tied bundle on his dashboard, the final moment of Vidal Dhu's life.

The Mach 1 impacted his body squarely, as Tannim used the hood's air-intakes to sight on his hips—and Vidal folded, his face mating with the Mach 1's hood in a soggy, splintering crash like a melon below a hurtling cinder-block.

*Suck sheet metal!*

Tannim threw a burst of reinforcing energy into the windscreen just as they hit, praying the glass wouldn't shatter. The pyrotechnic-glare blazed out from the car's every seam, as long-stored energy was tapped, obscuring Vidal's impact on the windshield. Then Vidal was flung up in the air like a rag doll. The glass held, then cleared enough to reveal the next problem.

Tannim had just run out of road.

*Oh shit. . . .*

Rosaleen stumbled, throwing Keighvin against the saddle-bow; recovered, stumbled again, and went to her knees. Keighvin thanked Danaa that Rosaleen was not a horse; the first stumble would have broken her legs off like twigs; the second would have broken her neck *and* his.

The elvensteed lurched to her feet and whirled. Keighvin heard the whine of another car approaching, registered it absently as Conal's Victor, and leapt from Rosaleen's back, his hands clenched into fists as he watched Tannim's Mustang slewing sideways.

*Dear Danaa, let him pull this off—*

Tannim didn't have the room to brake; instead, he slung the car around, gunning the throttle to break

loose the drive-wheels, putting the tail squarely in the direction of momentum, with the still-spinning wheels now working to arrest the car's movement.

The tires smoked like an erupting volcano, with a scream like the death-wails of four Bane-Sidhe. The cloud of smoke and dust hid the Mach 1 from view, and Keighvin held his breath—

The screaming stopped; it did not end in a crash of sheetmetal and glass. The smoke and dust lifted, to reveal the Mustang sitting beneath the streetlight, with steam and smoke coming from the wheel wells, its tail tucked neatly into the embankment on the opposite side of the road.

*Blessed Danaa—he did it.* In all of his long lifetime, Keighvin had not seen a piece of driving to match it. He sucked in a deep breath, only now aware that he had forgotten to breathe entirely.

Before Keighvin could take a single step towards the Mustang, the engine coughed and roared, and with another screech of tires, Tannim pulled the Mach 1 back onto the road and screamed off towards the airport . . .

. . . Just as Conal braked the Victor beside Keighvin. Conal took in the entire scene in a single glance, swore a paint-blistering oath, and burned rubber in hot pursuit of the human mage.

Keighvin took another deep breath and walked, slowly, to what was left of Vidal Dhu.

The Unseleighe Sidhe was still alive. His body was a broken wreck, his face a shapeless ruin, but he still breathed, and Keighvin could feel the hatred rising from him like the stench of decaying flesh.

He looked down at his lifelong enemy, and knew that Vidal was still conscious, could still hear every word he spoke.

He stared down at the body for a long time, then chose his words with precise care. "Once before I left you for dead, Vidal, and once before you returned to make war upon me. Once I gave you mercy and let you live—and you repaid my mercy with blood." He drew the tiny, hand-forged *skean dhu*, the little "black knife," from its silk and leather sheath at his belt. Fitting that it should be a gift from Tannim, who never believed the gift of a knife severed a friendship. This stroke would be from both of them. "No more mercy, Vidal Dhu."

With a curious lack of passion, he drove the knife of Death Metal home to the hilt and stood, leaving it buried in what was left of Vidal's twisted heart.

Tannim's leg felt as if he'd been soaking it in lava, but it was bearable. The hood of the Mach 1 bore a huge dent where Vidal Dhu's face had made its first impression. Tannim wanted to hammer the dent out with what was left of that face.

But that could wait until later. Right now, there were three kids in trouble, and personal vendettas could wait—assuming Keighvin left anything of the Unseleighe Sidhe for anyone to play with. He didn't think Keighvin Silverhair had even an atom of mercy left for Vidal Dhu.

And, of course, before Tannim could get any more licks in, there were others with more right than he had to dance on Vidal's little corpse. Conal, most notably.



Tannim still wasn't certain how he'd pulled that slingshot maneuver off, and he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to duplicate it.

*Then again, I devoutly hope I'll never have to.*

He looked reflexively in the rear-view mirror, not -expecting to see anything, but as an automatic reaction—and saw the front end of the Victor filling the rear windscreen, with Conal, helmeted as if he was on the track, grimly clutching the wheel. For one startled moment, it felt as if his earlier thought had summoned the Sidhe.

*Conal?*

The Victor was so close he could hear the high-pitched whine of its engine over the brawling thunder of the Mach 1's.

*Jeez—the radio!*

If Conal had his helmet on, *hemight* have plugged in his radio-mike. Tannim reached over and flipped on the FM scanner between two four-wheel drifts; it hit two broadcasts too faint to hold, then stuck on—

*“. . . Tannim will ye turn yer bloody damned receiver on, I've been . . .”*

*“. . . tryin' t' raise ye fer the past five friggin' minutes, ye demon-blasted muddle-headed excuse fer—”* Conal broke off his tirade as Tannim waved frantically.

*“It's about damned time!”* the Sidhe exploded. *“Keighvin's bringin' up th' rear-guard; the rest is mostly behind me. I don't s'ppose ye've got a plan?”*

While waiting for a reply, Conal cursed under his breath, as between the tight suspension and the low ground clearance, the Victor bottomed out for the thousandth time since this desperate run began. He was certain they were leaving a trail of sparks and grooved pavement. Not to mention what this run was doing to the undercarriage of Donal's precious car—

*Donal. Sweet Danaa. . . .*

Tannim stuck his hand out the window, miming shooting a gun. Repeatedly. *“Ah, blessed Danaa, th' boy thinks he's Mel Gibson now,”* Conal muttered. *“'Tisn't a plan he's got, 'tis a deathwish.”*

He raised his voice a little. *“Yon Sam's wi' Dottie an' her 'steed. You an' I have th' only real metal beasties, an' we're leadin' the pack. They should be on my tail in a trice. An' you're leadin' me b'cause I don't have any bleedin' headlights!”*

*Plan, we need a plan . . . there's going t' be damn-all interference at the airport.* Conal thought fast, speaking his thoughts aloud, and watching the mage-sight-enhanced silhouette of the young man ahead of him for any signs of agreement or disagreement.

Staying right on Tannim's tail was no easy feat—it was a good thing the Victor had better brakes than the Mustang. *“We're goin' t' have t' breach th' mage-shields on their stronghold—an' we're goin' t'*

have t' break down a fence there too, if I recollect. Now, the shields, they're likely t' be just like any *reg'lar* Sidhe defenses—an' that's pure Sidhe magery, w'out any human backup. So if you an' me should happen t' hit it wi' all that sheet metal, seems t' me it should go down. . . ."

Tannim nodded vigorously, and raised a clenched fist in the air.

Conal continued to think aloud. "That still leaves th' fence. But if we put our magics t'gether, you an' meself, an' armored up th' point on yon Mustang—ye think it'll fly, lad?"

There was no doubt that Tannim thought it would fly. Conal grinned in savage satisfaction, even though it included a twinge of guilt.

The Mustang was Tannim's pride, joy, and precious baby. He was going to have to spend weeks on it as it was, repairing the damage that had already been done to it. Conal hated to ask him to put the Mach 1 on point—but there wasn't much choice. "I know how ye feel 'bout that car, old son. But ye've got 'bout twenty-five thousand worth there, an' *I'm* pilotin' near half a mil. I promise, ye'll have every tiny atom of magery I got on that nose. So—do we brace for rammin' speed?"

In answer, magic energy flared up all over the Mustang, a vivid coruscating aurora of every color Conal could name and some that had no names, as Tannim released more of the energies he had invested in the Mach 1's body, adding his own to them. After the initial flare, they settled into a thin skin of light, with a vivid blue-white glow somewhere near the front end. Conal unleashed his own powers, letting them meld with the human's work. He Felt Tannim direct the shape and force of it, as Donal and the young mage had so often when working on the Victor. . . .

He choked back a sob, and shook his head to free his eyes of the stinging tears that threatened to obscure his sight.

*This one's for you, Donal.*

He let his grief and anger build, containing them within himself until they were too painful, too powerful to hold back any more. *And then* he added both to the mixture, strengthening it as only emotion could, giving it a wild power no dispassionate, cold, controlled magery could ever hope to rival. *Oh aye, my brother, my friend. This one is for you. . . .*

Tannim triggered the remainder of the Mach 1's -defenses, letting the energy run wild for a moment -before shaping it into a pointed ram over the Mustang's nose. To his mage-sight it outshone the headlights—and when he added in his own, personal power, it flared again with arc-light brilliance.

One eye on the tach to keep her from red-lining, one eye on the road—he needed a third eye for the magic—

Well, he could manage that by inner eye and feel; he waited for Conal's input, and it came to him, smooth and controlled, from the hand of an expert. And so like Donal that his eyes stung with unexpected grief.

*Christ.*

He and Donal had worked so closely together on that vehicle behind him, working complex

collaborative magics. The Victor wasn't pretty, not yet; the bodywork was immaculate, but the paint job was hardly more than a promise, and it still had tech-bugs to work out. No, it wasn't pretty. But it was beautiful, a work of pure art and genius, magic on four wheels.

A complete whole, in its own way. Even if it didn't have headlights yet.

A lump of sorrow threatened to choke him; just before he could swallow it down, he felt another surge of energy coming down the link. This one was pure emotion, and the feelings matched his own. Grief. Rage. A burning need for vengeance.

He gave in to his mourning, to his anger, and let his emotions join with Conal's to reinforce the magery they had just created. He rode it like a wave, then wrenched the wave into a coruscating barrier/weapon sheathing the front chrome.

*Never fight when you're angry.* Chinthliss had told him that, over and over. But there was a counter to that. Yes, anger destroyed control, disturbed the ability to think. But it *granted* a force that no controlled magic could match; and this, if ever, was a situation that called for that extra edge.

Deliberately Tannim forgot everything except the road ahead and his memories of Donal and Rob; and of little Tania, somewhere ahead, in mage-forged chains.

In the hands of people who tortured and killed children, and filmed it for profit.

He linked himself into the mage-ram, and filled it, laying its channels so the ram would dispel moments after -impact with the fence, exposing the steel of the Mustang's nose.

Finally, when he had to dim his own mage-sight because the front of the Mach 1 had gotten too bright for *him* to bear, he became aware that Conal was trying to get his attention.

*Tannim! Wake up lad! Th' rest of th' cavalry's behind, an' Keighvin says ye're lightn' up th' sky like a bloody fireworks display!*

He shook himself loose, and took the eye he'd had on the tach and spared a glance for the rear-view mirror. Yeah, they were behind him, all right. All the elvensteeds were in car-shape, and they streamed behind him as if he were a demented pace-car driver, in a LeMans race to hell.

It wouldn't be long now; the beacon from the airport was on the horizon.

*"Tannim! Sarge says Hangar 2A is second off the commercial access road!"*

He hadn't noticed any civilians on the road—either they'd been lucky, or—

*"By the way, ye've run a brace a' station wagons an' a Miata off onto th' shoulder. We better get there pretty quick-like, or th' next lad ye run off is likely t' be a black'n'white."*

And he hadn't noticed. *Great. Just great.*

Then he knew where his other-worldly allies were—they were ahead of him, forcing people off the road so they wouldn't be hit. Bless them, bless them, and thank God for mage-sight—there was the sign for commercial air. It couldn't be far now. . . .

*Hang on, Tania. Help's on the way—*

The movie people sent a limo; that alone impressed Tania. She and Laura got in the forward-facing seat, while Jamie (wired and irritable, and in need of a fix) bounced into the rear-facing bench. The driver closed the doors, and Tania ran her hand over the armrest, only to discover that it was really a cellular phone. Intrigued, she and Laura began exploring all the amenities this rolling room offered.

The dark blue upholstery hid a myriad of surprises: a TV and radio, wet bar and a little refrigerator, and—

She looked up at Jamie's sudden exclamation of pleasure, and lurched across the intervening space between them. Too late; he'd not only gotten one of the little bags of white powder open, he'd stuck his nose inside it and snorted directly from the packet.

As she and Laura stared at him, appalled, he lay back in the embrace of the seat-cushions and grinned at them. "Oh, chill out," he said, mockingly. "It's no big deal. I just need it for the shoot—"

Then he stuck his nose in it and sniffed *again*.

*Oh God—how much of that has he done—*

That was when the driver turned to look at them, and something odd about his eyes made Tania glance at him.

She froze, as his glowing, red eyes glared at them through the glass of the screen and the growing darkness of the interior. Eyes like two little candle-flames in the middle of a completely featureless face.

Tania screamed; Laura jumped and gurgled—Jamie started to turn—

And then, with no warning, everything went black.

She woke to moaning, in the dark, with her hands cuffed behind her back. She held absolutely still for a moment, wondering if she was stuck in the trunk of a car, or in a completely darkened room.

Her left arm was numb where she was lying on it, her legs knotted with cramps, and she was horribly cold. She stretched out her legs, tentatively, and encountered no resistance, rolled, and learned she was on some kind of hard, cool, stone-like surface; probably a cement floor.

Somewhere off in the darkness, someone was cursing. Someone else was moaning, crying. After a moment, she recognized the voice. Laura.

*Oh God—*

At just that moment, lights came on again in the darkness off beyond her. The huge bulk of something was between her and the light, and it took her a moment to recognize it as an airplane.

The moment the lights came on, Laura stopped moaning and started to scream, cry, beg her unseen

captors to leave her alone, to let her loose. The sharp *crack* of a hard slap echoed across the building, but Laura didn't stop.

*"Get her inside and across the Gate,"* said another -female voice. A cold hand of fear clutched Tania's throat; *these* must be the people who'd sent that thug out after her! Whatever they'd done to Laura so far, what they were about to do must be much, much worse for her to be shrieking like that. They must be monsters—

Then she remembered the faceless thing in the limo. Maybe they really were monsters, and Laura was screaming in mindless fear because the limo-thing—or something worse—was what had hold of her.

*Oh, God*—The ice of fear threatened to paralyze her, but right now nobody seemed to be watching her. She might have a chance to get away, get help. She rolled over, whimpering with the effort and pain it cost her, closing her eyes to concentrate on moving quietly—

And when she opened them, she was staring straight into Jamie's dried, wide-open eyes.

She couldn't help it; she screamed, and kicked away reflexively, pushing herself across the concrete away from the corpse, which gazed at her with a frozen expression of horrified pain. There was no doubt that Jamie was dead; he never blinked, never moved, never took a breath; his body was twisted up in a careless heap—a discarded puppet, with the ghastly evidence of violations no sane mind could inflict.

"What's that?" the female asked. Footsteps out of the dark heralded the arrival of someone. A moment later, a hand caught a fistful of Tania's hair and pulled her face up. She just caught a glimpse of a blond man, handsome in a movie-star way, before he slapped her hard enough to lose his own hold on her hair and she dropped back down to the concrete, too much in shock and pain even to cry out.

"Just the little bitch, my lady," the man called out, staring down at her and smiling. "She seems to have been startled by her bedmate. I think she'll be quiet now." He leaned down and crooned, softly, "Won't you?"

She nodded, tears cutting their way down her cheeks. *He has pointed ears. And green eyes*—

"Fine," the woman snapped. "Come give me a hand with this one."

The man smiled and locked eyes with her, and Tania shuddered at the promises in that smile. With a toss of his head, he flung his long mane of blond hair over his shoulder, and walked off again, turning only once to say, "He's sure to be hard for you now."

*He had pointed ears.* First the monster, then this—elf? He matched all the descriptions of elves—at least, the evil ones. . . .

*They killed Jamie.* The tears fell harder; she put her bruised cheek down on the concrete, and sobbed. *They killed Jamie, they're going to kill Laura, and then they're going to kill me*—

At that precise moment, the lights went out with an explosive flash; Laura screamed again, high and shrill, and the woman cursed.

*"Hold still, little lady,"* came a harsh, Louisiana-accented whisper in her ear.

She jumped, and stifled a yelp.

*“Come on, now, I cain’t help ya if ya won’t hold still,”* the voice scolded. *“It’s hard ’nough doin’ this shit without ya’ll movin’ around.”*

“Who are you?” she whispered back, unable to hear or feel anything behind her, in spite of the fact that the whisperer must be on top of her. “What—”

*“Ross Canfield, honey,”* he whispered back. *“I’m tryin’ t’ get these damn cuffs unlocked. I’m a friend ’a Tannim.”*

Her heart leapt and pounded, and she started to try to struggle, then remembered to hold still. “Tannim? Oh God, does he know what’s happening? Mr. Ross, they killed Jamie, they’ve got Laura—”

*“I know, honey,”* came the grim reply. *“Tannim’s comin’ as fast as he can, but there’s a couple miles between him an’ us, an’ a lotta things c’n happen in a couple’a minutes. I keep puttin’ out th’ lights t’ kinda delay ’em, an’ now that you’re awake, I’m gonna try and get you loose.”*

“Don’t bother about *me*, get to Laura before they do something horrible to her!” she said, hysterically.

*“Honey, I cain’t help Laura,”* Ross replied. *“There ain’t a lot I can do, but I’m doin’ all of it right now.”*

“Why not?” she whispered through her tears, as Laura screamed again. “Who are you? Why won’t you let me see you?”

There was a *click* behind her, a grunt of satisfaction, and the handcuffs suddenly loosened. She jerked her hands, freeing them, and pushed herself into a sitting position, feeling frantically for her rescuer.

*“Ya cain’t seeme ’cause I couldn’t get visible an’ work on th’ damn cuffs at th’ same time,”* said Ross, from right in front of her, where her hands were groping. She blinked; a glowing shape was forming in front of her. *“I’m sorry, honey,”* he continued, apologetically. *“There’s only so much a ghost c’n do.”*

As he finished his sentence, the glow took shape and sharpened—and she sat there with her hands buried to the wrist in the chest of a transparent redneck.

She jerked her hands back, and stuffed them in her mouth, choking on another scream.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

*Five thousand, six thousand, seven thousand, hold on, hold on . . .*

Tannim’s eyes flicked from the road to the tach to his mirrors, each split-second’s attention divided. The RPM needle swept up as the engine’s exhaust note built to a lusty whine, but Tannim refused to lift. He wanted every ounce of power he could get from the 351, and he was timing its peak torque to coincide with the impact on the fence. There were only a few hundred feet for the Mustang and the Victor to build up speed once the last turn was made. Then, the fence faced them: chain link and pipe.

*This isn't a movie; they don't just break away,* Tannim thought grimly, at last slapping the T-bar up into drive and stroking the throttle. Four hundred horses' strength thrust the car forward and pressed Tannim back into the seat as the distance to the fence closed—

—and the chainlink disintegrated, shattering like crystal shards as the magical field disrupted it and cast flaming shrapnel high into the air. The Mustang exploded through it onto the tarmac, and barely a breath behind it came the Victor. Crackling sheets of flame swept over the Mustang and then curled off into nothingness, exposing unscorched paint and chrome and four headlights stabbing the darkness.

Mage-sight showed flickering patterns of energy all over the hangar door, and more beyond—there was no doubt this was the right place. Any hope of surprise would be lost, though, if the field could not be breached all at once—and doing that meant punching a hole.

*I'm going to miss you, old car, really—it's been good. . . .*

Tannim braced himself as the RPMs climbed again, and the hangar door swept inexorably closer.

Alarms and klaxons burst into life, while rotating scarlet lights sent flashing signals of danger.

*Oh shit. The cops will be here any minute. We'd better get this over with fast.*

The bulk of Hangar 2A loomed ahead, the alarm-lights strobing against its flat metal sides. It looked locked up tight from where Tannim sat. He went through a very short list of bones he could afford to have broken, but still, there seemed to be no other way to sunder the magical defenses against elven magery. Lacking a helmet to protect his eyes, Tannim used the only defense he had against the inevitable flying, shattered glass from the windshield. He drew the Ray-Bans from his jacket and flipped them open, raised them to his eyes. . . .

A sliver of light grew from the ground as the main door of Hangar 2A rose, clanking and protesting.

*What in—*

*"Hurry up, hotshot,"* came a voice so close to his ear it might have been from the passenger's seat. *"I hit th' damn door button, but I ain't gonna promise it'll stay that way fer long!"*

"Ross!" Tannim could have kissed the ghost. "You ever-lovin' *genius!*"

*"Save it,"* Ross said shortly. *"Yougot a reception committee. An' I ain't up t'arrow-catchin'."*

Tannim backed off the throttle. For once, he had all the concrete he needed, and guided the Mustang into a wide arc which would very soon place him at the tail of the aircraft he saw inside the hangar. The Victor didn't need to follow, not with its superior handling. Conal gunned the beast and pulled up alongside, then ahead of him, the elvensteeds overtaking both of them, having no need to conform to the apparent laws of physics. The steeds streamed into the open hangar, a fantasy of black, white, and screaming scarlet Ferrarris, Lotuses, Jags, show cars, all bearing inhuman warriors in enameled armor and humans with high-powered firearms.

Every light in the place came up full, much to the obvious surprise of those inside, giving the Fairgrove team a clear view of their enemies. The enemies ran for what little cover the hangar and the C-130 inside provided—

And one small peroxide-blond in a torn taffeta minidress spotted the Mach 1, lurched to her feet, and stumbled to a run. And a silver-haired Sidhe darted out of cover, in hot pursuit *of her*, hands stretched to seize and hold her.

*Aw shit*—Tannim hit the door-release keypad on the console and yanked the wheel sideways, so that the momentum of his spin swung the passenger door wide open just as the Mustang came to rest a few feet from Tania. She flung herself in the general direction of the passenger's seat, crying hysterically, her face streaked with mascara and tears. Tannim leaned as far over as his race harness would allow, offered his right hand, grabbed her outstretched hands and dragged her the rest of the way inside. Then he gunned the engine again, slewing the car to the right on the slick concrete, and as the pursuing Sidhe came charging, glittering blade drawn, Tannim opened the driver's door right in his path.

The side window shattered as the Unseleighe Sidhe went down and the rear tire rolled over him. Tannim jammed on the brakes and bailed out, forgetting his bad knee—

Which promptly collapsed under his weight, with a stab of agony that made all the previous pain seem like a day at the dentist's. He fell, mouth gaping; saved himself from complete collapse by grabbing the door, and hauled himself back up. Tania stared in shock, tears still pouring from her eyes.

*"Shut the damn door!"* he yelled. Galvanized by his angry command, she reached over and shut her side, head snapping back to face him instantly. *"Lock them,"* he continued. *"Please! Stay down, and don't move!"*

She stared at him dumbly, as if she had seen too much for her brain to take in. *Aw hell, she's probably seen Ross, boggles, trolls, God knows what—*

"Look," he said pleadingly, taking his crowbar out as the firefight erupted all around him. "When this is over, I promise I'll show you a unicorn. Just *lock* the doors, *stay* down, and *don't move*."

She nodded, and he slammed the door, waiting just long enough to see her push the lock down and duck under the safety of the dash next to the battered CD-player box before turning to stumble into the fray.

Dottie let the elvensteed do the driving; she simply checked over her ammo and the rest of her gear as best she could with only one unbandaged eye. The headset looked very odd, wired in place over the bandages. She had assured Sam that the damage was slight, just a cut eyelid rather than a gouged eye, but it meant she couldn't use that eye until the lid healed. Sam noticed, however, that she had *not* mentioned the rest of the cut, a slash that continued up over the top of her head and had taken forty-seven stitches to close.

She finally took her main weapon onto her lap, and patted it the way Sam patted Thoreau. He stared at it, and her, still fascinated and taken a bit aback by the mere existence of a shotgun with a bore the size of the Holland Tunnel, never mind that it was tiny Dottie who was toting the thing. And then there were the shells, in double bandoleers that made her look like a Mexican bandit. She smiled gleefully when she noticed the direction of his stare.

"Triple-aught steel shot and salt," she said fondly. "Packed 'em myself. Forget the Force. Trust in the spread of the gauge, Sam."



He took a mental inventory of his own weapons. He'd left the water-Uzi behind, figuring that the enemy already knew of that, and were expecting it. *Two penny nails, Colt revolver and steel-jacketed bullets, six-inch circular saw blades . . . good thing Thoreau and I play frisbee a lot.*

He'd been saving the damn sawblades for months, collecting them from all his friends, since his neighbor Mary had started painting daft little landscapes on them and peddling them at craft fairs. He'd not trusted her around even a dulled edge, and he'd ground every bit of sharpness off, lest she slice open a finger while dabbing paint.

Still, dull or not, they'd play merry cob with an Unseleighe Sidhe's day when thrown hard enough.

*I d'know about that baggy of iron filings, though,* he worried. *Is the plastic likely to break on impact or not?* He wanted to have at least one weapon that couldn't possibly harm anyone but a Sidhe. There were three children in there, who might still be alive. If one of the nasties grabbed one to use as a shield . . .

Ahead of them, the Mustang impacted the gate with a fiery crash that sent sparks in a thousand directions, and lit up the place with every alarm known to the mind of man. Dottie only sighed. "So much for subtlety," she muttered, then frowned as she listened to something on her headset.

"Sam, Keighvin wants us to check the offices and make sure nobody gets out that way," she said absently, after a moment. Sam nodded, though Dottie looked a little disappointed as her elvensteed made an abrupt direction change, throwing him against the door, then screeched to a halt outside the darkened glass of the office entrance.

The doors dissolved and he and the mechanic bailed out like a pair of commandos. The elvensteed waited until it was obvious that they weren't going to need it in its current form—then it rippled, transforming into horse-shape, before rearing, pivoting on its hind hooves, and shooting off through the night towards the open hangar door.

Dottie moved in fast, blasting the thick glass door open with a single shell and darting through to throw herself against the wall. Sam followed, Colt in his hand and heart in his mouth, plastering himself to the wall on the side opposite her.

Nothing: desk, chairs, a painting on the wall behind the desk, now all full of holes. Typical receptionist area. But two hallways branched from it—one to the right, and one to the left. Glass crunched under their feet. Dottie jerked her head leftwards; Sam nodded, and eased into the hall to the right, rip-saw blade from the ammo-box at his side in his odd hand. Funny thing, that. Even though he was right-handed, he'd always been ambidextrous at frisbee. Thoreau had no idea at all what a good doggie he'd been.

He inched along the hallway with his back against the wall. When he reached a door, he opened it from the side; waited, then felt along the wall for the lightswitch and flicked it on before poking his nose and the barrel of the Colt inside. The first two doors he encountered led to storage rooms full of cardboard boxes. He checked one box that was open; it was full of videotapes in blank plastic holders. The third, however, was a little different.

He blinked in astonishment; this was a reception area that would have done justice to any of Gulfstream's high-powered execs. In one corner was a wide-screen TV with a discreet VCR on top; surrounding it were couches covered in what Sam was willing to bet was black leather. Matching black leather chairs were arranged in little conversation circles, each centered on a stylish walnut table. A wet bar took up one entire side of the room. Sam licked his lips, and tried not to think how much money was

-invested in the plush gray carpet, the black marble of the bar, the lush seating and furniture.

He eased along the wall to make sure no one was hiding behind the bar, sliding on the soft cushion of the bag of iron dust in his pocket. If only he'd had time to think of a better delivery system for it. . . .

The bar itself was magnificent: rare scotch and decanters of cut crystal, goblets, stem glasses, silver-chased antique seltzer bottles, shot glasses. . . .

*Holy God, I could use a whisky and soda right—*

He froze. Soda. Seltzer bottles—the old fashioned, rechargeable kind—their nozzles were big enough that *nothing* would clog them—not even iron dust. At least not right away—and the seltzer would make a good vehicle for the dust.

Now if the bastards had just gone all the way with this yuppie image of theirs, and had really invested in expensive crystal seltzer siphons and not the fake kind, the kind that could be opened and recharged at the bar, instead of the sort that took refills of cheap canned soda-water. . . .

He stuffed his gun back in the holster and dropped the sawblade into the ammo box, and began rummaging through the stock under the bar itself.

Armed with overcharged seltzer bottle in one hand, sawblade tucked under that thumb, and Colt in the other hand, Sam resumed his explorations.

There wasn't much else to find. The rest of the suite was one enormous room, with tables piled high with video-tapes, mailing boxes, and more supplies beneath the tables. Two postal machines graced the far end of the room.

He started to cross it—and Dottie's personal Howitzer thundered from across the hall.

He sprinted back the way he had come; it was longer, but this way he'd be coming up from behind her, not arriving in the line of fire.

This side of the office complex was a set of small, empty rooms, barren even of furniture. The shotgun spoke twice more as he passed them. He began to pant as he reached what would have been the executive lounge; he was an old man, and not used to running so much—

The shotgun roared again as he reached the door and flattened himself to one side of it. It looked as if this place was set up as a kind of rudimentary video studio. He couldn't see Dottie at all—

But he *could* see the back and shoulders of a tall, slight young man hiding behind a screen with a crossbow in his hands: blond-haired—

—pointy-eared—

He didn't even think; he just acted. He dropped to the floor, putting the seltzer bottle aside, drew up the sawblade and pitched it—then dodged aside without waiting to see if it hit. The worst it would do would be to distract him.

The Sidhe must have seen the movement out of the corner of his eye, for he turned just as Sam dropped, reflexively firing the crossbow.

The bolt *thudded* into the wall above his head—just as the sawblade hit the Sidhe in the neck.

He shrieked and gurgled, and fell back into the screen, knocking it over, and Dottie's shotgun thundered again.

There wasn't much left of either Sidhe or screen when Sam got to his feet again. With the screen gone, the rest of the room was in plain view, and it was pretty evident that Dottie didn't miss with that thing.

And the bodies of the Sidhe—were smoking and evaporating.

Sam stared at them, repulsed, but unable to look away. The bodies were literally dissolving, leaving only the sprinkles of iron buckshot behind. Dottie stood up from her hiding place behind an overturned sofa across the room, and made her way across the smashed lights and broken video equipment to his side, absently reloading from her bandoleer.

“Why are they *doing* that?” Sam asked, fighting down nausea. “Our people didn't—”

“Our people weren't killed by Cold Iron, holy herbs, and blessed rock-salt,” Dottie said. “It's mostly the iron that does it—” She caught sight of what Sam had in his right arm and frowned. “Sam, this is a bad time for -cocktails.”

He took his eyes off the remains soaking into the -industrial-brown carpet. “Here,” he said, thrusting it at her. “Put that pagan blessing of yours on it, like you did with me watergun.”

She raised an eyebrow, but freed her right hand to cup over the bottle. She whispered a few words, then sketched a sign in the air over it—

And this time Sam saw for certain what he hadn't quite caught the first time. A flash of light traveled from her hand to the bottle, and the water lit up for a moment. Her brows furrowed.

“There's Cold Iron in the water in that thing!” she exclaimed, half in accusation, half in admiration. “How in hell did you manage that?”

Sam just grinned. “Never piss off an engineer.”

Ross was livid, and ready to murder—if he could. They'd already tortured and killed the boy. One of the bastards had taken the other girl, the dark one, across the Gate into Underhill before he could do anything about it. That was Foxtrot's territory; he'd have to handle it now. But Ross had managed to get the hangar door open, and to keep it open, long enough for everybody to get inside.

The little blonde was safe inside Tannim's car—or at least, as safe as any physical body was going to be with all that steel-jacketed lead and those magic lightning bolts in the air. The firefight was spectacular; and the Bad Guys were losing it. . . .

Ross decided he'd better go keep an eye on Miss Bad News, the one duded up like a fashion model who seemed to be in charge. If she had any rabbits to pull out of her pert little hat, now would be the

time.

He scanned the area for her aura, a peculiar purple-black like a fresh bruise. It was easy enough to spot; she was heading straight for the C-130—or whatever it was. It wasn't exactly a plane, although it used the electronics of one. The engines didn't run on any fuel *he* was familiar with. There weren't any fuel cells in the wings, just peculiar spongy things filled with sullenly glowing energy.

He blinked himself into the body of the plane, avoiding the dead-black area of the Gate in the tail. He didn't know where that led, and Foxtrot had whispered into his head that he didn't *want* to know where it went. For a moment he was afraid that Queen Bee there was going through—

But no; instead of turning towards the tail, as soon as she climbed the stairs to the side entrance, she turned towards the cockpit, taking strides as long as that tight executive skirt of hers would permit, her high-heels clicking determinedly on the flooring. He followed her, growing more and more alarmed.

*Jeez. She got a gun up there or somethin' ? She can't be plannin' t'take this thing off—*

But that, it seemed, was precisely what she intended to do.

She dropped herself down into the pilot's chair, and reached for the controls. Ross looked around, frantically, for a way to stop her—he was just a plain old country boy—he didn't know anything about gear like this, not like Tannim did.

But that reminded him of what Tannim had told him about how he could glitch gear—and none of this stuff was armored against spirits. In their arrogance, the Bad Guys must never have counted on finding a ghost ranged up against them.

As the motors caught, and the rotors started to turn, Ross grinned savagely, and began taking a walk through the control panels.

Aurilia strapped herself into the pilot's seat and reached for the controls, glad she'd taken the time to rob that young pilot of his memories. It was time to cut her losses and run for it. Vidal was gone, and since the Fairgrove hosts were *here* instead of at the ambush site, presumably they had either killed or captured him. She'd already lost personnel, including some lesser Sidhe. Since the hangar door had malfunctioned and let the enemy *in*, she might as well take advantage of the situation and fly the plane, Gate and all, *out*. There were other cities to exploit; -Atlanta wasn't that far away. She could return one day in force, and take Keighvin at her leisure.

She heard the first engine catch; the second. All the instruments were green—

She'd take the aircraft out on the runway, and too bad for anything that happened to be in the way. Maybe she'd waggle the wings at the Fairgrove idiots shaking their fists down on the ground. Then head for new, fresher meat—

The engines coughed once, twice—the rotors slowed—and the engines died. Lights began flashing all over the cockpit, and warning buzzers whined like hornets in a blender.

She stared at the instrument panel, which now displayed readings that made no sense at all. The oil-pressure was off-scale; an engine was overheating. One had never started. Five airplanes were about

to hit her according to radar. The airspeed read one hundred twenty knots. The altimeter showed her to be in a steep climb.

She pounded her fists on the panel, but succeeded only in hurting her hand. Somehow, *something* had glitched the electronics. And as she stared at the display panels, movement ahead of her caught her eye.

The hangar door was closing. Even if she could fix what had just been done, she'd never get the plane started and moving before the door was closed.

She snapped the belts off and flung herself out of the seat. *Niall*, she thought, a red rage beginning to take hold of her, making her shake. *Niall will have to go call in his debts, the stinking corpse. If Keighvin wants a war, a war he'll get!*

The girl lay where one of the Sidhe had flung her, on the couch in one of the movie-sets, too hysterical and fear-crazed to touch. Foxtrot left her alone. He couldn't do anything for her mental state, and at the moment she wasn't in any physical danger.

There wasn't *alot* he could do in this Sidhe-built pocket of Underhill, anyway. His realm was a different sort of space. Right now he was little more than a glowing spark, hovering at about eye-level for a human, beside one of the video cameras. Still, whatever he could do to help the cause—though he couldn't do much here, at least he could do *something*. He couldn't even enter the human plane at all, not like Ross and the true ghosts could.

Changes in the energy level rippled across him, alerting him to the fact that something had just crossed the Gate. He bounced in place, torn between the urge to see what had crossed it, and the fear that if he left the girl alone, something would happen to her. Finally he gave in to the former, and raced across the studios to the staging area in front of the Gate. It didn't look like much; just an expanse of flat, brown stone, walled on one side by the studios, on two sides by the gray, swirling chaos of Unseleighe Underhill, and on the fourth side by the -utterly featureless, black void of the Gate. The two pillars that held it in place on this side glowed an eye-jarring -blackish-green. If Fox forced himself he could see through to the other side, very dimly, as if he was peering through dark smoked glass.

The Bane-Sidhe paced impatiently on the other side, rags fluttering as he moved. *It* must have been what caused the disturbance in the Gate energies, Fox reasoned. But—why?

Movement in the gray chaos caught his attention. There was someone out there—coming in response to a call?

No—

There were *hundreds*. Lesser Sidhe atop Nightmares, trolls and goblins and boggles and red-caps and worse—every variety of Underhill nasty Fox had ever seen—headed this way—

Making for the Gate.

If they came through, Ross's friends would be outnumbered and outclassed. He had to stop them, somehow. All he had here in the way of special effects was the power of pure illusion. . . .

And there was only one entity powerful enough in and of himself to stop an army of the Unseleighe

Court. It would be a gamble; they might not believe the illusion. They might decide to take him on anyway. By his reckoning, the trick had only a fifty percent chance of -working.

Well, that was what being a shapechanger and a trickster was all about, and he'd played worse odds happily.

He took his most recent memory of the High King and held it up before his mind's eye. The memory was about five hundred years old, but it would do. That wasn't so long in the lives of the Sidhe.

He Manifested in a flash of light, calculated to blind and surprise them, and when they recovered from the blaze, they saw the majesty of King Oberon striding -towards them.

As he raised his remembered image of Oberon's sword in a threatening sweep, the foremost riders pulled their beasts up on their haunches, pure fear on their faces. As he took one step forward, they turned tail and ran, panicking the ones behind them, until the entire army was in flight.

Fox howled with maniacal glee, conjured the illusion of an elvensteed below him, and gave chase.

\* \* \*

Aurilia snarled with impatience, kicked off her high heels, and summoned her armor and arms. She ran down the stairs of the plane and headed aft, wondering what could be holding up Niall. Surely it didn't take *that* long to summon his followers! And while the Bane-Sidhe dawdled, the last of Vidal Dhu's flunkies were falling, and her own troops were coming under fire. *Fatal* fire too; most of Keighvin's people were armed with a variety of Cold Iron weapons, and those that weren't were using the presence of the two steel-bearing cars to bend the trajectories of their magics in unexpected ways.

Damn them!

She could hardly see, she was so angry. The feel of the hilt in her hand was not enough; she wanted to slash something with it—

Just as she reached the tail of the plane and the ramp down onto the concrete, the Bane-Sidhe let out a wail of despair and stumbled down the ramp to cling to her with both skeletal hands, babbling, desiccated eyes wide in horror.

“What?” she shouted at him, daring to shake him, hard. “*What?* What's the matter?”

“Oberon!” Niall wailed. “It's Oberon! He's here, he's on Keighvin's side, he—chased off the army—he might -return—”

Oberon! For one moment, she panicked as thoroughly as Niall. But then—

“It can't be Oberon, you fool!” she said fiercely. “He's vowed to stay clear of things involving mortals!” Niall continued to babble, and she pushed him away from her in disgust. “Come on, you worm,” she snapped, turning, and hoping the insult would wake some sense in the Bane-Sidhe's skull. “There's still time to—”

She froze. There was a mortal between her and the battle; an old man brandishing a gun—and a seltzer bottle.

While Dottie marched straight into the fray, pumping her shotgun and picking off targets as calmly as if she was shooting skeet, Sam worked his way around the edge of the hangar towards the C-130. The sawblade-frisbees proved lethal indeed; by the time he was twenty feet from the tail-ramp, he'd used them all, and to good effect. Dull or not, they *acted* as if they were sharp when they hit any of the enemy—and even if all his hits did was to wound the creatures, that gave one of the other Fairgrove Folk a chance to get in a killing blow.

He made a dash from cover to the tail-ramp of the plane without getting worse than his hair scorched—and a steel-jacketed round into his attacker's face took care of hazard from that quarter. That was when he heard voices—and recognized one of them for the Bane-Sidhe by the evil whine under its words.

*Blessed Mother Mary—if that thing starts to howling, in here, with all the echoes—*

He froze with fear and indecision. He remembered all too well his last encounter with the thing. And that was with the protection of his ear-pieces. Here, at short range, the thing could fry his brain.

*You're for it, lad. This is it. It's you between that thing and all your friends.* He squared his shoulders. He was the only one within striking distance of it. And if it took him down—well—there were worse ways to go.

He stood up and walked calmly around the ramp; the Bane-Sidhe was there, all right—and curiously shrunken. It clung to the shoulders of a stunning woman in dark, shining armor, and babbled fearfully at her. She pushed it away, and turned. And froze as she saw him. He brought up both his weapons to bear.

The Bane-Sidhe took one look at the bottle in his hand, and stood paralyzed with fear, unable to speak, much less howl.

The woman stared at him—then began to laugh. “*What is this?*” she said scornfully. “Which are you, Moe, Larry, or Curly?”

The Bane-Sidhe pawed her shoulder and babbled something about “It's him, it's him, Holy Water.” She shoved the thing rudely away and began walking toward Sam. “You're a fool, mortal,” she said, her eyes narrowing as she slowly unsheathed her sword. “I know all about guns and gunpowder.” Her free hand sketched a symbol in the air, where it glowed between them for a moment. “There,” she continued, “your gun is useless. Go ahead, try it—”

He did, he couldn't help himself; he pulled the trigger convulsively, and the hammer simply *clicked*. She laughed.

“I don't necessarily have to play by elven rules any more than Keighvin does. What my magic can't touch, the magic of an elemental can. And as for that silly little water bottle you have, it might give Niall problems, but it won't hurt me. Holy Water is only good against the Bane-Sidhe, not a full-Sidhe. I might even find it—refreshing—”

He shook the bottle frantically to get the maximum amount of spray, as she neared him, forcing him to back up against the corrugated metal wall of the hangar. She raised her sword. “Good night, court jester,” she said—

And he hit her full in the face with the metal-charged water.

She screamed; he raised the stream above her as she dropped to her knees, pawing at her face, and sprayed the Bane-Sidhe. It opened its mouth to shriek, and he directed the stream into its mouth—saw it splash out for a moment—and then come out the back of the Bane-Sidhe's head, boiling the decayed skin off of its bones.

The nozzle clogged, then, but it didn't matter. Both the woman and the Bane-Sidhe were out of the battle and no hazard to anyone. The woman knelt, keening in pain; the Bane-Sidhe writhed on the ground unable even to do that.

*I did it. By God, I did it. . . .*

He took one step to the woman, raised the seltzer bottle, and brought it crashing down onto her skull. His old legs gave out, then, and he sat down on the concrete, and waited for the rest to find him.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Tannim limped away from Tania and the Mustang, crowbar unsheathed and at the ready. Three black elvensteeds thundered past him, ridden by spell-casting Sidhe in cobalt blue armor. They cut across his path, in pursuit of two red elvensteeds ridden by gray-clad Unseleighe, whose armor already showed burn marks and holes from bullets and elven arrows. As he watched, the three chasing split into an inverted vee, one to each side and one pulling back between them. Seeing they had been flanked, but not immediately noticing the third fighter, the Unseleighe slowed and whirled, to be caught in the throats by that third Fairgrove warrior sweeping a silver longsword in a massive arc. Both riders fell, and the Fairgrove fighters dispatched the red 'steeds with swordstrokes. Then the three turned as one, seeking new targets. *Padraig, Sean, and Siobhan*, Tannim noted absently. *I guess polo is good for something after all.*

And so the battle went; the Lesser Sidhe their Unseleighe opponents had rallied were being steadily routed by Keighvin's tactical skill—and the unpredictability of the magical and technological weapons brought to bear against them.

Tannim had not yet engaged any Unseleighe in hand-to-hand combat since leaving the car—but he held no illusions that his freedom would last. For now, he was taking the lay of the situation magically, while he had the time to do so. He felt the hangar's defensive net being drained away around the battle; someone had given up on this place, and was going to use its energy elsewhere. The airplane's engines had started a moment earlier, but had then gone silent, propellers seizing. Maybe Ross had glitched the airplane, and now whoever had been trying to escape was gathering power for a last stand. Maybe it was one of the Fairgrove mages stealing the power away.

Maybe it was part of a trap.

In any case, the flow was heading in the general direction of the airplane; he narrowed his eyes to home in on the focal point—

And was struck sharply from behind, strongly enough to go to the concrete.



*Dammit! I missed one . . . ?*

A heavy arrow clattered to the ground beside him, from where it had struck him in the back. Its tip smoldered—elf-shot, made to kill humans instantly by disrupting their tissues and life force at once. It had not penetrated, thanks to Chinthliss' armor, but left a ragged, seething hole in his beloved jacket. He whirled, hands blazing with energy, to face a seven-foot-tall Unseleighe who had fired point-blank at him from behind several huge wooden crates.

The bow was raised again, arrow leveling at Tannim's face this time—and Tannim took three stumbling steps towards him and lashed out with the crowbar's hook. He caught the bow, which splintered as if touched by an arc-welder.

*Enchanted. Damn I've got a good one here. . . .*

The Sidhe's face contorted with a snarl; apparently he had felt about the bow much the way Tannim felt about his jacket. Tannim looped the crowbar's path up over his head and brought it down on the Sidhe's upraised arm, where sparks flew again.

*Enchanted armor, too? Oh, hell, I don't need this right now.*

Tannim's shoulder blades ached from where the arrow had hit; the armor had done *nothing* to arrest the shaft's momentum. The knee, and now the entire leg, were threatening to freeze up, and only dogged determination was keeping him on his feet. That, and a strong sense of self-preservation.

The Sidhe staggered back, and dug his fingers into the crate beside him, coming away with a two-by-four the size of Detroit. He dearly intended to beat Tannim into a liquid with it. The fellow hadn't drawn his sword, doubtless assuming that Tannim was armored the same as he, but like as not, he'd noted that the arrow's impact alone had hurt the human. The young mage could only limp backwards, mind working furiously to find an easy save—*or any* save!—while the towering Unseleighe stalked him.

The two-by-four swung; Tannim deflected it downwards with the crowbar. Its owner brought it back around much faster than Tannim would have thought possible and swung again, too fast to deflect, this time just catching Tannim in the left side above the kidneys. He flew sideways, landing on his back, and the crowbar slipped from his fingers and clanged against the concrete.

The visor on the Sidhe's helm was down now, a silvery metal skull shadowing slit-pupilled eyes. He stepped swiftly to the downed human, drawing the board up over his head for the final blow, one to Tannim's skull. Tannim's fingers grasped the pointed end of the crowbar as he propped himself up with his left arm, and he did the only thing he could—

The crowbar struck again, this time hooking the Sidhe's right ankle, and Tannim put all his weight into pulling on it. The warrior went off-balance and toppled back, as Tannim recovered and leapt to the warrior's chest, pressing the crowbar's point under the visor and prying up. The metal skullface bent until the bone underneath gave. The body twitched once, then fell still.

Tannim withdrew the dripping bar and staggered back, falling against the crate he'd nearly bodyslammed a moment before. The three riders shot past him then, one raising a high-sign to him before decapitating another Lesser Sidhe, and then all three disappeared behind another stack of crates. Above them, a flash of white—a barn owl, no doubt giving aerial information to Keighvin. To his right, shotgun blasts and other gunfire marked Dottie's arrival with a pair of mechanics. And at the tail of the airplane was—

Tannim broke into as good a run as he could manage, sending out a desperate mental call to all of his allies, and even Chinthliss. He'd spotted the focus of the tapped energy—and she was just about to unleash it on Sam Kelly.

Sam backed away from what he'd done, inching on his buttocks like a kid in a sandbox. This was all so absurd, and so deadly—maiming fairy tales with a slapstick gag. At his age, anyone else would be sipping prune juice and weeding petunias in Florida, not acting like Batman in mail-order slacks. It was ridiculous, all of it, but there it was—a gibbering, discorporating Bane-Sidhe scratching its last moments on the tail-ramp of a C-130 with no throat or mouth left to scream with, and at the foot of the ramp, a former Joan Crawford look-alike knelt, doing the ultimate death scene.

He could hear her sucking breaths, sobbing, and -despite what she'd no doubt done, it was a heart-rending sound—that of a near-immortal dying. Funny, he'd never thought of it that way before—it made him shudder. *Orwas* that the reason his skin was pricking . . . ?

The woman raised her head, and gazed hatefully up at him with a marred, bloodied, but by no means dissolved face. She clenched her fists. Sam's heart froze.

*Bloody hell, her makeup. It wasn't water-based, God help me—the iron-water didn't touch her skin enough to kill her—*

Tannim kept a weather-eye on all sides while running, not wanting to be blindsided again. And much as he liked Sam, if there was a greater danger to be met, he'd have to answer that first. But as far as he could tell, the Unseleighe were at fourth and ten, with no kicker and no linebackers left. The hangar door was closed now, and they weren't going to be able to escape—what was left of them, anyway, unless they had a Gate up their sleeves. Tania was still in the Mustang; the Victor was still in one piece. Keighvin was on the farthest side of the hangar; astride Rosaleen. With no other threats apparent, he allowed himself to narrow in on the one immediately before him.

The woman Sam had been backing away from was standing now—the primal energy building up in her like floodwater against a dam. It did not Feel exactly like Sidhe magic, either—this was something Tannim knew well, something he was familiar with himself—it was elemental magery. It swirled about her in a sullen eddy as she raised her hands to spell-cast.

*And where in hell did she getthat?The Sidhe don't do elemental stuff—*

Well, evidently this Sidhe did. But there was something wrong with the flavor of it.

Never mind that; right now Sam was a sitting duck—literally, so far as the sitting part went—and the Unseleighe was about to let loose. He couldn't deflect it, and he couldn't shield Sam from it—he had his hands full keeping his own shields up. There was only one thing handy.

He threw the crowbar.

It wasn't exactly made for throwing, and Tannim was badly off balance.*He* went down on his ass, as his leg gave out altogether—and the bar just barely hit the woman's upraised hands, knocking them aside,

aborting the spell she had been about to cast. She whirled and saw him—and he recognized her as the woman from Kevin Barry’s—probably the same “Aurilia Morrigan” that had sicced the P.I. on him. And she recognized him, too; though her face was red and swollen, blistered in places from what could only have been Cold-Iron contagion, she snarled with an unmistakable rage and turned her attention towards *him*.

He clasped his hands, arms braced towards her in a desperate warding-spell, and cowered inside his shields as she unleashed a deadly combination of Sidhe and elemental magic on him. She overloaded his mage-sight; his eyes burned with the raw power flung at him. He Felt his shields eroding, being peeled away a layer at a time. He kept throwing more of them up, but he was quickly running out of energy. He’d pumped too much into the ram, and he’d already drained all the reserves in the Mustang.

A lick of fire got through, and he cried out as it scorched his cheek before he managed to cut it off. She was just throwing too much at him—it kept changing with every second—forcing him to change his protections just as quickly. He couldn’t see anything; he was trapped in the heart of a swirling maelstrom of multicolored magics, all of them subtly wrong, but enough so to make his stomach churn with distress and his eyes ache and water.

Another lick of flame came through, touching his legs. It burned away patches in his jeans, but could not eat through further. His armor was proof against that, but not against everything, as the Sidhe with the two-by-four had figured out. The argument his knee had lost with the file cabinet had bruised or broken his kneecap—and had torn newly-healed gashes open again. There was blood seeping through the armor there—if Aurilia saw that and figured out the implications, she could call up a stone elemental to pulverize him, and his friends would bury him in the armor because it would be the only way to keep him from oozing all over the bottom of the coffin. . . .

There were two determined firelords and an air elemental striking at him, relentlessly. They were beginning to hurt him seriously—all of his magical deflections were being undermined second by second. He’d never been oriented towards force-versus-force war—all his life he’d been the clever one using a tiny bit of leverage in the right place. Like the crowbar—but it was likely slag by now, and soon there would be nothing left of him but smoldering ashes in green-scaled armor. He was nearly blind, crippled, and thoughts of submission or suicide lanced his mind. . . .

*No! There’s gotta be a way I can turn this stuff against her—there’s always a way. She’s got the elements Bound—if I can break the coercive spells, the elementals will—*

The Hammer of God crashed down about ten feet from him. He clapped his hands to his ears; a reflex, it was too late to effectively protect them.

The magics around him swirled and evaporated—

Aurilia stood with hands outstretched, a look of complete surprise on her face, and a hole in her chestplate. As she crumpled, her eyes left Tanim and tracked to his right—

Where Sam was getting slowly to his feet, smoking Colt revolver in his hand, an expression of grim satisfaction on his face. He walked wearily to where Aurilia lay, and stared down at her for a moment.

Then, slowly and deliberately, he sighted down the barrel of the Colt. This time Tanim had enough warning to cover his ears and look away to protect his eyes from muzzle-flash. Sam Kelly planted a second steel-jacketed round right between Aurilia’s eyebrows.

Tannim's ears were ringing; ringing hard enough to make him dizzy. Or maybe that was the pain in his knee. When he looked back, Sam had holstered the gun and was walking towards him.

"Why—why in hell didn't you use that before?" he said in frustration.

"What?" Sam's voice sounded very faint and far away through the cacophony in his ears.

*Right. Neither of us can hear after two shots from the Colt.*

"I said," he shouted, "why didn't you use that before?"

"She got me damn bullets!" Sam shouted back. "They wouldn't fire!"

"So?" Tannim yelled.

"I guess she saw too many movies!" Sam screamed, with smug, self-satisfied anger.

"What?"

"Guess she never heard of speed-loaders!" Sam laughed.

So. She'd neutralized the bullets in the gun with her elementals, but not the ones in Sam's speed-loaders. That was the drawback of coercing elementals; wherever they had the option of taking you literally—if it was to your disadvantage—they would. They had done *exactly* what she told them to, and had not touched one bullet more than that.

Tannim felt his lips stretching in a grin; a feral grin that Sam answered with a nod. She'd underestimated Sam, too. She'd surely thought that once the old man was down, he was helpless.

"I saw you were in trouble, so I took a chance!" Sam continued; his voice seemed a little louder over the ringing. Maybe their ears were starting to recover. "I figured the gun might fire with fresh bullets—an' if that hadna worked, I'd've dubbed th' bitch with it!"

He offered Tannim a hand; the battered mage took it, and hauled himself to his feet. Or rather, foot—his left leg flatly refused to bear his weight. With Sam's help, he limped over to get his crowbar to use as a makeshift cane.

"That's what happens when ye piss off an engineer, lad," Sam continued, at a slightly lower volume. "We keep pitchin' things at ye until something works."

"So you do," Tannim observed, with a smile. "So you do."

Their troubles weren't over yet, however; for although the Unseleighe Sidhe and their troops had been destroyed to the last troll, there was a mundane problem still out there. Dottie galloped up on the back of her 'steed, shotgun still smoking, to remind them of just that.

"Tannim!" she shouted. The 'steed's hooves skidded on the concrete when she reined it up abruptly beside them. "Tannim, Conal says the cops are outside! We've got them barricaded out for the moment, but how are we gonna get out of here?"

"Oh, shit." The rest were pulling up beside him or running to meet him, including Keighvin and Conal in

the Victor. He looked about frantically for an avenue of -escape, but couldn't think of anything. "Keighvin, there isn't any time to build a Gate, is there?"

"Large enough to take the 'steeds—and especially, the cars?" Keighvin shook his head. "And we dare not leave them. They would point straight to us and Fairgrove."

Tannim tugged at his hair, frantically, trying to think. "Can't you transform them or—"

"*Hey hotshot!*" A familiar misty form, visible only to mage-sight, appeared at his elbow.

"Not now, Ross—" He wondered, briefly, if they could all pile into the plane and fly off—

"*Hey!*" The ghost slammed into him, jarring what was left of his shields, shaking him. He turned to glare, but Ross ignored it. "*If you want a goddamn Gate, I got one for ya!*"

Those beside Tannim who could hear the spirit stared at Ross. Keighvin seized him by the insubstantial arm. Ross started, and stared back at the elven lord in shock. Keighvin was probably the first real-world creature Ross'd met who could grab and hold a ghost when he chose.

"A Gate? Where, man!" Keighvin demanded.

Ross pointed at the tail-section of the C-130. "*Right in there. That was how they was bringin' in reinforcements, until Fox scared 'em off. You could bring the cars up the ramp, see?*"

Keighvin started to smile, for the first time in this long, harrowing day-and-night. "Fitting," he said, with great satisfaction. "Fitting, that we should use *their* Gate." He looked about him, and began issuing orders. "Dottie, get Tannim back to his car; you and Frank armor it to protect Underhill from it. Conal, you and Kieru do likewise with the Victor. Deirdre, Siobhan, Padraig, Sean—you help me incinerate the corpses that are left. The rest of you, collect the wounded, and up through the Gate! We'll gather on t'other side and make our way home at leisure—after we destroy the Unseleighe holdings Underhill!"

Keighvin set the last of his spells in place, and double-checked them. He glanced around the hangar once to make certain that there were no further signs of Sidhe or Fairgrove or anything out of the "ordinary"—

Though he doubted that the police would think what they found was ordinary. Hundreds of porn-tapes, including several of kiddie-porn and snuff-movies. One young man, obviously tortured to death—

*And a hard time we had getting young Tania to turn loose of the body, too.* He shook his head in pity; he hadn't blamed her for not wanting to leave Jamie's corpse here for the police to find, but he'd convinced her that it was the only way to cover the Fairgrove trail and give the police enough to think about that they wouldn't look for -complications.

The complete sets and equipment from the Underhill Studios, dumped near the crates, including what they had used on Jamie—and what few records the trio had kept.

Danaa only knew what the police would make of it all. There would be no bodies save that of Jamie; nothing but the wreckage of the offices and hangar; evidence of a fight—and a mystery.

*Yon Tannim thinks that the police will assume that some organized-crime contract went sour, and this was the -result. Well, I care not.*

All the preparations had taken less than fifteen minutes; meanwhile, the police were outside, trying to find a way to crack the wall of protections on each doorway, and shouting to them to come out and surrender on their bullhorns. Keighvin heard them through the corrugated metal walls—but while he stood here, this place was made of sterner stuff than corrugated aluminum.

*Let the police concoct an explanation for how a fight took place, but bodies and survivors vanished. So long as there is nothing linking this place to Fairgrove or the Sidhe, it matters not to me what they say.*

Well, he was ready. Siobhan was the last of the cleanup crew, and she had gone through the Gate a moment ago. It was time.

He mounted Rosaleen, and galloped up the ramp. As soon as he passed across the Gate boundary, the spells he had set activated; the substance of the plane, of Underhill itself, tried to go back to Underhill through the only portal available.

The Gate.

*Let them explain this.*

The plane imploded, taking the Gate with it, and leaving nothing of itself behind.

The protections on the outside walls collapsed.

Tannim's Mustang was the first up the ramp, with Sam in the seat beside him, and Dottie and Frank in the passenger's bench. Dottie's 'steed—transformed into a proud, ethereal unicorn, a glowing snowy white, with silken mane and tail, silver hooves and horn, and golden eyes—was right behind with Tania on her back. The Mach 1 was doing a good job of glowing itself, from all the magics Dottie and Frank had layered on, insulating Underhill from the devastation so much Cold Iron could cause.

Riding just ahead was Kieru, with his 'steed back to its normal shape—though not even for Tania's sake could Kieru convince it to put on a horn.

Kieru vanished into the dead-black nothingness at the end of the ramp, dissolving into what appeared to be a hard, solid wall. Tannim shuddered, and tried not to look—but his turn was next, and he sent his much-abused -American-built steed following in Kieru's wake. He closed his eyes, slowing to a crawl as the Gate sucked up nose, hood, and approached the windscreen—

There was a shiver of energy all over his body as he passed through, and every hair on his body stood on end for a moment. When the feeling had passed he opened his eyes again—

There, Kieru had pulled up, his mouth agape with astonishment and a little fear. Just beyond him stood a tall Sidhe; blond hair streaming to his waist, armored with gold-chased silver, brandishing a sword. His face was—impossible. *Too* beautiful, even for the Sidhe—and he was crowned.

“The High King,” Kieru said aloud, as his elvensteed backed. “Danaa! 'Tis High King Oberon—”

Then, before either Tannim or Kieru could do or say anything else, the High King shifted shape—

And in place of the breathtakingly handsome Oberon, there was a red-haired young man in black coveralls, with an aircraft carrier flight-crew cap, mirror-shades, ear--protectors, and a pair of aircraft batons—who began -directing the new arrivals, as if he was parking fighter planes.

Tannim looked at Sam; Sam shrugged. “Do what the man tells ye,” Sam suggested.

Seeing no reason why he shouldn’t, Tannim did, eventually parking at the edge of the “pavement” that marked the end of the Unseleighe-built area and the chaos of the unclaimed places of Underhill. He turned the engine off, pivoted, and watched the stranger.

The red-haired youth walked up to the Mustang, -saluted with a baton, and vanished—leaving only the afterimage of an embroidered chest-patch on his flight suit, which read “FX.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

It had been a long few months of healing and rebuilding. Conal, thorough as ever, had stroked every last bit of information out of the Victor’s diagnostic computer after returning to Fairgrove, and had already forged enough redesigned parts to keep the crew busy testing for a year. The local and national news had enjoyed a field day with the high-visibility “Mystery of Hangar 2A”—no doubt Geraldo was plotting an exposé by now.

Tannim had mentioned to Keighvin that someone would eventually discover the Fairgrove link, possibly even one of the few Fed-employed mages he’d run around with a couple times, but reassured the elven lord that they were generally pretty cool, and cynical in the way only Government employees could be.

They also knew when to leave things mysteries.

It was no mystery, though, how well Tania had recovered from her ordeal. She and he had talked often, and she admitted to having lost faith in Tannim before her kidnapping—but Tannim suspected seeing him coming to her rescue had helped restore her faith in other things, too. And being brought to the wonderland of Underhill, astride what at least *looked* like a unicorn—that is, before meeting a real one—had jolted her from her fears. Her friend, Laura, had been badly broken by what had -happened, but was being cared for Underhill by the Court. It was certain that when she was seen again, she would be strong and well, and had promised Tania to be her friend always.

Then Tania had been advised to go to the counselors at the Shelter House back in Savannah, to talk out what the people of Fairgrove could not help with. Her heart of hearts had healed well in her talks with the counselor—and that had led to today.

Tannim bent forward in the seat, pressing the scan button on the new CD/FM/AM tuner, installed at long last. It skipped from WRDU in Raleigh to WYRD in Haven’s Reach. Haven’s Reach was a tiny community with one of the highest per-capita counts of mages in the United States, right between Raleigh and Fayetteville. Somehow, WYRD stayed on the air year after year regardless of its eclectic playlist.

Now it played Icehouse: “Hey Little Girl.” The DJ must be psychic. Actually, in that town, he probably

was.

Tannim's left knee hardly ever hurt anymore; Chinthliss had finally showed, embarrassingly apologetic that he hadn't come to Tannim's aid. His dear friend had finally, apparently, had a romantic encounter, and was *very* distracted when Tannim had screeched for help. To make up for it, he'd called in a favor from a Healer-friend—now the knee moved just fine, and the muscles had finally gotten the detailed attention they'd needed for months.

That had made the drive to Research Triangle Park bearable physically—but he was still on edge emotionally over what was happening now.

The counselors had been more than professional—they had sincerely worked for the girl's best interests, and Tania decided, after going over all of her options, that this meeting would be best. So, her parents had been contacted, and Tannim had driven her here, to her old home, to see if the pieces could be fit together anew. She'd told him on the way there that she'd know the moment she saw her parents whether it was right or not, and if she was going to stay, she'd turn and wave.

Tania was walking up the steps, across a yard that had at one time been perfectly manicured. Now it showed signs of neglect, at odds with the *Architectural Digest* showpieces to either side of it. In the looping driveway was a gold BMW with a "For Sale" sign on the dash. And in one window of the house, a crystal sun-catcher glittered, etched with a white horse sporting a single spiraling horn.

That was a good sign. The DJ segued from Icehouse to a-ha: "Out of Blue Comes Green."

The door opened, and two figures rushed out, embracing her for one glorious minute. They stood at the door, then motioned for her to come inside with them. Tania stepped towards the threshold, stopped, and slowly faced the Mustang. Her arm raised, trembling, and Tannim could see tears streaming down her face even from this far. She shakily waved, smiling sweetly but obviously choking back more tears.

Tannim slipped the Mustang into drive and pulled away slowly from the curb. Tania was going to be all right, that much he knew. She had loving parents who had finally learned what raising a child was about, and she would be just fine.

After all, once touched by a unicorn, growing up couldn't be too hard.

**-- Chrome Circle --**





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## CHAPTER ONE

Gently bending the speed limit, eh? Turnpikes were fine things, out here in the Southwest; long stretches of arrow-straight macadam where you could really burn up some hydrocarbons. With one eye on the radar/laser detector and one ear on the CB radio, Tannim was confident there weren't too many Smokies, plain brown wrapper or otherwise, that he wouldn't know about long before he had to back down.

Heat waves distorted the landscape on either side of the Mustang, and made false-puddles on the asphalt ahead. Tannim had forgotten how hot it was in Oklahoma at the end of May, and how intense the sun-glare got by midmorning. Despite the protection of his ultra-dark Wayfarers, he still squinted against road-shimmers, the glare of sunlight off the metal and glass of other vehicles, and the occasional flash from reflective debris beside the road. In Savannah, Georgia, it was still spring; here it was already summer, and the long grass in the median showed the first signs of sun-scorch. Not as much as there would be by the end of June, but enough to make the ends of the cut stems noticeably brown, even at the speed he was moving.

One good thing about traveling by day. No ghosts. Usually. He wouldn't have been entirely surprised to have seen a weary spirit trudging along the shoulder, equally weary ox beside it, pulling a wagon that would not have been much larger than the Mach I Mustang he drove now, laden with all the worldly goods the long-dead pioneer owned. Or an Osage or Cherokee, trying to defend the last corner of the homelands he'd been promised.

He chuckled at his overactive imagination. In all the times he'd driven this stretch of the turnpike, he had yet to see a ghost, and he wasn't likely to this time, either. Not unless there was another Ross Canfield somewhere down the road, existing in an endless loop of time and replaying the mistake that got him killed, over and over again—until Tannim or someone like him happened by to free him.

Shoot, by now, Deke Kestrel's cleaned up every highway ghost between here and Austin.

The Mach I's air-conditioning worked overtime against the heat outside the car. This morning in the

motel outside Little Rock, the weatherman on CNN had predicted temperatures in the upper 90s for all of Oklahoma. Tannim suspected it was closer to 110 than 90, at least out here on the open road with no shade. He recalled working on his first cars in heat like this, spending every free moment during the school year and most of his summers out in his old barn, with no a/c and scarcely a breeze to dry his sweat. He'd come a long way from that barn, and the kid with all the dreams. Never had the dreams included anything like what had really happened.

Funny, when I was a kid, I thought the things I "saw" were nothing more than oddball hallucinations, entertaining as hell, but no big deal. Like an imaginary friend, only better, some a lot sexier than any imaginary friend a high school kid would imagine. I just chalked it up to puberty, but they're still on my mind. Hell, back then I even thought Chinthliss was an "imaginary friend," and I figured that still seeing him just meant I had a better imagination than everyone else. Until the spring dance, I never knew it was all real.

How old had he been? Young enough to think he knew everything; old enough to impress that visiting writer playing chaperone with his "maturity." Then things at the dance got ugly. Somebody there was using the emotions as a power source. I noticed, and so did that lady writer—Tregarde? Was that her name? She not only saw what I saw, but knew it was trouble. An adult, seeing it as sure as I did. It wasn't my own little fantasy anymore. Showed me I'd have to stop playing around with magic, or it'd eat my lunch. He'd had a long talk with Chinthliss that sleepless night. Given how things looked on the surface, intensive psychotherapy seemed like a fine option until his not-so-imaginary friend had confirmed it all. The magic he'd been playing with was real; the things he'd been seeing were real. In pilot parlance, it was time to get out of the simulators and take a real stick, or give it up. I grew up on heroes; I opted for taking a shot at becoming one and doing something about the bad guys. Clever me, I thought that just having magic would let me take care of everything. Always happened that way in the comics.

Since then, he'd seen things no "rational" person believed in anymore; he'd been shot at and beaten up and chewed on—as his often-aching left leg reminded him—by creatures nobody'd ever heard of outside of myths and horror movies. The magic had brought him good times, too, but plenty of moments when he wished he'd never taken the particular path his life was on. Sometimes he wondered if it had been worth it. If the green-eyed kid had known what was going to happen to him, would he still have gone for it? Or would he have sold off every piece of chrome, burned his little notebooks, and gone into accounting?

Well, maybe not accounting. Maybe art, like my folks thought I would.

His eyes itched, and he groped reflexively for the package of antihistamines on the seat beside him, popping one out of the foil and into his cupped hand without taking his eyes off the road. This was the time of day when people suffered highway hypnosis, especially people in cars with no a/c; more than once he'd had someone in front of him start to swerve into his path as they dozed off. And there were always the "Aunt Bee" and "Uncle Josh" types, who thought forty-five was way too fast to be driving; you could come over one of the deceptively gentle rises and be right on top of them before you knew it. Especially out here. But the double-nickel was just too slow, and the sixty-five limit wasn't much better.

He washed the bitter pill down with lukewarm Gatorade, and tossed the now-empty foil packet in the back seat with its crumpled brethren. Hopefully the pill would kick in before his nose started again.

Right. Your Majesty, may I present the Incredible Hero Mage with the dribble-nose. He'd learned pretty quickly that magic was like any other ability—you needed to be aware of it to use it, and not only did it not solve everything, it didn't solve most things. It was about as miraculous as a lug wrench. Hell, he couldn't even cure his own allergies with it!

He never had any trouble remembering why he'd left Oklahoma; his allergies never failed to remind him, usually long before he crossed the state line. He sighed and downed another mouthful of his drink. The planet must dump every substance I'm allergic to on the state when I head this way. The only good thing about his allergies was that by the time he graduated from high school, they were so bad that he needed no excuse to leave the family farm. Not when I can't get within twenty feet of a cow without my eyes swelling shut. Never mind that the antipathy between Tannim and farm animals seemed to be mutual. Cattle took a perverse pleasure in chasing him, geese hated him on sight, chickens went out of their way to shed feathers on him, and as for horses—

The only horses that don't try to flatten me come under sheet metal hoods.

That was most of the reason for his sinking feeling of dread as he approached the outskirts of Tulsa, headed ultimately southward toward Bixby. His father's last several letters and phone calls for the past year had all been about the changes he was making. Since he had resigned himself to his son's career-track in car testing and racing and Tannim was not expected to take over the family farm, his father had decided to turn the farm into something more lucrative. Not incidentally, it was also now more likely to sell when he retired. The old homestead was no longer a farm, it was a ranch. A horse ranch. Doing well, too, it seemed.

Quarter horses. Just what I need. They're going to take one look at me, and I know what they'll do. Tannim had never once gotten within a foot of a horse without it stepping on him, kicking him, biting him, or attempting other assorted mayhem on his person. Dad would expect some help, even if it meant that Tannim had to take allergy pills until he was stony. Well, Al told me that Joe likes horses. Maybe I can talk him into helping Dad out, and getting me off the hook, at least until we can head back to North Carolina and Georgia.

Young Joe was the other reason for this trip, besides the Obligatory Familial Visit, though the connection between the young man who now called himself "Joe Brown" and Tannim was a convoluted one.

Yeah. Once upon a time.

It all started with Hallet Racetrack.

Hallet International, the small and slightly silly monument to the desire of men and women to hurl their bodies as quickly as possible around a loop was not all that far from Tulsa, or more importantly, Bixby, where the old family farm stood. And last summer, Hallet was where two Fairgrove Industries mechanics had been sent to help out in track-testing the first Fairgrove foamed-aluminum engine block to leave their hands.

Fairgrove also "employed" Tannim as a test-driver, mechanic, public relations, and general "outside" man. Or, as Rob had called him, a "gentleman flunkie." He also drove for their SCCA team, but he'd have done that without the pay.

So far, so good. Ordinary enough; plenty of racing concerns had a guy who was that kind of jack-of-all-trades. And plenty of racing concerns hoped to become big enough one day to field engines or parts of them to other teams. But that was where the ordinary took a sharp right and snapped at the apex.

One of those two Fairgrove mechs that had found themselves out in the heart of Oklahoma just happened to be a Seleighe-Court Sidhe.

In other words, Alinor Peredon, "Al Norris" to the real world, was a genuine, pointy-eared, long-haired, green-eyed, too-pretty elf-guy, just like the kind that clogged sci-fi bookstore shelves and played Tonto in the comic books. So, too, was the head of Fairgrove, one Keighvin Silverhair, Tannim's long-time friend and employer.

The other mech, a laconic fellow by the name of Bob Ferrel, was human enough—but he just happened to be a wizard. A minor wizard, whose magics mostly had to do with making engines purr like kittens, but a wizard nonetheless.

Not that he's in my league, but he isn't bad in his own area. Al's better, of course, but you don't dare send an elf out into the Land of the Mundane without a human helper to keep him from blowing his cover. They may be competent enough Underhill, but out here in the wild world, they're rubes.

Perhaps if Tannim had been sent along on that little junket, things would have turned out differently.

Then again, maybe not. Some way or other, though, I'd have wound up with severe bodily injury. I always do. Why is that?

Somehow Alinor had gotten himself mixed up with a desperate mother, her kidnapped and mediumistic child, and a looney-tune preacher. The preacher called himself "Brother Joseph," and manufactured bargain-rate zealots that made skinheads look like cupcakes, and called his little social club the "Sacred Heart of the Chosen Ones". . .

. . . add in a Salamander from the era of the Crusades, the ghost of a murdered child, and a bigger bunch of incendiaries than the Branch Davidians. Naw, I don't think anything would have been any different if I'd been there, aside from my hospital bills. The situation was too unstable. The Feds would still have moved in, and the Salamander would still have blown things sky-high. Nasty creatures.

Alinor and Bob had to handle the whole mess on their own; Keighvin Silverhair and Tannim had their own fish to fry at the time. A spiteful bunch of Unseleighe Court creatures had made themselves nuisances over a crucial period out at Roebing Road Racetrack in Georgia. They'd almost cracked up the Victor GT prototype, and they'd managed to cream Tannim's good knee while they were at it. Coincidence? Maybe; maybe not. The Unseleighe had ears and eyes everywhere; like Murphy's Law, they always chose the worst possible time to act.

For the most part, Al and Bob had handled it all very well. Alinor had been rather sloppy towards the end, though; he'd had to play fast and loose with the memories of several of the humans involved, and he'd had to do a quick identity switch on himself. But by and large, there hadn't been too many loose ends to deal with, and most of those had been taken care of within a month.

All except one: young Joe, the teenage son of the lunatic preacher Brother Joseph, a boy who had taken his own life in his hands to expose the crimes going on in his father's compound. He'd turned informer partly out of a revolted conscience, but mostly hoping to save the little boy Al had been looking for—Jamie Chase, the kid who'd been kidnapped to the cult by his own father.

When everything was over, Al had forgotten there would be one person around who still knew something about the supernatural goings-on. He couldn't really be blamed for that. He was a mechanic, not a military strategist or superhero. Young Joe still had unclouded memories, and he had no relatives, nowhere to go. For the short-term, the Pawnee County Deputy Sheriff, Frank Casey, had been willing to take the boy in. Joe was eighteen—barely—but did not have a high school diploma and was not particularly well socialized. Frank felt the young man deserved that much help.

Young Joe had seen a little too much for his own peace of mind, and not enough to keep him from getting curious once most of the furor had died down.

Turned out that he was both curious and methodical. It wasn't hard for him to find out some of what had gone on, not when his little friend Jamie Chase and Jamie's mother Cindy were spending a lot of time with Bob at the track. Between one thing and another, he'd managed to ingratiate himself with Alinor and Bob before the test runs ended, and that was when they discovered that the kid was a potential wizard himself. He was telepathic and also had that peculiar knack with human machines that Bob, Al, and Tannim shared.

Now, there were several options open to them at that point, including shutting his newly awakened powers down. But while he was not quite a child, he was still close enough to that state to qualify for elven assistance, at least so far as Alinor was concerned.

Alinor had an amazingly strong streak of conscience, and was quite a persuasive master of argument when he put his mind to it.

He had stated his case, articulately and passionately, to his liege lord, Keighvin Silverhair. In the short form, Al wanted "Joe Brown" brought into the Fairgrove fold, as many other humans had been in the past. Bob backed him up. They both felt the kid had earned his way in; certainly Jamie would have been dead two or three times over if Joe hadn't protected him.

Joe sure was emotionally and spiritually abused by his old man, which qualifies him for help as far as my vote goes. Poor kid. I wouldn't have wanted to go through what he did for anything. Then you figure out what he must have felt when they told him that the compound went up and that the Feds shot it out with his dad and killed him. Poor Joe; everything and everyone he knew either went up in smoke or is rotting in a federal pen. And rescuing that little Jamie kid by going public and turning his nut dad in—that took some real guts. From all Al said, the cult played for keeps; people like that usually find ways to deal with "traitors." Permanently.

Keighvin listened and Keighvin agreed, allowing Al and Bob time enough in Oklahoma to reveal something of their true natures to the boy. If he accepted them, he could be invited to join the human mages, human Sensitives, and elves of Fairgrove Industries. That organization was loosely affiliated with SERRA—the South Eastern Road Racing Association, which itself had more than a few non-mortals and magic-wielders in its ranks. And if he freaked, they would wipe his memory clean, shut his powers down, and let him go join the normal world.

Joe didn't freak; in fact, he was relieved to find some kind of explanation for what had happened at his father's compound. Either the kid was very resilient, or this was a side effect of being taught so many half-baked, conflicting notions that nothing really seemed impossible anymore. Bob was convinced that the kid would make a first-class Sensitive and a fine assistant to Sarge Austin back at the Fairgrove compound. Sarge would make a good role model and father figure for young Joe; a true rock of stability, with honest, simple values. The one place where Joe had actually been happy was military school—working under Sarge should do wonders for him. The only potholes in the road were the facts that the kid was barely eighteen, being watchdogged by the Feds, under the temporary guardianship of the local sheriff, and they couldn't just kidnap him.

So they reached a compromise, worked out with Frank Casey: Joe would finish his last year of high school in Oklahoma, so that he had a genuine diploma. When he graduated, someone would come from Fairgrove to pick him up with a "job offer." And meanwhile, Al and Bob would keep in touch with him

through letters, phone calls, and occasional visits, by means both mundane and arcane.

Enter Tannim, who hadn't been back home in more than a year. The elves felt very strongly about the ties of kith and kin, and took a dim view of people who treated such things carelessly. Around about March, Keighvin had begun to hint that it would be a good idea for Tannim to "spend some time with his family." By the end of March, the hints had turned about as subtle as a ten-pound sledgehammer upside his head.

In April, Tannim thought he might get off the hook; a major disaster Underhill and in the more mundane lands of North Carolina had left Elfhome Outremer in ruins and all of the Seleighe Court in shock. Virtually everyone on the East Coast was needed to help put the pieces back together again. But by the middle of May, with Joe about to graduate, Keighvin's hints turned into an order. Tannim would go visit his family, and while he was there, he would pick up young Joe and bring him back to Fairgrove. But not until he had spent at least two weeks in the family bosom.

Go rest, he says. Spend time with your family. They miss you; they need to know you're all right. Relax, he says. Like I'm going to be able to relax around my parents! I can't tell them more than a tenth of what I really do! And good old Chinthliss—if he gets wind of the fact that I'm not busy, he'll want to show up, and the last time he showed up—

"Hiya, boss!"

Tannim yipped in startlement and rose straight up in his seat, narrowly avoiding running off the road. He was no longer alone in the Mach I.

Lounging at his ease in the bucket seat next to him was James Dean, famous boyish good looks, Wayfarer sunglasses, red leather jacket, and all. There was just one small addition: in fancy chrome over the right breast of the jacket was a tiny logo composed of two letters.

FX.

"Mind if I come along for the ride?" Foxtrot X-ray asked with a lopsided smile.

Tannim calmed his heart and his temper with an effort. There was no point in getting mad at Fox; the Japanese kitsune-spirit operated by his own rules. There was no point in complaining. Fox wouldn't understand why Tannim was upset. And Fox was good-hearted. He'd done Tannim plenty of favors since they'd met.

"Can anyone see you but me?" Tannim demanded, his attention torn between his sudden passenger and the road. Having a James Dean lookalike along was going to complicate an already complex situation. . .

Why couldn't I just be gay? It would be a lot easier to come out of the closet than to explain any of this to my parents. . . .

"Of course not!" Fox replied. "Why? Do you want to show me off? That could be fun—"

"No!" Tannim shouted. "No, I do not want anyone else to see you! Not my parents, not the neighbors, not the people in the next car—"

"Oh, they won't be able to see me," Fox said, shrugging dismissively. "I don't know whether your

parents have the Sight, but even if they do, I can keep them from seeing me if you really want. They won't think I'm real, and that's half the battle. Half the fun, too!" Fox cracked a vulpine grin. "But what about that kid you're supposed to pick up? He could probably see me even if I shield from him, unless I made a point of not coming around while he's with you. That could be fun, too. I could make it a game. You sure you want me to stay hidden?"

Tannim paused a moment before saying anything, thinking hard. It could be useful to have Fox appear to Joe—could it cause problems as well?

"I don't know," he said finally. "Just do me a favor and stay out of sight until I get a feel for the situation, all right?" It was useless to ask Fox to just go away; there wasn't a chance in the world that he would if he thought Tannim was going to be doing anything really interesting. Fox had more curiosity than a zoo of raccoons, and every resource imaginable to indulge that curiosity. There was no place here, Underhill, or in any plane known to Tannim, that the charming and often annoying fox could not go. He was not a powerful spirit, as power was measured among such beings, but what he had, he used cleverly.

Fox sighed and shrugged his leather-clad shoulders. "I 'spose so," he said with some reluctance. "It won't be as much fun, but I 'spose so. Hey, how 'bout some tunes?"

Glad for something to distract his uninvited passenger, Tannim fumbled for the still-unfamiliar controls of the CD player in the dashboard. Not exactly stock equipment for a '69 Mach I, but then, neither were the in-dash radar-detector, the cassette player, the CB, the police-repeater scanner. Tannim had never been one to let authenticity get in the way of gadgetry.

Even if he had been, this CD player, gift of a friend, would still have become the crown jewel in his dashboard.

Donal, my friend, I never jack up the volume without honoring your memory. Miss you, pointy-ears.

He'd forgotten what he'd left in the player, but the first bars told him. Icehouse. "Great Southern Land." Appropriate. Fox certainly appreciated it; he slouched down in his seat with every appearance of pleasure, propped his black fox-feet on the dash, and surveyed the rolling hills beyond the window. An Australian "digger" hat appeared from nowhere to cover Fox's head.

"So, where are we going?" the kitsune asked innocently. "For that matter, where are we?"

"Oklahoma," Tannim said in answer to both questions. Fox's brow wrinkled in puzzlement.

"Isn't it supposed to be—like—flat?" he asked. "No trees? Covered in dust?"

Since that was what virtually everyone said, Tannim only sighed. Fox wasn't stupid; he had perfectly good eyes. "If you want flat and treeless, I'll take you to West Texas," he said. "Not everything's the way you see it in the movies. Most things about Oklahoma are filmed out in California anyway." He had no idea if that was really true or not, but it probably was.

"Except UHF," Fox reminded him with glee. "Supplies!"

Trust a Japanese kitsune to remember an obscure Asian joke from a Weird Al Yankovic film, Tannim thought, grinning in spite of himself. "Okay, you're one up on me. How about sitting back and enjoying the ride while I get us through Tulsa rush hour?"

"Tulsa rush hour? Both cars and a mule?"

Tannim smirked. "Just you wait, silly fox."

\* \* \*

They survived rush hour, although Tannim had never been able to get used to the schizophrenic traffic patterns even when he still lived here. The mix of granny drivers too timid to merge, urban cowboys determined to prove their macho behind the wheel of their pickups, guys who'd stopped off for "one for the road" before heading home after work, midwest Yuppies in Range Rovers, and people who just plain shouldn't have been allowed in the driver's seat all made for some white-knuckle maneuvering. By the time they escaped the stream of traffic headed out of the city toward Broken Arrow and outlying bedroom communities, Tannim's tangled hair was sweat-damp and he had to force the muscles in his hands to relax.

No way am I going to go through this on the way back. I'll wait until after dark and start the drive at night. I'm a racecar driver, I don't need commuter craziness. It's too damned dangerous.

Fox wasn't the least bit perturbed, which was aggravating. Then again, if there was an accident, Fox wouldn't have to stick around and suffer the consequences of someone else's stupid driving. I've been in fights that were more relaxing.

Never mind. The last of it was behind him now. In a few more minutes, he'd have an entirely new set of problems to worry about.

"Don't try to talk to me when my folks are around, okay?" he said to Fox. "Don't try to crack me up, don't make faces at me, don't play practical jokes. Don't try to distract me. Whatever you think about doing while they're there, don't."

"Would I do that to you?" Fox replied, all injured innocence.

"Yes," Tannim said shortly, and left it at that.

Fox pouted. Tannim ignored it.

Hi, Mom. Hi, Dad. Look what I brought home. Oh God, all I need now is for Chinthliss to show up.

He resolutely put the thought away, because sometimes simply thinking about Chinthliss would conjure him up.

No. I do not need that.

Finally, with a mixture of anticipation and dread, he turned down a county section-line road running between two windbreaks of trees. Beyond the trees were fields that hadn't seen the touch of a plow in decades, dotted with the fat brown backs of grazing cattle. The road itself was bumpy and pitted; they didn't exactly pave roads out in the county, they just laid asphalt over what ruts and holes were already there, and hoped it wouldn't wash out too soon. As long as it stayed flat enough that VW-swallowing valleys didn't form, it would usually do.

He crossed two more section-line roads, ignoring the rough ride. Not a lot of money in the county budget for fixing these roads. Well heck, a few years ago they hadn't even been paved, just graveled, and



wasn't that hell to drive on? The blackened remains of an old barn loomed up on his right out of a sea of uncut grass, and he averted his eyes. That, if anywhere, was the place where his current odyssey had begun, in the ruins of that barn, and his budding "business" of restoring cars. If the barn hadn't burned, would he be the person he was now?

Rhetorical question. One that did not need answering. One thing led to another, and if one path was not taken, who was to say that another would not have brought him to the same end?

One more section-line road, and then a bright red, oversized mailbox with "Drake" in reflective letters on the side, and "RT 4 Box 451" appeared on the left. It was his father's little surprise for mailbox-bashers; it was really two mailboxes, a smaller one inside a larger, with a layer of concrete poured between them. Anyone who hit that with a bat was going to regret it, and anyone who tried to run it over with a truck was going to be a very unhappy camper. Depending on whether they were driving a tall truck or a short one, it would end up in their radiator or in their laps.

He signaled, and turned into the gravel drive. There were changes evident immediately.

He replaced the fences! That was an expensive proposition, especially since the post-and-barbed-wire had all been replaced with welded pipe. He must've dug out my old welding rig—I didn't know he knew how to weld! Behind the fences, instead of cattle, horses looked at him with interest, while foals sparred with each other.

The house looked a little more prosperous, too. And—

I don't believe it. I do not believe it. He put in a satellite dish!

The mesh dish presided over a front yard patrolled by guinea hens, birds which were noisy as a Lollapalooza tour, but the only sure-fire means of getting rid of ticks without spraying. Tannim pulled up in front of the garage, beside a pair of shiny aluminum four-horse trailers.

Altogether it looked as if the quarter-horse business was doing well.

"Vanish," he growled out of the corner of his mouth, as the front door opened and two middle-aged, slim people in jeans and work shirts came out to greet him.

Fox vanished, eyes wide, obeying the warning in Tannim's voice. Parents. Now things were going to get scary.

\* \* \*

Tannim had always known that his father loved techie-toys as much as Tannim did. He just hadn't realized that Trevor Drake knew as much about techie-toys as his son did.

". . . so we've got a LAN hooking up the office, the stable, and the kitchen, since your mom has to access the database if we get a call from a customer and I'm out in the fields," Dad said, as Tannim's head spun under the burden of all the computer neepery. "We're using dBase for our data, and I've got a record not only of full pedigrees but everything I've ever done with every field. Got a plat of the property in a CAD program, can keep track of where every buried line and fencepost is to the tenth of an inch." Trevor's voice filled with pride. "We're doing as much without spraying and chemicals as we can, and we let the horses free-range all year except for foaling and really bad storms. The file-server's a 486 with a 2-gig read-write optical drive—it's in the closet in your old room so don't kick it or drop something on

it."

There was no doubt that Trevor was Tannim's father; the two had the same slim build, although Trevor's hair was lighter as well as laced with gray and cut as short as a Marine's. Their faces had some superficial similarities in the shape of the jaw and the high cheekbones; Trevor's was tanned to a leathery toughness by years in the fields in all weathers. But there the resemblance ceased; Trevor was as muscular as a body-builder from all those years of hauling hay and wrestling calves, and if he looked like anyone, it was Will Rogers. For all his strength, Tannim really didn't look as if he could defend himself in a fight against a wily garden hose, and he looked more as if he belonged on MTV than behind the wheel of sophisticated racers. Unlike his father's buzz-cut, he'd had his hair styled short in front and on top, but let it grow long in the back, where it formed a tangle of unruly curls. That changed due to the couple of months he usually went between haircuts, though. He was expecting to hear something about the length of his hair, but so far the only comment had been from his mother, a compliment on the style. Peace flag up and accepted.

Trevor cocked an eyebrow at his son, a signal that Tannim knew meant he was waiting for a reply.

"It's very cool, Dad," Tannim replied dazedly. "I didn't know you'd been doing all this—"

What he was thinking was, Where did he get the cash? The beef market hasn't exactly been booming. Even if he liquidated the whole herd, he wouldn't have had enough for all those horses, let alone computers, software, satellite dishes, renovations. . . . There were a number of ways he could think of where his father could have gotten a bankroll, but none of them were on the Light Side of the Force, so to speak. It worried him. If I'd known he really wanted all of this so badly, I could have found a way to make it happen, somehow.

"Well, I wouldn't have been able to, if it hadn't been for that boss of yours," Trevor Drake said, with a certain fond satisfaction. "You signed on with a good firm, there. Remember when you had that pile-up a couple of years ago that landed you in the hospital, and he sent you off for some rest?"

When that mess with the Unseleighe against the Underhill side of Fairgrove happened, and I creamed my knee the first time, yeah. He nodded cautiously. Dad had been talking about wanting to convert to quarter horses, but he didn't have the bread. A certain suspicion dawned, hardening into certainty when he dredged up a vague memory of drugged hallucinations while healing. Yeah, he'd been babbling something in a dream about his parents' money troubles, how he was worried about who'd take care of them if something happened to him, and how it would take a big load off his mind if only he could do something about it.

"You wouldn't believe how well he has you insured," Dad continued. Tannim nodded cautiously again. "Turns out he's got a basic load of policies on you, with us as beneficiaries on some of 'em. And when you tore up your knee, once the fuss all died down, they sent us a check. A really big check. I thought it was a mistake, so I called Fairgrove, but your Mister Silver said no, it was right, and I was supposed to keep the money, and then he asked if the herd was still for sale. Paid me top dollar for 'em. Between that and the insurance money, we had enough for some top stock and all the rest of this."

That pointy-eared— Tannim bent down to adjust his pant-cuff as an excuse to keep his father from seeing his face flush. He throttled his reactions and simply shook his head, expressing mild appreciation of "Mister Silver's" generosity. Actually, he wasn't quite sure how to feel. Not that he wasn't pleased that his folks had been taken care of, but—

It felt like a cheat.

You've got no right to feel that way, he scolded himself, as his father led the way to his old room and showed him where the file server lurked in the back of the closet, humming to itself. Dad's worked hard all his life. He earned all this, it wasn't just given to him! Yeah, Keighvin was making sure that Mom and Dad were going to be okay. That's the way he operates. No matter how modern he acts on the surface, underneath it all he's still a medieval feudal lord, and medieval feudal lords take care of their people and the relatives of their people. It comes with the territory.

Put that way, he felt a little better about it all. But it would have been nice if Keighvin had asked first.

Medieval feudal lords don't ask, they dictate. It's just—dammit, he took it all out of my hands, and they're my parents! I thought I was doing all right by them, and then Keighvin comes in and trumps me! I feel like he took me right out of the loop, and he eavesdropped on my dreams to do it. I suppose I ought to be grateful he didn't send them a bag of gold or something.

"It was pretty funny, son—Mister Silver had the check for the cattle sent over in a Wells Fargo bag marked 'gold bullion.' I thought I was gonna bust a gut laughing!"

That does it. Silverhair Stew when I get back to Georgia.

"When you're ready, come on down to the stables," his dad was saying while Tannim brooded over the file server as if it was personally responsible for all this. "I've got some stuff down there that I have to take care of right now, and a lot more I can't wait to show you."

"Great—" Tannim began, but his Dad was already gone.

He turned around slowly, and shut the door. The Ferrari poster he'd hung on the back of the door when he was ten was still there; so were all the models he'd built, although he had never arranged them quite so neatly on the shelves. And he didn't remember all those shelves being there, either.

The plain wooden desk was empty, except for a clean blotter, a phone, and a single pen next to a cube of notepaper. It had never been that empty when he'd lived here, not even on the rare occasions that he'd actually cleaned the room. It was always piled with car magazines, comics, rock rags, books about art, and paperback science fiction books. His autographed picture of Richard Petty had been neatly framed and now hung right over the desk, but the holes where he'd thumbtacked it to the wall still showed near the edge of the mat. The drawers of the desk and the matching bureau beside it were empty, but all of his paperbacks were in a new bookcase on the other side of the desk, with a set of magazine-holders taking care of the magazines. There was a metal Route 66 sign hanging on the wall opposite the Petty photo, and his tattered Rush 2112 banner.

Someone had refinished the desk, and done it well enough that all the stains from oil and WD-40 he'd made when he rebuilt carburetors on it were gone. He ran his fingers slowly across the edges and surface. It felt as if someone had erased part of his life with the stains, even though he had tried to remove those stains himself a hundred times.

The room had been repainted and there were new curtains, but the carpet was the same, and the bedspread. But in place of his old clock-radio on the stand beside the bed there was a new digital clock-radio that included a CD player. Replacing the old black-and-white TV he'd rescued from the junkyard and repaired with Deke Kestrel's help, there was a new color portable. No cracked case, no channel knob that had to be turned with vise-grips; this television had an auto-tuner. It could effortlessly lock in a vivid image, just like he had tuned in those strong images in that very bed, so long ago, of the dragons and magic and her. All she had done with him—and to him—had seemed so rich and real, erotic

and more. But only a few of those images of dragons and adventure had come true, and his ethereal lover had yet to appear in the real world.

This, the real world, where he stood like an artist who has walked into a gallery to see his life's work re-framed while he was away for lunch.

The room felt both familiar and alien at once. This is surreal. Very, very surreal. He just wasn't certain of anything at the moment; he felt unbalanced, uncomfortable, as if he had tried on clothing that was too tight.

This is why I don't come back. Because you can't come back. I can't be what I used to be, I can only try to fake what my folks remember. If I just act . . . no . . . if I'm just myself, they'd never be able to handle that. They'll wonder what they did wrong. Parents are as fallible as anyone else, and they made mistakes with me. They want to know what they did right—but like anyone else, they have rigid ideas of exactly what's right. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that a boy-genius grease monkey isn't what a farmer wants or expects.

As he stared down at the worn red ribcord bedspread, Fox materialized on the bed. He looked a little less like James Dean now, and a little more like the lead singer of the Stray Cats.

"Hey," he said cheerfully. "Nice place! You seen the stables yet?"

"No," Tanim replied cautiously. "Why?"

Fox just snickered. "You're in for a big surprise."

\* \* \*

Tanim stared at the horse. The horse stared back and laid its ears down in an unmistakable expression of threat. "Just hold the reins, son," Trevor repeated patiently. "He won't hurt you."

"Dad—that's a stallion. Stallions are aggressive, even I know that much. And he doesn't like me." Fluorescent lighting hanging from the metal rafters of the ceiling showed every nuance of the stallion's expression, and it was not a friendly one. Tanim would have backed off another pace, but there was a cinder-block wall in the way. The horse bared its teeth at him and stamped its foot on the rubber mat covering the cement floor.

Trevor sighed. "That horse is a kitten. Tanim, your mother can hold that horse."

"Then why isn't she here instead of me?" he asked, as the stallion stamped his foot a second time—possibly indicating what he wanted to do if Tanim's feet got within his reach.

"He's not interested in you," Trevor replied, patiently. "He has other things on his mind right now."

"I'll bet," Tanim muttered, trying to inch away.

Trevor stood beside something that vaguely resembled the gym apparatus known as a pommel-horse, holding an object like a cross between a large hot water bottle and an elephant's trunk, he referred to as an "AV." He said he was going to "collect" the stallion, and he wanted Tanim's help. Tanim did not want to know what an "AV" was, and he certainly did not want to help in what he thought his father was going to do.

"Dad, that horse is going to kill me." He said this slowly and carefully, so there could be no mistake. The horse confirmed his words with a neigh, a snort, and another exhibition of teeth. "That horse wants to kill me. I did not drive all the way from Savannah to be killed by a horse, or to assist you in giving one a good time!"

Trevor shook his head, whether in denial or in disgust, his son wasn't entirely certain. But at that moment, Tannim's allergies realized that he was standing in straw, in a stable full of hay, dust, and powdered grain, and not more than ten feet away from a large, sweaty, dander-laden animal.

He exploded into a volley of violent sneezing. The horse lost all interest in killing him, and backed away from him in alarm as far as the lead on the halter would permit. The horse's eyes rolled alarmingly, and it uttered a pitiful whine as it danced around and jerked on the rope holding it to the side of the stall. Trevor swore under his breath, put the "AV" down, and worked his way hand-over-hand up the rope to the stallion's head to try and calm it. Tannim took this as permission to escape.

He retreated immediately, eyes streaming, nose running, only to meet his mother at the kitchen door. "Dad deeds you, Bomb," he got out between sneezes. "Dable. Wid da dallion."

Correctly interpreting this as a message that Trevor needed help with his champion stallion, Tannim's mother thrust a box of tissues at him and trotted across the backyard in the direction of the stables. He continued his retreat to the bathroom across from his room, where he had prudently stashed everything he was afraid he might need.

He turned on the shower as high as it would go, and steam poured over the top of the curtain-rod, giving him a little relief. As he popped pills out of their plastic-and-foil bubbles and gulped them down, he heard the shower-radio come on all by itself.

It can't be heat- or water-activated. So— He stripped off his clothing and ducked into the shower, putting his head under the hot water to ease his aching sinuses. It's him. Maybe if I ignore him—

"Hey! It's Fox-on-the-Radio, taking the third caller who can tell me Elvis Costello's favorite flavor of chewing gum, or answer the Super Mondo Nifty Keen-o Boffo Kewl Bonus Question: Just what is Tannim, the most eligible bachelor mage in southern Bixby Oklahoma, listening to?!" came an all-too-familiar voice from the waterproof speaker.

Tannim took his head out from under the stream of hot water long enough to look blearily at the white plastic radio. "Fox," he said at last, "you are weird."

"Hey! That's the right answer, caller number three! And you win—a bar of soap!" A bar of soap popped out of the bottom of the radio, forcing Tannim to grab for it before it got under his feet, only to discover that it was an illusion. "That's right, it's WYRD, weird radio!"

"WYRD is in North Carolina," Tannim corrected automatically. "In Haven's Reach. This is Oklahoma."

"So how 'bout that reception?" Fox replied gaily. "It must be something in the pipes. Yes, it's WYRD, all-talk-talking, all day, all night, all the—"

Tannim reached over and turned off the radio with a firm click.

One super-hot shower with lots of steam, half a bottle of eyedrops, two antihistamines and a few squirts

of lilac-scented "prescription stuff" up his nose later, he felt as if he might survive until suppertime, at least. Even if he was groggy now, it was better than being unable to see or breathe.

Maybe I can just stay in the bathroom for the whole visit?

No, that would be the coward's way out. Besides, Fox would DJ him to death. Or worse. The fox was shameless.

He ventured out into the hallway, hearing voices from the kitchen, and decided he might just as well face the music. The kitchen had been redone, too, but he knew that he had paid for that, at least—it had been his Mother's Day gift about three years ago. Right now, that made it the one place in the house he felt the most comfortable in.

His father was sitting at a stool at the wood-and-tile breakfast bar while his mother did something arcane with a piece of raw meat. Both of them looked up as he came in, and to his relief, both of them were smiling.

"I was beginning to think I'd failed my Test of Manhood," he began, and his mother giggled. She still looked a lot like her old high school pictures from the late '50s; a little grayer, a little older, but still remarkably like a Gidget-clone.

"I'm sorry, son," Trevor said, with real apology in his voice. "I keep forgetting about your allergies—that is, I remember them, but I keep forgetting how bad they really are. I shouldn't have even asked you to go out there with me."

This, of course, immediately made Tannim feel even more guilty than he already did. Didn't live up to their expectations, again. "Look, I should have known better," he interrupted. "I brought a respirator, like we use for painting cars. It's in the trunk. I could wear that and—"

His mother shook her head, still giggling. "Oh no—dear heaven, no, don't do that! The horses would be terrified!"

Well, that'll be a first. Usually they terrify me.

"It's all right," his father said hastily. "Your mother can help me, it'll be fine. She's the best hand with a stallion I've ever seen, anyway."

Tannim bit his tongue to keep from saying anything really crude, and managed to dilute all the things that sprang immediately to mind down to a mild, "Well, she did rope you, didn't she?"

That made his father roar with laughter, and his mother blush and giggle, and eased at least a little of the tension among them.

He managed to keep the conversation on safe subjects up to and through dinner—mostly on what those few of his classmates who were still in the Tulsa area were doing. He didn't really care, if the truth were to be told, but it gave his parents something to talk about, and when they were talking, they weren't asking him questions he couldn't answer.

In a way, it was rather sad. The stars of the high school athletic teams had all, to a man, washed out in college or in the minor leagues and were now selling cars, or working oil field or construction jobs. Most of the girls that were still in the area were married, and on either their third kids or second divorces.

Tannim hadn't kept in touch with any of them, for good reason. He'd had nothing in common with them in high school, and had even less now.

The only kid he had kept in constant touch with was Deke Kestrel, and he knew right where Deke was. Down in Austin Texas, working as a studio musician, and doing a damn fine job of it. Deke was sitting in with Eric Johnson and the other local heroes of the Oasis of Texas. He was also training his more "esoteric" skills, but once again, that was something he couldn't talk to his parents about.

"What ever happened to that girl you used to date, honey?" his mother asked, breaking into his thoughts. "The one who was so into science? Trisha, Trixie—"

"Trina," he corrected without thinking. "She finished her doctorate. She's at Johns Hopkins, doing research into viral proteins."

"Oh." From the rather stunned look on both his parents' faces, this was not something they had ever anticipated hearing over the dinner table. How nice—and you drive cars for a living, dear? Congratulations Tannim, you certainly killed that subject dead in its tracks. But his mother was persistent, he had to give her that. "Well, what about that friend of yours that went into musicals—"

"I don't know," he lied. "I lost touch with him after he went to New York." I lost touch with him after he died of AIDS, Mom. This was turning into the most depressing dinner conversation he had ever had. I'd better talk about something cheerful, quick. "I heard from Deke Kestrel just a couple of days ago, though—he's doing backup work for a really incredible guitarist in Austin. It's the guy's fourth CD, and Deke says the guy might do a guest shot on his first solo project."

That revived the conversation again, and he managed to keep it on Deke and how well Deke was doing until the dishes were safely cleared and in the dishwasher.

Then he pleaded fatigue and fled to his room. At least he could call Joe and get that much accomplished. Set up the meeting, feel the kid out, make sure he wanted to go through with this. Try and tell him what the pros and cons of the job were. That was one thing Chinthliss had never been able to get through his head, but Joe already had a taste of the "cons." And at least with Joe, he would not have to hold anything back.

It wasn't very comforting to think that he had more in common with Joe, someone he didn't even know, than he did with his own family.

He moved the phone over to the bedside stand, called directory assistance for Frank Casey's number in Pawnee, then took a deep breath to steady himself and dialed.

"I'd like to talk to Joe Brown, please," he said carefully. "This is Tannim, from Fairgrove Industries. . . ."

## CHAPTER TWO

Joe nodded as he spoke, forgetting that the man from Fairgrove couldn't see him. The window-unit a/c in the living room came to life with a shudder. The banter of a news-show anchor harmonized oddly with the hum. A drift of cold wafted down the hallway at ankle-height from the direction of the living room. "Yes, sir," he said. "I can do that, sir. I'll be ready."

Joe hung up the old hall phone with a feeling of anticipation mixed with trepidation. So, it was finally going to happen. This whole strange year was finally over. "That was the man from Fairgrove," he called into the living room. "He's in Bixby. He says he'll meet me tomorrow for lunch."

His guardian, the sheriff of Pawnee County, Frank Casey, got up out of his chair with a creak of wood and leather audible over the television and the air conditioner. He turned down the volume on the television and came out into the hallway of the tiny house he shared with Joe, blocking off most of the light from the living room. Frank was a big man, one who truly filled the doorway, and his Native American ancestors would have identified him immediately as a warrior, even without paint, honor-feathers, or any other traditional signs. It was the ambient radiation of warrior, a halo of not-quite-there colors that Joe was able to see now, after some coaching and training from Alinor and Bob. There were other colors in that aura, colors that told Joe that his guardian was just as hopeful, and anxious, as he himself was, despite Frank's impassive expression.

"You don't have to go through with this if you don't want to," Frank said solemnly, while the a/c shuddered into silence and the sound of cicadas outside the front door behind Joe grew louder. "I don't care what you promised that fellow from Fairgrove. If you aren't comfortable with this, we can find somewhere else for you. Maybe you should consider college again?"

Joe shook his head as the cicadas wound down for a breather. "No, thanks," he said awkwardly. "Sir, I appreciate your thinking about it and all, but this is going to be for the best. You know I won't ever fit in around here. These Fairgrove people, they know about people like me. I don't think college is the right thing for me now. I'm not ready for it, and I really don't think any college is ready for me. Besides, Fairgrove promised me a full ride if I want to go to college later."

Frank grunted, and the wooden floor creaked beneath him as he shifted his weight. "Sounds too good to be true, like the things recruiters promise you to get you to sign up."

It was Joe's turn to shrug. How could he ever explain to his guardian why he trusted these people to keep their promises? Frank would never believe him. Even though he'd been right there to see the worst that the Salamander could do, he no longer believed in the creature's existence. Somehow he'd managed to convince himself that more than half of what had happened during the raid had been optical illusions and the rest was delusion. He'd even forgotten how the Salamander had warned the cult followers about police raids and the like.

That happens to people, Al said. When something happens that just doesn't fit with their idea of reality, they'll chip away at it and twist it until they make it fit. I guess that's what happened to Frank.

"They have a good reputation, sir," he replied. "You checked them out yourself."

His guardian nodded slowly. "I did, and I admit they came out clean on all counts. And you are old enough to make up your own mind. Still—you're also old enough to change it if you want, and if you do, well, you've got a place here."

Joe flushed, but with pleasure as well as embarrassment. He knew there were more things that Frank could not bring himself to say. The lawman was nothing if not stoic. "Thank you, sir," he replied awkwardly. "I—ah—I probably ought to get some sleep. Good night, sir."

"Good night, son," Frank said softly, as Joe retreated to the little guest room that had been his home over the past year and more. "Pleasant dreams."



The ten-by-ten room was tiny, especially in comparison with the luxurious suite his father had bestowed on him just before he had defected from the cult. The walls, with their faded floral wallpaper, sometimes leaked cold air in the winter, but it was nothing compared to the cold fear he'd always endured around his father. The ancient window air conditioner wheezed every time it came on, and it vibrated so hard that it rattled the windows in their frames, but the machinery that kept the underground complex of his youth running had been just as loud. The only furniture was a single bureau, a tiny corner-desk where he did his homework, and an equally tiny nightstand with a gooseneck lamp from K-Mart on it. Joe's own belongings all fit in that bureau with room to spare. But this was a more comfortable room than anything in the mansion in Atlanta or the Chosen Ones' compound could ever have been. He felt welcome here, as he had not there.

For one thing, he didn't need to worry about hidden cameras watching his every move. He didn't have to worry about his father breaking the door down in a psychotic rage, destroying everything in his path in the name of his own holiness.

Joe piled up pillows at the head of the iron-framed bed and leaned back into them, contemplating the poster Bob had given him, now framed on the otherwise empty wall. It was an artist's rendering of the Victor GT prototype, over the Victor logo and the logo of Fairgrove Industries itself. The latter was a strange piece; at first glance it was simply a pair of trees against the sky, but when you looked closer, you saw that the trees formed the face of a lovely woman, wearing an enigmatic smile. Then you looked again, and it was only two trees.

Which was the reality and which the illusion?

Bob would have shrugged and said it didn't matter. Al would say, "Both. Neither."

But it did matter. So much of what he had thought was true turned out to be deception. Just one illusion after another.

Everything my father told me was a lie. He thought about that for a moment, then realized that he actually had more of a start than he'd thought. If everything he told me was a lie, then the truth would be the opposite of what he told me, wouldn't it? That made sense—and what was more, a lot of what Al and Bob had told him was the very opposite of what his father would have said.

That meant he could trust what the two Fairgrove men had told him. He had no reason to doubt them, and every reason to believe them. But this—it was jumping off a cliff into a sea of fog and no way of knowing if what lay below him was the warm, friendly pool he'd been promised, or rocks he would be shattered upon.

Would it be better to change his mind, and see what Frank could find for him? He could still do that.

Could he, though? He'd spent a whole year here, and every moment of it had been as an outsider. His father had done one thing for him that was decent—he'd had a better education than most of the kids here. Even if half of it had been laced with the manifesto of a lunatic. At least what he'd gotten in the military academy had been sound. He'd tested out of just about everything, and he was able to go straight into his senior year with no trouble.

That was one thing that Frank, Al, Bob, and Mister Keighvin who ran Fairgrove had all been adamant about. Joe had to get his high school diploma. "It may not seem like it's worth much," Bob had drawled, "but without it, if for some reason something happens to us, you'll never get anything better than a

fast-food job. You won't even be able to get into the Army. That diploma is your safety net."

\* \* \*

He'd breezed through his classes with no academic trouble—and despite the doubts of the principal and many of the teachers, no other kind of overt trouble, either. He knew what they thought—or feared. There were those who were certain he would take up where his father had left off, corrupting the other students with the poisonous doctrines his father had taught. Others expected him to bully the other students, start fights. A few simply expected fights to find him, whether he wanted them or not.

They were all wrong. The other students were afraid of him, most of them, but even the worst bully in the school was too cautious after the first time he disrobed in gym class to try to pick a fight with him.

Just as well, since I could have wiped the floor with his face. No boast, just fact; the cult of the Sacred Heart of the Chosen Ones had emphasized that there would be battles, and the faithful would be in the thick of them. Every child, Joe included, was trained in self-defense from the moment they entered the compound. Joe had the added advantage of years of training in military school. When he walked into Pawnee High School in the fall, he knew that he had no intention of starting fights—but if they started, he knew that he would be the only one left standing afterward.

There were no fights; no one even said anything to his face. But they whispered behind his back and watched him with wary eyes, as if they expected that at any moment he might pull out an assault weapon and start shooting. Despite his powerful build, none of the coaches asked if he wanted to be on a team. Despite his looks, the few girls he'd asked out were not interested.

He really couldn't blame them, not after what had happened at the cult compound. People were still talking about it, and a year later, the FBI and ATF still had the place cordoned off. Joe wouldn't go anywhere near the place; the very idea made him sick. But how were the ordinary people of Pawnee going to know that? For all they knew, he was just like his father. He didn't blame them for being scared of him. In fact, it was probably only the fact that Frank Casey was his guardian that kept them from running him out of town.

From time to time someone in a car with darkened windows would pull up to Frank's house after school and ask to talk to Joe. It was always a different person, but the questions were always the same: Do you remember any more bunkers, or places where there might be weapons or ammunition stored? Whoever the person was, he would always bring a new map of the compound, and there was generally one more tunnel or bunker drawn on it than there had been before. It was hard for Joe to picture where things might be, since he was always working from the memories of having walked through the compound and not from any recall of a map, but with the aid of the ever-growing layout the Feds were building, he could at least say things like, "I think there's another tunnel there—I wasn't allowed down that way."

They may never find it all. Only his father had known where everything was. He'd told one of the men that once. "Why does this not surprise me?" the man had answered—and in the voice used by that parrot in the Walt Disney movie. It had kind of surprised him, that a supposedly grim FBI guy would have seen the movie, and delighted him more that the guy would have enough of a sense of humor to do that. In its own small way, it reaffirmed to Joe that he was dealing with human beings and not faceless chesspieces.

But strange cars pulling up to Frank's house did not add anything to Joe's popularity at school. Would it be any better in college, where he'd turn into the subject of every psych major's term paper and master's thesis?

The cicadas started droning again, right outside his window, loud enough to carry over the sound of the a/c unit. He didn't mind—in fact, he kind of liked it. In the bunkers you never heard anything but the drip of water in the tunnels, and the hum and clank of machinery.

And sometimes, the marching boots on concrete. That sound haunted his dreams—sometimes in the dreams, the marching men were coming to get him, sometimes he was leading them. Both were horrible.

Frank thought that college would be easier for him, and better than high school, but Joe wasn't so sure. How long before everyone found out who I was? Even if they didn't, he still wouldn't fit in, not unless he went to some other military school. He was just too—too—

Too straight-edge. It didn't seem to matter that he liked trucks and cars, the way a lot of the guys did, that he liked the same kind of music and listened to Edge of Insanity after midnight when he could. He got rid of that swastika tattoo right off, before he ever set foot in school. That had to go before he grew his hair or tried to. None of it mattered. The differences were bone-deep. They slouched; he stood and sat at rigid attention. They wore grunge, or cowboy-chic; he wore carefully laundered blue jeans and spotless t-shirts or slacks and button-downs. He said "sir" and "ma'am" reflexively. Even the nerds looked more normal than he did.

But with Al and Bob, now—he had felt comfortable for perhaps the first time in his life. However strange he was, they were stranger, they had far more secrets to hide.

And they understood this knack he had for seeing into peoples' minds, for knowing something about what was going to happen, for seeing things. Things like ghosts. . . .

Bob said that this Tannim guy could see ghosts. Said he could do a lot of other things, too.

The a/c went off, leaving only the drone of cicadas and the chirp of crickets. This Tannim guy—he sounded interesting on the phone. Easy to talk to. He'd mentioned that Joe's first job would be as assistant to a "Sarge" Phil Austin, running Fairgrove security, a man who had some of the same knacks as Joe. So he was going to get picked up by a guy who talked to ghosts, and he was going to be errandboy to a guy who ran security for a place where they built racecars with magic.

Sounded like the kind of place where one Joseph Brown just might seem ordinary.

Right now, that didn't sound too bad. At least these people wouldn't be staring at him all the time, waiting for him to go off the deep end, and whispering about him at PTA meetings.

Funny thing; every time he looked at the Fairgrove logo, the lady seemed to be smiling a little more.

\* \* \*

Tannim didn't have too much trouble finding Pawnee, even though he'd never actually been to the county seat. The address and the directions Joe had given him were perfectly clear; it was equally clear that there wasn't much of a town to get lost in. Like the rest of the area around Tulsa, this was not a place that had suffered in the Dust Bowl; the trees here were probably as old as the town itself and lined the streets on both sides, giving shade and the illusion of cool. To Tannim's amazement, the streets surrounding the courthouse were cobblestone. Hell to drive on, like River Street in Savannah, but very picturesque. The town itself probably hadn't changed much since the 1920s.

The tiny house belonging to Deputy Sheriff Frank Casey could have been built any time in the last

seventy-five years: a white-painted, single-storied frame house with a native rock foundation. It was trimmed with just a little bit of "gingerbread," sporting a huge front porch with a cement floor and a pair of porch swings. Tannim pulled up into the vacant driveway, which was two overgrown and cracked parallel strips of concrete. Before he could get out of the Mustang, two men emerged from the house and stood waiting for him on the porch itself.

The older man of the pair would have dwarfed most people; he made Tannim feel like a midget. He was huge, copper-skinned, hawk-nosed, with intelligent dark eyes, wearing a dark brown uniform shirt and tan pants. He wasn't wearing his badge at the moment, but he didn't have to. This could only be Joe's court-appointed guardian, Sheriff's Deputy Frank Casey.

But Joe was big enough not to be dwarfed even by his guardian. He looked as if he'd been pumping iron since he was a fetus; blond and blue-eyed, he'd have been a perfect model for a Nazi recruiting poster, except that his blond hair had been done in a fairly stylish cut that looked a lot like Tannim's, only shorter. There was a pale patch on his upper arm that made Tannim suspect he'd had a tattoo there, once.

Tannim got out of the car and went around the nose to meet them. There was no breeze under the trees, and he was glad of their shade. It was probably close to 90 out in the sunlight.

Frank Casey stepped forward to intercept Tannim. "I'm Deputy Frank Casey, Joe's guardian," he said, in a carefully neutral voice, holding out an immense paw of a hand.

Tannim met his firm handshake with a clasp that was just as firm. "I'm Tannim, from Fairgrove Industries in Savannah," he said, looking straight into Frank's eyes. "My folks are from around here, though—the Drakes, over in Bixby. They used to have cattle, but they're running quarter horses, now."

He had figured that invoking local ties would relax Casey, and he was right. The man's tension ebbed visibly. "Bixby, hmm? Good horse country," he replied.

Tannim shrugged and grinned.

"Couldn't prove it by me," he answered cheerfully. "The last thing I know is horse-stuff. Well, I'm supposed to bring Joe Brown here over to my folks' place; they want to meet him. Fact is, they insisted on it." He turned to Joe. "I'm not going to inflict them on you until we've had lunch, though. Dad wants to show off his stallions. I wouldn't do that to anyone on an empty stomach."

Frank chuckled, as Tannim had hoped he would. Joe probably thought he was managing a pretty good poker-face, but Tannim read any number of conflicting emotions there.

"Well, my lunch hour is about over, so I'd better get back to the office and find out what disasters came up while I was gone." Frank shook Tannim's hand again and clapped Joe on the shoulder. "Enjoy yourselves."

He strode off down the street under the ancient trees, heading in the direction of the aged county courthouse only three blocks away.

Well, looks like I passed inspection. Now let's see what Joe has to say. Tannim waited until he was out of earshot before speaking again.

"Okay, just so you know, Bob Ferrel is a pretty good friend of mine, and Alinor is some kind of cousin of my boss, Keighvin Silverhair. I've been working for Fairgrove for a good few years now, and I was

told pretty much the whole story." He quirked an eyebrow at the youngster, who looked a bit uncomfortable. "I'm sure this is going to sound unlikely, but I promise you, I've seen things weirder than snake shoes and Mets pennants. I've had stuff straight out of Tim Burton films happen to me before breakfast. So don't worry about my thinking you're crazy if you let something slip. You're more likely to think that about me."

A faint hint of skepticism crept over the young man's handsome face, but he didn't say anything.

"So, how about that lunch?" Tannim continued. "I wasn't kidding about Dad and the horses. He's doing something kinky with them. 'Collecting them,' he said. Whatever that is, I don't want to know." He shuddered. "They hate me, I'm allergic to them. Seems to me those are pretty good reasons to keep a decent distance between us."

Joe finally smiled. "I like horses," he offered. "There were horses at the military school I went to, and I learned how to ride and take care of them. I'd have been able to get on the horse-drill team, but Father pulled me out—"

His face darkened momentarily, and Tannim nodded sympathetically. "Look, from here on, no one is going to tell you what to do with your life, all right? If you decide to back out of this before we leave, that's okay; if you want to leave Fairgrove after you've been there a while, that's okay, too. Keighvin'll cut you a ticket to anywhere you want to go. Hell, he might even be able to get you into West Point or Annapolis, if that's what you want."

Joe blinked, as if the idea of an elven lord having the ability to influence people in the normal world had never occurred to him. "He can do that?" he asked.

Tannim allowed a hint of cynicism to enter his expression. "Keighvin has money. Politicians need money. Senators are the ones who make recommendations to West Point. Got it?"

Joe nodded. "I'd like to make sure I gave Fairgrove my best shot, though," he replied a little shyly. "I mean, it's only right."

I like this kid. How in the name of all that's holy he turned out this good with that fruitcake for a father—"You about ready for that lunch?" he said by way of a reply, and waved Joe over to the Mustang.

Joe's eyes widened at the sight of the Mach I, and widened even further when he got into the passenger's seat and saw all the electronic gadgetry in the dashboard. He didn't say anything though, until Tannim asked him if he had any preferences in music.

He shrugged. "Rock, I guess. Anything but country." There was something behind that simple statement; something dark. Was there someone in Joe's past who had preferred country and western? His father, maybe?

Tannim's fingers closed on the Rush CD, *Roll the Bones*. He took that as an omen, and put it in the player before pulling out into traffic.

God, Donal would have loved this album.

One advantage of the CD player was the extraordinary clarity of lyrics; the title track began, and Joe seemed more than a little startled by the chorus, then began paying attention. Very close attention.

Though Tannim was not one for placing life-guiding meaning into most rock lyrics, Rush was a pretty darned articulate band. And Joe could do worse than get a dose of "hey kid, sometimes things happen just because they happen—for no other reason, not your fault, not anybody's fault." He left it on.

He wasn't in the mood for franchise food, so he picked the first good-looking roadside diner that came along and pulled into the parking lot. GRANNY'S DINER, the sign said, painted on a cracked wall that looked as old as any "granny." The place was crowded, which argued for decent food, and the interior could have come right out of any movie from the fifties. So could the waitress, from her B-52 hairdo to a pink uniform with "Peggy" embroidered over her right pocket. Fox would love this place. Thank God he isn't here; he'd be freaking out Joe by now and giggling about it. Kitsune. I'll never understand 'em. As bad as dragons, I swear. Thank God I don't have to deal with them too often. Well—except for Fox and Chinthliss.

Joe's tastes were simple: big, juicy hamburgers, a large salad instead of fries, milk . . . just amazing quantities of all of it. Unlike Tannim, he didn't talk while he ate, so Tannim kept up a one-sided ramble about the more mundane side of Fairgrove between bites.

"What do you do?" Joe asked, when the waitress came to take their orders for dessert. "Al and Bob never really told me." His brow wrinkled a little. "I hope you don't mind my saying this, but you don't seem very old."

"I seem too young to be doing anything important, right?" Tannim chuckled. "I guess I started kind of young; a lot of people in racing did. As for what I do—I'm a test-driver and a mechanic, I drive on the Fairgrove SCCA team—"

"SCCA?" Joe interrupted.

"Sports Car Club of America," Tannim explained. "We have three teams: GTP, SERRA and SCCA. The ah—people like Al drive the GTP and SERRA cars; I handle most of the SCCA driving, since SCCA doesn't allow modifications like aluminum engine blocks and frames. It's a racing club, but for regular people with regular budgets."

Joe nodded, then accepted his apple pie à la mode from the waitress with a smile and a polite "thank you." He spooned up a mouthful, and looked at Tannim expectantly. "That can't be all you do," he said.

Tannim chuckled. "You don't miss much, do you? No, the people like Al and Keighvin can't go out much, so I do a lot of outside contact work—Sarge Austin will probably have you doing the same, before too long. We can always use someone who's smart enough to know their way around, and straight-edge enough to make the suits comfortable. I'm afraid a lot of the folks at Fairgrove look kind of like a cross between a rock group and a Renaissance Faire."

Once again, Joe nodded—but then he knew all about needing people for "outside" work. From what Tannim had heard and guessed, Brother Joseph hadn't let too many folks outside the barbed-wire walls of his compound, once they got inside.

The rest would have to remain unsaid, at least until they were safely inside the Mustang again. Joe evidently realized this, for he remained silent until the meal was finished and Tannim had paid for it, with a generous tip for the smiling "Peggy." They walked out into the midday heat, the air so full of dust that there was a golden haze over everything. Tannim thumbed the remote on his keychain; the doors of the Mach I unlocked and popped open, and the engine started. Joe looked startled, then grinned his appreciation as they both got in.

Joe buckled up, fumbling a little, as he had the first time, with the unfamiliar belts. Not too many people put on a four-point harness like it was second nature, after all.

"So," Joe said, with a tension in his shoulders that told Tannim he was bracing himself for the answer to his question, "just what comes along besides the ordinary stuff in this job?"

"How about me?" said a voice from the backseat.

Tannim looked into the rearview mirror. His jaw dropped.

Oh, it was Foxtrot all right. But he was a five-foot tall fox, a cartoon-style fox, only one with three tails and a little collar with "FX" on the gold tag dangling down in front.

But just as startling as Fox was Joe's reaction. His eyes were wide with surprise, but also with recognition.

"Long time, no see, Joey," Fox said genially. "If I'd known it was you they were talking about, I'd have come for a visit months ago!"

Tannim said the only thing he could say under the circumstances. He pointed to the back and looked onto Joe's eyes. "You know this lunatic?" he asked calmly.

Joe's mouth was still wide open, his eyes dazed. "I—uh—he was my imaginary friend," the young man managed, weakly. "When I was a kid."

"Not so imaginary, Joey," Fox replied. "Of course, I'd much rather look like this—"

The whole figure shivered, blurred, and changed back into a leather-jacketed James Dean lookalike. "Hard to pick up chicks when you look like a stuffed toy," Fox offered, leaning back in the seat. "Well, most places. By the way, what are you doing here? You were supposed to be in Georgia."

"It's a long story, Fox," Tannim interjected, and sighed. "Well, at least now I don't have to worry about you freaking Joe out by showing up out of nowhere."

"Yeah," Joe said faintly. "He already started years ago."

Tannim decided that he might as well seize the moment and use it for a short lesson. "I told you weird things show up around me. This is one of them," he told the young man as he pulled the Mustang out onto the highway. Thank God he didn't materialize while I was actually driving. "Fox isn't human, never was, never will be."

"Hey!" Fox exclaimed, feigning injured pride. "I resemble that remark! I happen to come from a very distinguished pedigree!"

"Pedigree is right." Tannim nailed the throttle for a quick pass around a slow-moving haywagon. "He's just what you saw as a kid: a fox-spirit, a shape-changer. Take a good look at him. No, really look at him, the way Alinor taught you."

Joe turned around and stared at Fox, who posed for his edification, magicking a white sparkling gleam off his teeth as he grinned. As Tannim had hoped, the order to look at Fox steadied Joe considerably.

Having your imaginary friend from childhood suddenly pop up as real was enough to take the starch out of anyone. "Well, he's just a little see-through," Joe said slowly. "That means that he's a spirit, using everything he's got to make people like us see him. And there's a kind of an outline around him, and it isn't like a human aura."

"Good," Tannim said with satisfaction. "Right. He's a kitsune—to be precise, a Japanese fox-spirit—and don't ask me how he ended up in Georgia, 'cause I don't know."

Fox smirked. "I'll never tell. My lips are sealed."

"I wish," Tannim muttered. "Anyway, he's tricky—that's what he enjoys doing, seeing new things and playing tricks on people. He has absolutely no ability to change anything in the real world, unlike a human ghost, but he's pretty hot stuff Underhill or in the spirit plane. The reason you can see and hear him is because you can see into the spirit plane and he is making the effort to be visible. He's kind of half here and half there—and again, that's unlike a human ghost, who can choose to be all here and affect the material world in a limited sense."

Joe nodded, his forehead wrinkled with concentration as he tallied this with whatever Bob and Alinor had already taught him. "So there's things like ghosts that can be here, and things like Fox who can't, really?"

"Pre-cisely," Fox replied for Tannim. "I can make you think I can affect the real world, though." He snickered. "Like I did to you, hotshot, with the soap."

"Yeah, well I'd like to know how you did that trick with the radio, though," Tannim grumbled.

"Hey! It's Fox-on-the-radio!" The kitsune's voice came from the four speakers, even though the radio was off. "Betcha caller number three can't guess how I'm doing this!"

Fox put his hands behind his head, leaning back, looking unbearably smug. His mouth had not moved at all.

"I know!" Joe said suddenly, looking pleased. "It's because since he's really talking with his mind, he's just making us think his voice is coming from the speakers instead of his mouth, which it isn't doing either."

A bit tangled, but Tannim got the gist of it, and muttered imprecations under his breath. Fox looked crestfallen.

"Awww," he said. "You guessed! That's not fair!"

"Life's like that," Joe and Tannim said in chorus and complete synchronization. They exchanged a startled glance, then both broke up in laughter. Fox pouted for a moment, then joined them.

Either he's handling this really well, or he's so blitzed by Fox and all that he only seems to be. I think my bet's on the kid. "Well now that Fox has joined us, I was wondering if you wanted to tool around Tulsa for a while." Tannim looked at the young man out of the corner of his eye. "Keighvin told me to outfit you while we were here, and I can put it all on the company card. I kind of figured you didn't have a lot of stuff."

"Take him up on it, Joe," Fox advised from the backseat. "Tannim's a Fashion God."



Tannim flashed the kitsune a withering look. "I'm supposed to get Nomex for you—that's fireproof underwear, basically, real popular back at Fairgrove. Some jeans and boots, too, and a few other things. And—" He paused. This was a delicate subject. "And personal gear. It can't be a lot, since the Mustang will hold only so much, but Keighvin seemed to think you ought to get yourself the same kind of things you'd be furnishing a dorm room with. You know, CD player, clock-radio, that kind of thing. And clothes."

Joe's face darkened. "I don't take handouts," he said stubbornly.

Tannim sighed. "Look, it isn't a handout, all right? You're going to be meeting people, some of them important. If you're gonna be Sarge's assistant, you'll have to escort Big Guns from places like Goodyear and March and STP all over the plant. You can't do that wearing jeans and a t-shirt. And as for the rest of it, well, if you had anything to move, Fairgrove would be paying moving expenses, right? But you don't, so you're getting it in gear."

Now Joe looked confused. "I don't know," he said uneasily. "I never knew anyone who got a job with a place like Fairgrove. I don't know what's right."

And until you get to Fairgrove, you won't ever meet anyone who's gotten a job like this. "Trust me," he said persuasively. "It's perfectly normal."

For Fairgrove.

"If you say so, sir," Joe replied, looking very young and uncertain.

"I say so," Tannim said firmly, taking the Mach I onto the on-ramp for the interstate. And in his head, though he was certain it was only in his head, he heard Fox snickering.

"That's right, he says so! Now how much would you pay?" the radio blared in Fox's voice. "But wait, there's more if you order by midnight tonight! You get two free neuroses, a fixation, and your choice of—"

Click.

\* \* \*

There weren't a lot of bags in the back of the Mustang, and not just because Joe had balked at purchasing too much. It had occurred to Tannim that "shopping for Joe" could be the way out of the house that he had been looking for. In fact, "shopping for Joe" might become his salvation. He could use it as an excuse to flee the house even when Joe wasn't with him.

So, Joe was now wearing a good pair of Bugle Boy pants and a snappy shirt ("You want to impress my folks, don't you?"); and there was a bag of Nomex jumpsuits in red and black in the trunk of the car, and a box containing a clock-radio. It was not the one Joe had selected; Tannim had switched it on him for a pricier model with a CD player in it. But since it was going to remain in the trunk of the Mach I until they reached Savannah, Joe wasn't going to find that out.

Fox was gone; he'd lost interest in the proceedings early on and simply vanished. He'd claimed he had a karaoke tournament to judge. It hadn't been easy persuading Joe that clothing could look good and be comfortable, but Tannim had managed.

The kid looked really good, actually. He was probably going to cut a wide swath through the secretaries at Fairgrove. Tannim guided the Mach I through the traffic of south Memorial on the way to Bixby, feeling relaxed and pleased with himself. Modest, polite, and a hunk. And he has round ears. Uh huh. They aren't gonna know what hit them. He isn't going to know what hit him. Oh, things are going to be interesting around there.

Well, heck, why limit the mayhem to the secretaries? There weren't too many unattached female mechanics and engineers, but there were a few—and the elven ladies would probably be just as intrigued with the polite young human.

Tannim grinned, but only to himself, and freed a hand just long enough to pull his hair away from the back of his neck to let the sweat dry. Joe's mere presence would get some of the ladies, human and elven, off his back. Not that they weren't charming, but they tended to get possessive, and there just wasn't a one of them that Tannim found—right.

Yeah, throw Joe into the pool and see all the lady-fish go into display, ignoring me. Good plan! Keighvin would see to it that they didn't eat him alive or get him into any trouble, physical or emotional. And if he didn't, Bob, Al and Sarge would. Do the lad some good. Loosen him up.

With those thoughts to elevate his mood, he pulled into the driveway and into his "spot" beside the horse trailers, reflexively checking his watch as he turned off the engine. Right on time for dinner, just like Mom asked. Perfect. The folks always said, "tardiness is the height of conceit, punctuality the height of respect."

His parents came out to meet them, both obviously very curious about Joe. They climbed out, and Joe waited diffidently beside the passenger's door while Tannim made introductions. He charmed Tannim's mother immediately with his politeness, and impressed Trevor Drake with his soft-spoken attitude. Supper was waiting for them, and it went much more smoothly tonight, since Trevor could not say enough good things about Keighvin Silverhair and Fairgrove, and Joe could not say enough good things about the food. He completely won over Tannim's mother by volunteering to do the dishes afterward, and by insisting that he help clear the table. Tannim vetoed the former, and helped with the latter. "You and Dad can go enjoy the horses," he said. "I'll give Mom a hand. I'm not allergic to dishwashing."

So Joe changed back into his jeans and t-shirt for a trip to the stables to inspect the horses, leaving Tannim alone with his mother.

"I was a little worried about this Joe," she told him, as she stacked the dishes he rinsed in the dishwasher. "We saw so much about those awful people on the news, and I was afraid he'd be—oh, I don't know—just someone I wouldn't feel comfortable around. But he's a really nice boy, honey." She paused to fix him with a look he knew only too well. "He's so polite, and he looks respectable."

She did not say "why can't you be more like him?" but Tannim knew that was what she was thinking.

"Well, Mom, when your father puts a gun in your mouth to discipline you, you learn to be polite pretty quick," he said, off-handedly.

"He didn't!" she exclaimed, eyes round. At her son's nod of confirmation, she turned just a little pale. "Well, the poor boy," was all she said, but Tannim sensed the thoughts running around in her head. Joe had just gone from "that nice boy" to "that sweet, mistreated boy" in her mind, and he had an idea what might come next. Actually, he was all in favor of it.

Joe and Trevor came in then, talking horses. Tannim joined them at the breakfast bar, letting them do all the talking, just observing. Joe had relaxed a good bit; Tannim knew his dad probably wasn't like anyone the young man had ever met in his short life, and that was all to the good. Expose him to something normal, and let that show him how abnormal his own parents were.

"Listen, Joe, you don't have much to pack up now, do you?" Trevor asked, finally.

"No, sir," Joe replied, looking faintly puzzled. Tannim held his peace; this was what he thought might be on his parents' minds.

"Well, it's a long way out to Pawnee—if your guardian doesn't mind losing you a little early, why don't you come move into our guest room until you and Tannim leave?" Trevor asked, making it very clear that he meant the invitation. "That way you and my son can talk whatever business you need to, and he won't be spending a lot of time driving around in the heat."

"I think that's a great idea, Joe, if you'd like it," Tannim seconded enthusiastically. "A really good idea, in fact."

It means I can continue some of those magic lessons without worrying about interruptions. I know every good place around here to go where we won't be disturbed. And maybe if my folks feel like they've got a replacement son, they won't look at me as if I'm not really what they wanted.

Some of the same might be going through Joe's mind. "I can call and ask him," he said tentatively. "If he says it's okay, I can pack up tonight and be ready in the morning."

"Go call," Tannim's mother urged, adding her vote to Tannim and her husband's. "I'd love to have you here. Tannim doesn't eat enough to keep a bird alive, and I love seeing someone who appreciates food."

Joe blushed and excused himself. Tannim grinned at his folks. "Thanks, Dad, Mom," he said sincerely. "Joe is going to need a lot of help getting used to the way things are in this world. I think we can help him out quite a bit in two weeks."

Absolutely true, complete truth, but not the way they think.

"I kind of figured that, son," Trevor said warmly. "Boy's been sheltered in a pretty peculiar sense. He knows everything there is to know about the way lunatics think, and nothing about the way normal folk tick. And we raised you, so we know how to talk to lunatics. We can translate for him."

Tannim mock-threatened his father with a hand and then said, "Well, you have a point, actually." Tannim patted his mother's hand. "And he could use seeing a lady who stands up for herself, too. Where he comes from, women are supposed to go hide themselves in the kitchen and let their men do all the thinking for them."

"Well, he won't get that here," she replied, forthrightly. "I think he's lonely, honey. It would be nice if we could make him feel as if he had a home to come back to, if he wants."

Well, it sounds like they've adopted him! Heh. He could sure do worse.

"Thanks, folks," was all he said, but he put feeling into it.

At that point Joe returned. "Frank said to make sure I wasn't making a nuisance of myself," he reported, looking anxiously at all three of them. "And if this is going to be an inconvenience to you—"

"Well, if you're worried that much about it, you can give me a hand with the horses," Trevor said comfortably. "Tannim can't; boy takes one look at 'em and starts sneezing. Help me run some of the friskier ones on the lunge, maybe saddle up a couple of the mares and give them some exercise in the mornings. Some of those ladies are getting a little pudgy."

"Could I?" Joe's face lit up. "You have beautiful horses, sir. They're so great, are you sure you can trust me with them?"

Hoo boy, wait until the kid gets a look at the elvensteeds. Did Al ever show him Andur and Nineve in their true forms? He thought back over what Alinor had told him in his briefing. No, I don't think he did. Didn't want to put the kid into overdrive. A Sidhe was bad enough. Heh. He and Rosaleen Dhu are going to get along just fine, and that'll make him one of Keighvin's favorite "sons."

"If I didn't think I could trust you with them, I wouldn't have asked you to help," Trevor said, invoking logic. "That's a lot of cash tied up in horseflesh, son, and I know you'll be as careful with them as I am. I saw for myself you can handle them fine, and you know your way around a barn. So, can you move in tomorrow morning?"

Tannim sighed. The way his father said "morning," he knew that Trevor meant it. That meant rising at seven A.M., no excuses.

"Sure thing, sir!" Joe was eager now. His blue eyes were alight with anticipation. "If I can tell Mr. Casey that you want me to help out, he'll know I'm not imposing on you."

"Good, it's settled then." Tannim's mother nodded firmly. Her curly hair bounced with the nods. "I'll have the guest room ready for you, and we'll expect you tomorrow morning."

Joe looked at his watch. "In that case, Mr. Drake, Mrs. Drake, I'd better be getting back. I don't want to wake up Mr. Casey coming in."

Tannim rose, stretching. "Right. Mom, Dad, I'll get Joe here back to Pawnee, and I'll probably take the long way home. It's a nice night for a drive."

He watched his mother's face twitch as she repressed the automatic response of "don't stay out too late."

He winked at his father and led the way out for Joe. The sun had set while Joe and his dad had been out in the stables; now it was full dark, with no moon. Their feet crunched on the gravel on the driveway, and off in the distance, the whisper of a distant highway beckoned. It really was a good night for a drive, and Tannim intended to take full advantage of the solitude. He'd been promised some rest, and he was, by God, going to get some. He found driving restful, particularly when he had no place to go and no time he had to be there.

They climbed into the Mustang, and Tannim joined the stream of traffic on Memorial. Joe was far more talkative on the way back; for a wonder, Fox did not appear. Joe was a lot more relaxed now than he had been when they first drove out here. Tannim took that as a good sign; he already liked young Joe, and it seemed that Joe was far more comfortable with Tannim than the boy had expected to be.

"So, how are we shaping up?" Tannim asked, as he took the turnoff to Pawnee, headlights cutting twin

cones of light through the darkness. "Me and Fairgrove, I mean. Are we anything like you thought?"

"I—" Joe faltered for the first time during the drive. "Sir, you're not at all what I expected. You're not like Al or Bob, I mean."

Tannim threw back his head and laughed. "Yeah, I can imagine! Sieur Alinor Peredon would probably be horribly offended if you thought he was like me! No, I'm not like anybody at Fairgrove, and neither is anyone else. That's the beauty of the place. You're supposed to be yourself, and no one else."

Joe's face was in darkness, but Tannim sensed his sudden uncertainty. "What if—what if you don't know who you are, sir?" the young man asked hesitantly.

"Well, wherever you are is a good place to find out. And Fairgrove is a good place to be," Tannim said firmly. "And quit with the `sir' stuff. I'm not a knight like Alinor, and I'm not your guardian. I'm just Tannim, nothing more, and heaven knows that's enough for anyone. Okay?"

They entered the outskirts of Pawnee, and a few street lights dimly illuminated the cobblestones. Leaves made dappled, constantly moving shadows between each light.

"Okay," Joe said, although he didn't sound very sure. "Uh, if you don't mind my asking, what kind of a name is `Tannim'? I never heard anyone by that name before. And why don't you use your last name?"

Tannim chuckled. "I use it, because one of my teachers gave it to me. `Tannim' isn't the name my folks gave me, but I guess it must suit me since they started calling me by that right after I started using it. And I don't use my last name because I don't really need it." He shrugged. "People remember a guy who only goes by one name, and in this business sometimes you need people to remember you."

I'm not gonna bring Chinthliss up unless I have to, and that is the only way I can tell him where the name came from. Kid's got enough to cope with already. He's got Fox; he sure as heck doesn't need Chinthliss.

He pulled up into the Casey driveway at the stroke of ten; the lights were still on, and the flickering blue in the living room windows showed that the television was also going. Good. That meant they wouldn't be waking the deputy up.

"I'll pick you up in the morning, Joe," Tannim said, unlocking the doors from his console. "Some time between eight and nine, all right?"

"Great!" Joe said with an enthusiasm that made Tannim wince inwardly. Terrific. The kid's a lark. Ah, well, he and Dad can mess around with the horses while it's still cool, and I can sleep in with a clear conscience.

The young man slid out of the car, shutting the door carefully, waved a cheerful farewell, and trotted up the porch steps into the house. Tannim backed the Mustang carefully down the drive, and headed out of Pawnee.

He stopped under a streetlight to make a selection from his CD box, since there were no other cars in sight. Driving to relax, let's see. Kate Bush, Rush, Icehouse, Midnight Oil, a-ha, Billy Idol . . . there. Cocteau Twins. That'll do just fine.

He slipped the CD into the player, and turned the nose of the Mustang out into the darkness. No fear of

getting lost; he knew the area around Tulsa like the back of his hand, every section-line road, every main drag. All he had to do was look for the glow of Tulsa on the horizon to orient himself.

He thought about checking out Hallet Racetrack, but thought better of the idea. It was probably locked up, and although he could get around just about any lock ever made, you just didn't trespass on a racetrack. Right now, when it came down to it, he just wanted the night, the tunes, and the road.

A brief tingling of energies warned him of a "friendly" coming in; Fox materialized in the seat next to him, but uncharacteristically didn't say a thing. Tannim let the Mach I set her own speed, and rolled the windows down to let in the night and the air. Music surrounded them both in a gentle cocoon of sound as the Mustang rolled on through the darkness, and the wind from the open windows whipped Tannim's hair and cooled his face.

Night, stars, and sound, and the open road. He felt muscles relaxing that hadn't unknotted for a long time. Fox leaned back in the passenger's seat, resting one long arm on the window-frame, graceful fingers tapping in rhythm to the song.

Stars blazed overhead. The headlights reflected from the bright eyes of small animals in the grass beside the road; once a rabbit dashed across in front of the car, and he braked instinctively to avoid hitting the owl following her. The owl was hardly more than a flash of wings and a glimpse of talons. Barred owl? Looked like it. Be a little more careful, lady; the next guy might not know you were going to be on that bunny's tail.

"I'll warn her," Fox said quietly, picking up Tannim's thoughts so easily that Tannim realized he must have relaxed enough to drop his shields. Well, that was safe enough in the Mach I; there were shields layered on top of shields, magics integrated with every part of this car, and the only reason Fox could get in and out so easily was because Tannim had made those shields selectively transparent to him.

The music ended, and Tannim reached for the CDs, trusting to his instincts to pick something appropriate. For the first time, he regretted the fact that Fox couldn't interact with the physical world; it would be nice to have someone in the passenger's side to change the CDs for him. This wasn't quite like changing a cassette; still, he managed with a minimum of fumbling.

A great rush of strings flowed from the speakers, and he relaxed still further. Alan Hovhaness, "Mysterious Mountain." Good old instincts. Not a lot of mountains in Oklahoma, but right now, with only the stars and the swaths of headlights, the hills seemed mysterious enough.

"This is good," Fox said quietly, his voice full of approval. "Really good."

Tannim made an ironic little bow in his direction, but did not reply; he didn't need to. Fox was so rock-obsessed, he probably didn't realize that any other kind of music existed. The music spoke for itself, sweeping through the Mach I like the night breeze, cutting brilliant streaks across the sky like the occasional meteor. He gave a sigh of regret when it finished; someday he was going to find a store that stocked enough obscure records that he'd be able to pick up more from this particular composer. He'd heard another piece on the radio once, "And God Created Great Whales," that he'd snap up in a heartbeat if he ever found it.

But when his hand sought the CD box for the third time, and the first notes screamed from the speakers, he was startled at what his instincts had chosen. Billy Idol? Not very relaxing—

Just as he thought that, Fox sat bolt upright in his seat, glancing to the rear in alarm. "Oh-oh," the kitsune

said.

And vanished.

What the—

He glanced in the rearview mirror, to see a pair of headlights coming up on him from behind. Fast. Too fast for him to do more than react.

He winced away from the mirror in pain, squinting. Whoever this was, he had his brights on, and he was not going to drop them. The headlights filled his mirror, glaring into his eyes, as Billy Idol snarled over the speakers.

Some hot rodder? Got to be, but why alone and why out here? This is a lousy road for dragging.

He edged over to the side, a clear invitation to pass. The unknown didn't take it, moving up to hang right behind his rear bumper, engine growling.

Trying to pick me? Out here? Who is this jerk?

And why had Fox vanished like that?

He edged over further, until his right-hand wheels were actually in the grass, and waved his hand out the window. He wanted to flash the guy the finger, but the idiot was probably drunk and Tanim was not in the mood for a fight.

This time the answer was clear and unmistakable.

The car behind surged forward to hit the rear bumper. Not so hard that it knocked the Mach I off the road—or his hands off the wheel—but hard enough to jar Tanim back in his seat and bang his head and neck against the headrest.

"You sonuvabitch!" Pain blossomed in his neck. Savagely he jammed the pedal to the floor, spinning the wheels for a moment before he jarred into acceleration. The Mustang's engine thundered in his ears, drowning out Billy Idol, vibrating through him, a cross between a growl and a howl. For a moment, the headlights receded behind him.

But only for a moment.

The headlights grew again. The car behind caught up as if it had kicked in a jet engine. He had only a moment's warning, and then the vehicle pursuing him swerved to the left, accelerated again—

—and passed him, not quite forcing him off the road.

He got only a glimpse of the driver, just enough to see that it was either a very long-haired guy, or a woman. The car itself was clear enough; a late-model Mustang, '90 or '91. It was either black, or some other very dark color.

Then it was past him, accelerating into the night, impossibly fast unless the driver had a nitrous-rig under that hood. All he saw was the tail, red louvered lights winking mockingly at him, then disappearing.

You arrogant bastard!

His jaw clenched painfully tight, an ache in his neck and the base of his spine. He forced himself not to pursue his tormentor. He slowed, then stopped, right in the middle of the road, turning off the engine.

The license plate had been from no state. And he had not been able to read it. Could not. His eyes had blurred around the letters and numbers, although everything else about the car had been crystal-clear.

His hand reached out of itself and turned off the CD player. In the absence of the music, the singing of crickets and rustling of grass in the breeze seemed as distant as the farthest stars.

He reached under the seat for a flashlight, opened the door and got out. Heat rose from the asphalt as he went to the rear to see what the damages were.

He kicked rocks aside savagely as he took the few steps necessary to reach the rear of the car, certain he was going to find a taillight out at least, and a crumpled bumper at worst. He moved slowly, played the beam of the flashlight over the rear of the car, and couldn't see even a scratch.

What the hey—? If I didn't get hit, then what did happen?

Then he turned, and froze, as movement toward the front of the car caught his attention.

There was something on the driver's side door.

He approached it, slowly, cautiously, playing the light over the door, and felt anger burning up inside him, hot bile rising in his throat.

There in the circle of light from his flashlight, pop-riveted to the door-panel, was a fingerless black leather driving glove.

With a growl of pure rage, he grabbed it and tore it off, the thin leather ripping away and leaving the rivet in the middle of his otherwise pristine door-panel.

I'm going to find him. And I'm going to kill him.

Something rustled inside the glove, and a strip of white paper peeked out at him impudently. He had the uncanny feeling it was moving in there on its own.

He pulled it out and unrolled it. His hand trembled as he held it in the light from the flashlight.

It was a thin strip of antique parchment, with a quotation written on it in black ink in a clear, if spidery, hand.

\* \* \*

I have now found thee; when I lose thee again,

I care not.

All's Well That Ends Well



Act II, Sc 3

\* \* \*

He stared down the black ribbon of asphalt under the stars. There was no way that driver could have done this.

No way on Earth.

## CHAPTER THREE

The warmth from the asphalt road seeped through his boots and the cool breeze whipped the ends of his hair around his face as his rage ebbed, and the fear began. Not fear for himself—any setup this obvious wouldn't make him fearful for himself—but for his parents, for Joe. They were vulnerable, and only because they were related to him, or connected to him. His first impulse was to get in the Mustang and start driving and not stop until he was back in Savannah, at Fairgrove. But that was no more than a momentary impulse, and he preferred not to act on impulse alone. Impulsive decisions were for when he had less than ten seconds to think before he acted.

Besides, that might be exactly what this challenger wants me to do: take off for help and leave them all unprotected. He throttled down every emotion with a fierce determination to leave his reasoning unclouded. I have to think this one through before I do anything.

He opened the Mach I's door and slid into the driver's seat, throwing the glove down on the passenger's seat. His mind hummed. Music. I think better with music. He started the engine and put the Mach I gently into motion, then punched the radio on. It was after midnight; time for the alternative rock program, Edge of Insanity, that took over the midnight-to-six slot from the classical station. With real luck, the program would work for him the way WYRD did, the play-list acting as a goad to his thoughts.

He tuned in right in the middle of a techno-trance piece; excellent. That was good, logical, thinking music. Okay, I need to analyze the heck out of this. There's a reason why they talk about "throwing down the glove," and using a glove can't have been an accident. This was a gauntlet, a direct challenge. Not just the glove, though, all of it was meant to impress me so that it couldn't be ignored. Whoever this was, she managed to produce enough of a magical shove to the back of my car that I thought she'd rammed my bumper. And she slammed that glove and rivet into my door, also magically, and in such a way that I didn't even know she'd done it. He realized he had already come to think of his adversary as a woman; well, it was a reasonable assumption, given the silhouette, the small size of the long-fingered glove, and—the finesse. Not a bit of wasted energy; when males issued a challenge, they generally overdid it. Testosterone poisoning, clouding the brain.

Right. That's what she did. Now, what she didn't do. She didn't shove the left bumper, although she made me think she had; if she'd done that, she would have sent me off the road, and I could have been seriously hurt. She didn't damage the rear of the car. The damage to the pristine door panel was enough to send him into a rage all over again. Don't be an idiot; you have enough equipment to make that hole disappear. Borrow Alinor or Keighvin, and they might even be able to stand the touch of Death Metal enough to ken the hole out of existence. No, the point is she didn't do anything at all that would really have harmed me or the Mach I. All she did was make me mad. And she did it with style. This was very carefully calculated. She could easily have done me some serious hurt if she'd tried.

This also had the feel of something planned to enrage him, put him off balance, make him stop thinking.

But if she knows anything about me, she has to know that I've got pretty good control of my temper, and I think quickly. So if her ploy didn't make him act on anger or fearful impulse—what did that mean? Maybe this wasn't something planned to make him act impulsively. It was supposed to make him angry, there was no doubt of that. If she can send a pop-rivet into my door, she could have sent something else through it. An iron spike. A crossbow bolt. Hell, a bullet. All right, rethink everything. Let me assume she's as brilliant and complicated as anyone I've ever seen. In that case, she'd do something that could have multiple outcomes. It might make me angry enough to chase after her, or afraid enough to run, but that wouldn't be her primary objective.

And her primary objective must have been—

The challenge. An invitation to single combat.

Yeah. Everything she did points to the conclusion that this was a formal challenge, properly issued, artistically issued. Executed to show me clearly that I was dealing with a certain level of finesse and power, without giving anything else away. And done by the rules.

The road passed over a creek; a gust of damp, green-scented air wafted over him, and he thought he heard frogs. If this was a challenge, that meant a great deal; challenges were only meant for the person to whom they were issued. She who flung down the gauntlet would allow him time enough to realize that it was a formal challenge, and further time to think about it. Even the worst of the Unseleighe played challenges by the book.

There weren't supposed to be any Unseleighe living out here, though; that was one problem. So the questions of who and why still remained.

And a new question arose: what next?

If he turned and ran, he might very well make things worse. Creatures who played the game of "challenge-response" often took the refusal to accept the challenge as the signal for a no-holds-barred attack, for the once-honorable opponent made himself into "prey" by fleeing. A worthy foe would not act on impulse. An unworthy foe should be disposed of as quickly as possible, for it not only hinted at treachery by breach of format, but also threatened the system of honorable challenge itself.

Easier to be the honorable opponent. When you know the rules, you know the pattern. Thrust and parry.

The parents and the associates of the honorable opponent were not part of the challenge. The parents and associates of prey were—

More prey. No, I'll have to play this one clean until I know the answers to my questions.

He found himself headed toward Bixby and shrugged. All right. I shield and armor the farm right up to the limit. Joe's going to be a lot safer there than at Frank Casey's. His education is just going to start a whole lot earlier than either of us thought. Damn. Now there's something else. He might be the ultimate "prize" in this little contest if I'm not careful. I have to keep that in mind. He might be what she's really after, and she's challenged me to get me out of the way, or to set things up so that he becomes, literally, the bone of contention. Winner take all.

He vaguely recognized something by the McGarrigles playing in the background—"Mother, Mother," perhaps—and he turned the radio down until it was a mere whisper of sound. Good omen or bad? Good, if it was meant for Joe, as a warning to protect the young man; but maybe bad, very bad, if it was meant for him.

Another impulse was to call Conal or Keighvin at Fairgrove, but that was likely to be another mistake. First of all, calling in help might be a bad move at this early point. Secondly, this was not the sort of thing you could do much about over the phone. His associates at Fairgrove were not going to be able to help at long distance, and it had not yet come to the point where he could legitimately ask for help, reinforcements. The dance of "liege lord and equal ally" that he and Keighvin trod had its own patterns and measures. If he was to retain Keighvin's respect, he would have to deal with this quickly and appropriately.

But he had another source of help available to him; one with a different set of liabilities attached, but one for which the accounting was definitely on his side. Chinthliss owed him at the moment. Time to ask—politely—for a little payback.

One did not skimp on protocols and propriety when talking to dragons.

Tomorrow, he decided. Tonight, just in case this lady doesn't play fair and I'm misreading everything, I put up the defenses. That certainly matched the last song: the "house of stone" and the "cage of iron."

The house was dark by the time he pulled into the driveway; only the porch light left on, and a solitary lamp in his room still burning. He used his key and let himself in, and moved to his room, shadow-silent on the carpeted hallway.

He stripped out of everything, including his body-armor; donned a clean bikini-brief, and slipped into bed, turning the light off as he did so. But he was not going to sleep, not yet anyway.

All the old protections and shields he had put in place around this room as a kid were still here; dormant, but ready to be brought up at any time. That, at least, felt like "home." He closed his eyes, stretched in the comfortable and comforting embrace of mattress, clean sheets, and blankets, letting his body relax itself, feeling shoulders and neck pop and release their tension.

He chanted under his breath, old song lyrics invoking all the familiar energies he had learned when he first began his mage-training here. As the chant harmonized with the hum of the machinery within the house, his physical eyes drifted shut, and his body went rigid.

So far, so good.

He opened another set of eyes; everything around him glowed softly, each object clearly delineated in its own faintly-luminescent aura. It could have been dusk in this room, rather than fully dark, so far as the Othersight was concerned. A bit more concentration, and he could have lit up every item that he had cared for or spent time with, according to emotional attachment.

He "sat up," although his physical body remained lying in the bed; his spirit-self rose from the bed, went to the exact center of the room, and took a fighter's stance. As he had when he was a teenager, he readied his magics and sent a spell of deeper sleep into his parents' minds. Not just because this would be a very bad time for him to be interrupted; if, for some reason, one of them walked in on him at the moment, they'd have the scat scared out of them. They'd be sure that he was dead—and certainly, his

heartbeat and breathing were so faint at the moment that they would have every reason to believe just that. He was just short of death, connected to his body by the thinnest of willed tethers. Few people dared to go out-of-body this way, but the advantages were worth the risk.

Oddly enough, he had never used that power to keep his parents sleeping when he was a kid and had wanted to sneak out and raise some hell. Only when he had to meet with Chinthliss, or practice some of what he'd been taught.

Ah, I was just too lazy. I had to be in trance to make them sleep, so there was no point in doing all that work just to keep them from catching me. By the time I went into trance, mucked with their sleep, and came out again, half the night would be gone. Time's already burning away.

The old patterns of shield and armor were still in place; he examined them with a critical eye. He'd based his old constructs on the smooth dome-shapes of the silly, bad-effect "force-fields" of his favorite old science fiction books and movies. The basic shape was still good, but he knew a lot more now than he had then; he tore the structure down and began rebuilding it from within, constructing a crystalline structure after the pattern of a geodesic sphere, with his room as the center. Bucky Fuller, mage of logic that he was, would have been proud. He knew better, now, than to assume that because his room stood on solid ground, the earth afforded as much protection as a shield. No, now his shields extended below ground as well as above. The geodesic structure was a lot more stable than a smooth dome, able to bear a great deal more pressure. Once the initial structure was in place, he really went to work. Over that, he layered shields and shunts to drain off excess energies, and not a few traps for the unwary: magical deadfalls and power-sinks.

When he was finished, he sat within a beautiful, radiant construction that could have been a work of computer-generated art. Multicolored energies iridesced over the surface of his basic shield. Satisfied with what he had done at last, he repeated the patterns on a larger scale, weaving a web of energies and barriers around the house and stables, around the entire farm. Layer on layer on layer—it would take someone who knew what he had done to untangle it, and he would be warned and ready to deal with the intruder himself long before an enemy actually penetrated those protections.

He worked feverishly, right up until dawn. Then, and only then, he turned his trance into a true sleep and let weariness take him into a light slumber.

As Tannim drifted into the deeper realms of sleep, the dreams started again.

Warm gray mists surrounded his body, evaporating the clothing he wore. The tiny scales of his body armor whisked away, falling in a rain of silent sparkles. As he turned, the shadows from his lower body coalesced into a bedroom of night-black satin. Flames without candles lit the room, atop hundreds of fluted golden rods.

And when he turned around completely, she was there, indescribably beautiful, irresistibly seductive, waiting for him on a bed of silver satin, imploring . . . please . . . now . . .

\* \* \*

The alarm clock went off far too early, even though he was more or less ready for it. He opened one eye and blearily looked at the display.

Oh God, six in the morning. No choice, though; the sooner he got Joe under a safe roof, the happier he'd be. He dragged himself out of bed, picked out clothing, grabbed his armor with it, and slipped

across the hall to the bathroom.

What was it about mothers and waterfowl? This had been a perfectly ordinary, plain bathroom when it had been his, but now that it was the "guest bathroom," his mother had gone berserk with decorating. Ducks. There were ducks everywhere. Wooden ducks with dried weeds in them on the vanity, duck plaques on the wall, a duck-bordered, pseudo-early-American wallpaper, ducks carved on the tissue-holder, even a matching potpourri warmer.

"Ducks," he wondered aloud. "Why did it have to be ducks?"

"What, dear?" his mother said, and opened the door to the bathroom before he could stop her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed faintly, as he flushed with embarrassment at being caught by his mother in his underwear. Even if it did cover more than a pair of Speedos.

But then she paled. "Oh, dear," she whispered, even more faintly, her eyes running with horrified fascination over the scars crisscrossing her son's body.

Thank God none of them are new—

But there was no denying the fact that his entire body was interlaced with a fine network of scars, from the first, a knife-wound in the forearm, to the latest, four talon slashes running from the right nipple to the left hip. Not exactly the way a loving mother likes to see her child. Especially since he couldn't explain most of them.

She was staring at those talon-slashes at the moment, and he knew what she was going to ask.

"It looks worse than it was, Mom. They're just scratches. I was shopping at K-Mart," he improvised hastily, "And I got knocked through a plate-glass window during a blue-light special."

"A blue-light special?" she replied, recovering her poise a little, one eyebrow rising.

"I'm telling you, Mom, those women were crazy. There were almost knife-fights over those Barney dolls." Sure. It could happen. . . .

But her eyes were already traveling to the teethmarks that crossed his left leg from hip to ankle. "That—ah—was the wreck," he reminded her. "Remember? They had to cut me out of it."

"Aren't those bites?" she asked, in horrified fascination.

"Jaws of Life," he lied frantically. "They slipped. Mom, please! I'm in my skivvies!"

"And I changed your diapers, young man," she responded automatically, but at least she closed the door.

And at least she hadn't seen the glittering body-armor under the pile of clothing on the floor.

He locked the door to prevent any further incursions and turned on the shower. There were a few things he could do to recharge his body and make up for the lack of sleep, and the shower was the best place to do them. Writing an IOU to my body. Oh, well. It won't be the first time. Chinthliss was always on his case about doing things like this, but— But sometimes there's no choice. If I get a choice, I'll catch a nap

after I get Joe over here.

He stood under the shower and let it literally wash the fatigue from his body as he drew upon his reserves. There was more in those reserve stores than there usually was, thanks in no small part to some payback on Keighvin's part, and a healer-friend of Chinthliss'. By the time he turned the hot water off, he felt better than he expected to. Almost human, in fact.

Certainly alert enough to deal with his mysterious lady in her Mustang.

Ersatz Mustang. Boy-racer fiberglass and recycled pop cans. Might as well have a plastic model. Nothing more than the sum of its parts, any of which you can pick up at Pep Boys off the shelf. Heh. If you can't have the real thing, why bother?

Maybe that was why she'd put a hole in his Mach I; pure jealousy.

Sure. It could happen. And Carroll Shelby will join the Hare Krishnas. But if she can have anything she wants, why pick a Mustang at all?

He reached under his clothing for the armor; glad now that he never, ever went anywhere without it, even if it did mean he had to wear long-sleeved shirts in the hottest weather. He and Chinthliss had worked on it together for three solid months, and no few of the scars on his body were the result of being in a situation where he couldn't wear it. It had saved his life more than once, and was worth all the trouble it posed. If the mysterious lady had fired a crossbow bolt, a bullet, or a spike through the door, she would have gotten a rude surprise. He might have gotten broken ribs, but she probably wouldn't have killed him. Not unless she knew about it, and how to get past it.

He squirmed into it, like a dancer getting into a unitard, and that was what it most resembled. Made of thousands of tiny hexagonal scales, enameled in emerald green, it was better than Kevlar because it offered as much protection from magic as it did from bullets or knives. The cool scales slipped under his hands as smoothly as silk; the entire suit of body-armor weighed about as much as a garment of knitted silk, and moved with him as easily and naturally as a second skin.

He crooked his finger and ran the nail up the split down the front to close it up again. There were no seams, for every scale was linked magically to every other scale, so it could be opened anyplace that he wished.

It wasn't perfect—he could, quite easily, be clubbed to death while wearing it. He could be injured through it, by impact. And it didn't protect his head, neck, or hands. But it gave him a lot of edge over someone expecting to do his arguing with a bullet, knife or elfshot.

His clothing slipped on easily over the armor, and he made sure that none of the green scales showed before he opened the door to the bathroom to let the steam out.

When he'd finished with hair and teeth, he sprinted to the kitchen just long enough to grab a banana and down a glass of orange juice, kissing his mother quickly in passing. "Gotta go pick up Joe," he said as he ran for the door. "I'll have a real breakfast when I get back."

Her protests were lost in his wake.

Personal shields were up before he left the static shields of his room and the farm, and he activated every protection he had on the Mustang once he was inside it. With every sense, normal and magical, alert, he

drove the entire distance to Pawnee in a familiar state of controlled paranoia.

Nothing happened.

Once or twice he thought he saw a late-model Mustang that might have been hers, but it always drifted away in the traffic. There were no attacks, no probes, not even a whisker of power brushed up against his. The attack—or challenge—of last night might never have happened.

Except that there was still a pop-rivet in the driver's-side door, and a black leather glove on the seat beside him.

It taunted him; in no small part because he had been able to learn so little from it. It simply lay there on the black vinyl seat, a palpable presence. Finally he couldn't stand it any longer; at a stoplight he grabbed it and shoved it into the glovebox.

Good God, I just put a glove in the glovebox. That'll be a first.

Well, if she thought she was going to be able to winkle any of her magics into the Mach I via that glove, odds were she was wrong. The glovebox had its own little set of diamond-hard shields, and they worked both ways, shielding what was in the box from outside influence, and keeping what was in the box from getting any influences out. This wasn't the first time he'd had to carry something small and potentially dangerous. And for things large and potentially dangerous, there was the trunk.

Heh. Big enough for a body or two, if need be.

Jeez, his thoughts were bloody this morning!

He shook his head. This woman and her little "present" were affecting him in ways he didn't like, turning him savage. A single steel pop-rivet in the door panel and a stiff neck should not be doing this to him.

Whoa! Back up! A steel pop-rivet?

He pulled the glove out of the box for a moment and examined it with one eye still on the traffic before shoving it back in. Why didn't I notice this last night? And steel eyelets on the back of the glove. Whoever, whatever this broad is, she's not Unseleighe. That glove's been worn; there's scuff marks and creases in the leather. No Unseleighe would be able to tolerate steel on a glove, and no Unseleighe would be able to use his magics to manipulate a steel pop-rivet. I don't think even Al or Keighvin could, and they have the most tolerance to Cold Iron of any Sidhe I know.

That didn't mean, however, that she might not be in the hire of the Unseleighe, or an ally of some kind. They even had human allies and servants. But if she was that good, why would she be working on behalf of someone else?

He sighed, and mentally shrugged, as he took the turnoff to Pawnee. Maybe the pay was extraordinary. Maybe she wasn't with the Unseleighe at all. Maybe she was the local hotshot, somebody who'd moved in after he left, and she was pulling the equivalent of the young gun going after the old gunfighter.

She obviously knew a great deal about him; she had a distinct edge over him in that department. He had to learn more about her, and fast!

Joe came bounding out of the house before he even came to a full stop in the driveway, full of energy

and enthusiasm, with a pair of duffel bags and a couple of boxes waiting on the porch to be loaded into the trunk. His guardian was right behind him. Tannim helped the young man stow his gear in the trunk, trying to sound and look as normal as possible, all the while reassuring Frank Casey that this was no imposition. Somehow he managed to smile and act as if everything was exactly the same as it had been when he'd dropped Joe off last night. Somehow he remembered to mention that Joe would be helping Trevor with the horses; evidently that was what finally convinced the deputy that Joe would indeed be pulling his own weight.

Being out here made Tannim nervous; he had to consciously force himself not to look over his shoulder. The last place he wanted to bring trouble to was the sleepy little town of Pawnee; they'd already had enough trouble to last them well into the next century, and Casey was obviously able to take care of anything normal that arose.

When Joe was buckled into the passenger's seat, and they pulled out of Pawnee with nothing sinister manifesting, Tannim heaved a sigh of relief.

"Is something wrong?" Joe asked immediately. "Did your parents change their minds or something?"

"Yes," Tannim replied. "No. Yes, there's something wrong, but it doesn't have anything to do with my folks, and they don't know anything about it. They still want you out there. Dad's making his famous omelettes and Mom is doing pancakes so we get 'proper breakfasts' when we get back. No, the problem's with what's in the glove compartment."

He nodded at the glovebox, and Joe opened it, pulling out both glove and quotation.

"A glove?"

"Yeah, weird, huh? After I dropped you off last night, someone in a late-model Mustang rammed the back of the Mach I and left that pop-riveted to the door. Except that she didn't ram me, she used magic to shove me forward hard enough to make me think she'd rammed me, and she whanged that into my driver-side door with magic, too, so that I didn't notice it until after she'd passed me and was gone."

Joe was quick; he cut right to the chase. "Why?" he asked.

"I think it's a challenge." He chose his next words carefully. "The trouble is, I don't know for sure. I don't know what the stakes are. And I don't know who or what she's going to drag into this."

"Like me, maybe?" Joe hazarded, turning just a little pale. "Tannim, I hope you don't mind me saying so, but I could have gone a long time without hearing that. I was hoping I wasn't gonna have to deal personally with this magic stuff for the next couple of years."

Tannim could only shrug. "Sorry. Sometimes stuff just shows up and bites you in the ass. Look, I've got major protections on the farm, you, my folks. I'm going to try to keep you out of this. Maybe this is as harmless as a drag race; she could be the local hotshot trying to pick on me. The main problem I've got is that all I know about her is that she planted that on me with magic. The rest is speculation. Except for one thing: she can't be Sidhe. Pop-rivet and the fasteners on that glove are Cold Iron, and that glove's been worn."

"So what are you going to do?" Joe asked, apprehensive, but covering it fairly well. Tannim negotiated a tricky bit of passing before he answered, using the traffic to buy him time to think of what he was going to tell the kid.



Everything. Teenage sidekicks notwithstanding, he's got guts and he's got combat experience.

"Use that glove to try and find something more about her," Tannim replied grimly. "Right now, I'm at a major disadvantage, since she obviously knows something about me, maybe a lot. And for the rest—besides being very careful, we're going to act as if this was all business as usual. We'll leave here on schedule for Fairgrove, unless there's a good reason not to. If we let her think she's disrupting our lives, she wins a moral victory, if nothing else."

Joe nodded slowly. "Just tell me what to do, and I will, sir," he said bravely.

Tannim smiled crookedly. "Besides putting that glove back, the best thing you can do is give my mom someone to fuss over, and someone for my dad to show off his horses to. Occupy their time. That'll keep them from wondering what I'm up to, and maybe keep them out of danger. I'm still thinking this through. Unless you really want to stay out of everything, I'm going to at least keep you informed."

"Right." Joe accepted that, and stowed the glove back in the box. "Ah—where's Fox?"

"That—" Tannim replied quietly "—is a darned good question." And one he hadn't considered until now.

He saw her coming. No—he sensed her coming. He looked back over his shoulder before I knew anything was up, said, "Uh oh," and vanished. And he hasn't been back.

Fox knew something. He had to. There was no other explanation for the way he'd acted.

Did he recognize her? There had to be something there that he knew, or sensed—something that slipped right by me, because I thought she was just some hot-rodder, or an obnoxious drunk, right up until she rammed the rear of the Mach I. I had no clue she'd done anything with magic until after she was gone. So what does Fox know about all this?

"You're thinking about something," Joe observed, watching his face alertly. "Something to do with that woman and Fox."

"Yeah." He ran his tongue over dry lips. "He was with me right up until the moment she showed up, then he just blinked out, and hasn't been back."

"Can you make him show up?" Joe asked hopefully. "It sounds like he might know something."

But Tannim had to shake his head with regret. "No. Not without violating a lot of trusts, as well as protocols. My friends—the ones like Fox—wouldn't ever really trust me again if I forced him to show up. That's part of the reason they like me. He knows I'm thinking about him, I'm sure. He'll only show up if he wants to."

Joe shook his head sadly. "Sometimes it's really frustrating to be the good guy, you know? The bad guys never have to think of things like this."

Despite the tension, Tannim had to chuckle at that. "Fraid so, Joe," he replied. "I'm afraid so."

\* \* \*

They reached the ranch without any kind of incident, but Tannim was not about to be lulled into lowering

his defenses. If this was a challenge, that would be precisely the sort of thing she would be looking for. No, if anything, he had to redouble his efforts.

But before he did that, he was going to have to refuel and get some real rest. He'd done everything he could do to protect the innocent bystanders without having specific information on his opponent. Now was the time to get himself back up to top shape.

Joe had already gotten breakfast with his guardian, but he showed no reluctance to eat when presented with a second breakfast. Tannim marveled yet again at the way the young man could dispose of food, as he munched his way dutifully through as much of the "farmhouse meal" as he could handle at one time. One thing for sure, he's solved our leftover problem for awhile.

After breakfast, when his mother and father both mentioned work in the stables, he seized on the excuse to get a little more sleep. "You guys go right ahead," he said, trying to sound relaxed. "I have a ton of books with me I haven't had time to get to. I'll go read in my room, if you guys don't mind, and I'll catch up with you at lunch."

That gives me another three hours to sleep. I can pack six hours worth into those three, with a little hard mage-sleep. That should put me back up to par. Or at least as close to par as I've been in the last couple of months.

After the exhibition of allergic reactions Tannim had shown the last time he'd entered the barn, neither of his parents were eager to have him along. They accepted his statement with a minimum of fuss and ushered Joe out the kitchen door, all three of them looking eager. The proprietary way his parents flanked the young man made Tannim smile. They had definitely "adopted" him.

He shoved the dishes into the dishwasher, cleaned up the kitchen hastily, and practically ran into his room. He spread a book open on the nightstand, to make it look as if he really had been reading, but—

But if they happen to come in and find me asleep, it's not that big a deal. They know I need rest, they'll just think I'm actually getting it.

He thought, given the tension that he was under, that he just might have to will himself to sleep. He had not reckoned with the exhaustion, long- and short-term, he'd been enduring for the past couple of months. He laid himself down on the bedspread, closed his eyes, and fell asleep even as he was preparing the first stages of willing himself into that state.

He woke to the sounds of voices in the house; Joe and his dad. He lay motionless for a moment, with the memories of vivid dreams in his mind.

Dreams of her.

He'd dreamt of her, at least once a week, since he'd first encountered Chinthliss. Nightly, sometimes. And interestingly enough, she had aged at approximately the same rate that he had; when he'd been an adolescent, so had she, and now she was a full adult, although it was no longer possible to tell exactly how old she was. She could have been twenty or forty; showing nothing that pointed to chronology, only that she was no longer an adolescent and not yet showing any signs of middle age.

With raven hair that cascaded down below her shoulders, enigmatic green eyes, and beauty that was both cultured and wildly untamed, she was, in a sense, the perfect lover he'd never been able to find in anyone else.

Not that he hadn't looked.

For a long time he'd been certain that he would find her. He'd assumed, as most young romantics full of hormones do, that the dreams meant the two of them were destined to meet and become lovers. But as the years passed, and he never found anyone remotely like her, he became convinced she was nothing more than an unconscious expression of his wish for that "perfect" lover. Not that she was slavishly devoted to him in those dreams; far from it. That would not have interested him, once he was past the macho cockiness of every adolescent that demanded absolute devotion, or worse, ownership. Luckily, that unflattering phase of his development had been brief.

No, she was very clearly herself in those dreams, perfectly capable, perfectly competent, and quite able to take him on in a game of wits, in a game of intellect, of purely physical challenge, and in any other games as well. That was what made her so perfect. And so damned impossible.

He wondered why he'd dreamed of her now, though. And that kind of dream: erotic so far past what he thought were his ordinary fantasies. He'd been entangled to the point where he'd awakened in a state of sexual tension that was as demanding as the state of nervous tension he'd been in when he started this little nap. His undershorts felt two sizes too tight. And he was in his parents' house, for God's sake. Not in a position to do anything about it.

Oh, she was something special, though. She was just the kind of otherworldly succubus that would make all the sacrifices to get her worth it. He wouldn't care if she was going to eat him alive, if there was a chance he could win her heart. But, instead of her, he had some crazy woman in a hot-rod Mustang forcibly planting leatherwear on him.

The voices in the hall drew nearer, and Tannim hastily put his dreamy musings out of his mind. He grabbed simultaneously for the paperback on the nightstand and a throw-blanket to cover himself with, then assumed a posture of reading. When his mother tapped on the door and opened it, he was able to greet her with a reasonably calm demeanor.

"Ready for some lunch?" she asked.

"Sure," he told her, putting the book down and stalling a bit for his blood to cool. "I hope you three had a good time out there. I already know it was work."

That kept her busy, chatting about what she and her husband and Joe had accomplished; while she was talking, she wasn't asking him any questions. Joe had clearly enjoyed the morning's workout. A few minutes later, while they all ate, Trevor couldn't say enough about how well Joe had handled the horses.

"Well, if you haven't got anything planned for him this afternoon, I'd like to borrow him," Tannim interjected. "There's quite a bit of outfitting we still need to do."

Joe paused in mid-bite and raised a single eyebrow at Tannim in inquiry. Tannim nodded, ever so slightly.

"There's not much for him to do in the afternoon," Trevor replied, "not in this heat. Remember, we were counting on that. I know you two have a lot of business to take care of, and I figured you were going to take afternoons and evenings to do it. And maybe just spend some time driving around together; if you're going to be working together, you ought to get to know each other."

Tannim smiled; if he hadn't had these current worries, that's precisely what he would be doing. Sometimes his folks showed some amazing insight. They always had seemed to get smarter the older he got.

"In that case, we'll take off," he said. "As soon as you're ready, Joe."

Joe made the last of his third sandwich and glass of milk vanish with a speed that meant he had to be either magical, ravenous or enlisted-Army, then pronounced himself ready to go. Tannim stayed only long enough to clear their own dishes away, leaving his parents lingering over coffee, before leading the way back out to the Mustang.

Which had, unfortunately, been sitting in the hot sun all morning.

He popped the doors open with the electronic gadget on his keyring and started the engine the same way, but waved Joe away from the car. He opened the driver's side long enough to start the a/c, then stood with the door closed beside it for a moment while the interior cooled a trifle. He tried not to think about that shiny pop-rivet in the door panel, but it seemed to be winking at him, mockingly.

Heck, I ought to at least hit it with a dab of touch-up paint so it isn't so blatant.

He finally couldn't stand it any longer and waved Joe inside, pulling open his own door and sliding gingerly over the hot black vinyl. The steering wheel was almost too hot to touch, and he made a vow to find some shade, somewhere, that would cover the car in the mornings. Joe winced away from the hot seat, sitting forward a bit to keep his back away from it. He didn't have the protection of the armor; all he had were jeans and a white t-shirt.

"Where to?" Joe asked expectantly. "I figured you didn't have shopping on the brain."

"Wish I did." He eased the Mustang around in the graveled half-circle in front of the house, pulled up to the end of the drive, and headed down the way he had first arrived. No more backing down the drive; not when that put him in a vulnerable position so far as a getaway was concerned. "No, I told you I needed to get more information on this woman; I'm going to a place where it's safe to work some magic to see if I can't get hold of—well, he's an old friend, and he's something of an expert on challenges."

When his encounters with Chinthliss had gone beyond real dreams and into situations he had originally thought were "waking dreams" or entertaining hallucinations, the old barn he'd rented for his Mustang restoration business had been the place where he'd first encountered his mentor. That would be the safest place to try to contact him again, even though there wasn't much left of the building. No one would bother them there, and the shield-frames Chinthliss had put in place were still there.

He hadn't intended to come back, but now he had no choice.

The track leading up to the place was long overgrown, visible only as two places where the grass was a little shorter and a little paler than the rest. He turned off through the broken gate in the fence that no one had ever bothered to mend, and pulled the Mach I up through the waving tall grass. If he hadn't known exactly where the safe track was, he would never have dared this with a car that was not an off-road vehicle. But the earth was packed down here, and there shouldn't be anything lurking to slash tires or foul the undercarriage. Still, he kept the car at a walking pace, just in case, bringing it up to what was left of the east side of the barn, pulling it into his old parking place in the shade of a blackjack oak.

He retrieved the glove from the glovebox and stuck it into his pocket. He climbed out of the car, and

waded through the weeds and grass to where half of the barn door hung from one hinge, the other half lying in the grass. Joe followed, diffidently.

He stepped across the threshold. "You know," he said, conversationally, as he stared into the empty, weed-filled space that had once held his workshop and all his beloved Mustangs in their various states of repair, "I had a dream about this place, before I ever set foot in it. I dreamed that I came up to this door, opened it, and looked around. The place was mostly empty, full of shadows. And right there—" he pointed to the west corner "—there was a tarp with something under it. In my dream I would come up to that tarp, and pull it off, and there was an engine under there. Not just any engine, but a 428 CobraJet, in absolutely perfect condition. Mint, like the day it had come off the line. And it had just been waiting for me to find it."

He contemplated the corner for a moment; there was no sign now that there had ever been anything there. Somewhere under the weeds, there probably lurked all the bits of junk the guy he'd sold salvage rights to hadn't carted off, but you wouldn't know that from here. "Anyway, that was what convinced me to rent this barn; to begin my Mustang restoration business, to go ahead with the whole plan. I did just that, rented it sight unseen; walked up to the place with the key in my hand and unlocked the door and swung it open. And sure enough, in that corner, there was a tarp, with something under it. I walked up to it; my heart was pounding, let me tell you. I grabbed the end of the tarp, and I pulled it away—"

"And the engine was there!" Joe exclaimed when he paused.

Tannim shook his head, smiling. "Nope. Nothing but a pile of musty old lumber and some odd bits of farm equipment. And just at first, I was horribly disappointed. I felt like the dream had let me down, somehow."

He let his gaze drift upward to what was left of the walls, to the blue sky above where the roof had been. And he realized that coming here did not hurt, as he had feared it would. He'd given up the limited dreams this place meant a long time ago—outgrown them, so to speak. He might just as readily have felt pain at seeing his old tricycle, or his playpen.

"But then," he continued, "I had this revelation. The dream hadn't let me down at all, because it had spurred me to make the commitment to try the business. I might not otherwise have done it. And I knew at that moment that the things I would build here would be so much better than that phantom engine, there'd be no comparison. Everyone wants to hit it big and have something great just happen, like winning a lottery. But—the things I would create here would be all mine, built out of the work of my own hands and my own sweat, and not just thrown into my lap."

"Yeah . . ." Joe said, and nodded. "Yeah, I see what you mean." And although not everyone would have understood, Tannim had the sense that Joe did.

He took another step or two into the barn, and felt all the protective energies of Chinthliss' magics close around him. The blackened walls took on a peculiar golden haze as he reactivated those magics; gaps in the walls closed up, and a glowing golden field arched upward, between him and the open sky.

Joe stared, wide-eyed, open-mouthed. Tannim grinned, gazing right along with him. He still loved this place.

"Well, there it is, Joe. Real magic. Don't know how much Al and Bob showed you, but this is it: two-hundred proof."

"They never showed me anything like this," Joe replied, still ogling around with unabashed astonishment.

Tannim permitted himself a chuckle. "Well," he said, "there's more where that came from."

\* \* \*

Joe hadn't imagined why Tannim had brought them to this burned-out hulk of a barn, except out of nostalgia. He did understand what Tannim meant with his story about the dream-engine, though. He'd had more than enough experience with how gifts out of the blue could backfire on you, or have strings attached you didn't even know about until you began your puppet-dance. No, it was better to earn what you got, that was for sure.

Still—the place was not exactly prepossessing. The roof was gone, and although the remains of the four walls lifted ragged and blackened timbers to the sky, he couldn't imagine what Tannim could find here that he couldn't get in—say—a brush-filled ravine, or a tree-packed ridge, both of which would offer the same amount of privacy that this barn would.

Then Tannim had done—something—and as his skin tingled with the feeling of a lightning storm building, the walls came alive and rose unbroken to the sky in solid sheets of power.

More than that, a kind of roof appeared overhead—a roof of glowing golden light.

All of it was rather ghostlike, since he could see right through it, but it felt powerful, and he had no doubt that it would protect them in its way as well as armor plating.

That left him with a lump in his throat. Witnessing magic like this was an electrifying and bewildering experience.

Al and Bob had shown him a few things, including something they'd called "personal shields," but it had all been small stuff compared with this. Was this the kind of thing Tannim did all the time? Would he be expected to work with this kind of stuff on a regular basis? And what about the other people at Fairgrove? Were they all as—well—as powerful as this?

"What do you want me to do, sir?" he asked, pleased that his voice shook only a little.

"Just watch," Tannim replied, taking a relaxed pose in the center of the barn, legs spread apart almost like a pistol-shooting stance, arms raised over his head. "Nothing else."

Well, that was easy enough to do. . . .

He watched, and for awhile nothing much seemed to happen. Then he felt that funny tingling along his skin that he had learned meant something magical was going on, and a faintly glowing ball of green-and-gold light formed in front of Tannim, hovering in the air at about chest height. Soon it was quite solid, as if someone had hung a light bulb right in midair. He could not imagine what this thing was, but he watched it with wide eyes. This wasn't the sort of thing he saw every day.

Tannim stared into the ball, and Joe had the sensation that he was somehow talking to it. He dropped his right hand long enough to pull the black driving-glove out of one pocket, and held it up to the globe for a long time.

Then he tucked the glove away again, raised his hand back over his head, and stared at the globe for a

moment longer.

This was as creepy as anything Brother Joseph had ever done, and only the sense that this was not anything evil or even harmful kept Joe standing where he was. He knew what evil felt like; whatever it was, this wasn't evil.

But he almost lost it when the ball suddenly brightened until it rivaled the sunshine and cast a tall shadow of Tannim against the wall behind him. And he did yelp when it vanished in a clap of thunder.

But Tannim only dropped his hands, dusted them off against his jeans, and stared at the walls for a moment. Abruptly, the glow disappeared, leaving only the fire-blackened timbers again.

"I love that effect!" Tannim laughed.

"What was that?" Joe blurted. "What did you do?"

"Call it—a magical version of a fax machine," Tannim replied after a moment, his green eyes luminous in the bright sunshine, as if there was some power making them shine. "I have a friend named Chinthliss who's like a more powerful version of Foxtrot, though he'd choke if you ever said it to him. I want him to help me, and that little glow-ball is how I told him pretty much everything we know." He grinned then, and pulled his Wayfarers out of his pocket, putting them on. "Now, we just wait."

A magical version of a fax? Joe shook his head; this was way beyond anything Al and Bob had ever showed him. Even though he knew that when they came to visit they hadn't ever come by airplane much less driven across the country, they hadn't once explained how they did manage to cross the miles between Pawnee and Savannah whenever they chose. They certainly hadn't shown him things like this. Tannim turned away from him for a moment and bent his head down to peer at something in the grass growing up through the barn floor.

Joe might have asked more questions, except that at that precise moment, someone coughed delicately behind him.

"Excuse me?" said a low, sexy, female voice.

\* \* \*

Tannim thought he saw something give off a bit of mage-sparkle in the grass at his feet, and he peered down for a moment.

"Excuse me?" said a voice that was not Joe's.

Tannim jumped in startlement, and turned to face the barn door.

And froze as he saw who was standing there behind Joe, his mind lodged on a single thought, unable to get past it.

It's her—it's her—it's her—

And it was: the woman who had haunted him and hunted him down through his dreams for the last decade and more. The woman he'd dreamed of this morning. Her. And she stood there, nonplussedly taking in his look of complete and utter shock.

There was absolutely no doubt of it; she matched his dreams in every detail. Gently curved, raven-wing hair swept down past her shoulders and framed a face that he knew as well as he knew his own. Amused, emerald-green eyes gazed at him from beneath strong brows that arched as delicately as a bit of Japanese brushwork. The regal nose was just short of being hawklike, and gave strength to the prominent cheekbones. The sensual mouth hinted at a hundred secrets. And the body, the perfect, slim, small-breasted body . . . did more than hint.

She stood as he remembered her standing; poised, and not posed, graceful movement arrested for the briefest of moments. She wore silk and leather; a red silk jumpsuit that flowed in an exotic cut that spoke of expensive designers, tooled and riveted black leather belt and boots. She wore them beautifully, flawlessly, unselfconsciously, as if they were the stuff of her everyday attire.

"Excuse me," she said again, in a throaty contralto that he remembered whispering intimacies into his ear, ". . . but I understood that I could find someone here who works on Mustangs."

He took one step toward her; another. At the third step, he looked past her and spotted her black Mustang standing in the midst of the tall grass outside the barn door. The grasses waved gently around it, like something out of a commercial. Joe simply stood frozen in place, staring at her. She waited, calmly. She looked as if she would be perfectly ready to wait all day.

Tannim started to speak, and had to cough to clear his throat before his voice would work.

"Not—for a long time," he said dazedly.

"Ah," she replied, with a smile tinged with something he could not read.

But then her eyes widened as she looked past his shoulder, and she stepped back in alarm.

Fear lanced him. He whirled to look.

There was nothing there.

Quickly, realizing that she had pulled the oldest trick in the book on him, he turned back.

She was already gone. And so was her car.

Only then did his mind click back into gear, as he sprinted past the broken-down door, and stood where the car had been. There was the imprint of four tires in the grass—but no track-marks leading up to them. There was no sign that the car had actually been driven through the grass to reach that spot, and there had been no sound of a motor.

Belatedly, recognition. The car that had stood there had been the same Mustang that had shadowed him last night.

The grasses waved and parted; he looked down when his subconscious recognized that the shadow there was not a shadow. There was a second black, fingerless driving glove in the grass at his feet.

He picked it up, and immediately banished the thought that he might have dropped last night's glove and not have noticed. That glove had been torn where it had been riveted to the door and he'd ripped it off. This glove, also for the right hand, was intact.



And it, too, contained a small strip of parchment.

He took it out, and there was another quotation handwritten there, in the same spidery hand.

\* \* \*

The painful warrior famed for fight,  
After a thousand victories, once foiled,  
Is from the books of honour razed quite,  
And all the rest forgot for which he toil'd.

Sonnet 25

\* \* \*

He stared at it, the meaning burning arc-light bright in his mind. The challenge has been made. Chicken out of this one—or be defeated—and everything you are and ever were will be erased, and everything you ever did will be forgotten.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Tannim tucked the slip of parchment back into the glove with special care. The sun burned down on his head, as the quotation burned in his mind. Of all the ways he'd ever imagined of meeting her, this had never once crossed his mind. He'd pictured himself simply running into her in some exotic place, imagined finding her on his side in a desperate combat, wondered if some day she might simply appear at Fairgrove as a new "employee" even as he had. He had fantasized rescuing her, fighting by her side, having her rescue him, even. It had never once entered his mind that she could be an enemy.

No—not an enemy. Have to call it like it is; I don't know that yet. An opponent, but I can't put her in the "enemy" column yet. Maybe that was wishful thinking, but he couldn't get all those dreams out of his head. Surely they meant something.

Grass swished and crackled behind him, and young Joe moved out of the barn to stand next to him. "There was a lady there a minute ago, wasn't there?" he said, his voice remarkably steady, given the circumstances. "And a car?" In the brilliant sun, his hair looked almost white, and his vividly blue eyes mirrored the Oklahoma sky.

"Uh-huh," Tannim confirmed. "I'm beginning to feel like Prince Charming. She left me another glove."

Joe regarded the glove in Tannim's hand with a dubious expression and made no move to touch it. "I don't think you're gonna have too much luck going around Tulsa getting women to try those on to see if they fit."

Tannim smiled faintly. Not bad; the kid's keeping his sense of humor. "Not as reliable as a glass slipper."

No maker's mark in these gloves, though. No tag, and no sign that one had been cut or taken out. No identifying marks at all. Wasn't that a little odd?

Come to think of it, they didn't really look mass-produced. Huh. Custom work? If so, they might be as good as a glass slipper if I can find out where they came from.

He was just about ready to take the gloves apart, stitch by stitch, when a warning tingle along his personal shields alerted him. Something was manifesting in the barn!

He tested the energies, and recognized one he had not really expected to encounter quite so soon. But it was more than welcome, especially in light of this second challenge.

He sprinted back to the barn and reinvoked all the protections; the golden walls of power came up around him, enclosing him in a safe zone that only he, Chinthliss, or their sendings would be able to pass. He held his hands out at chest height, preparing the space in front of him to receive whatever Chinthliss' answer would be.

A thunderclap announced its arrival in his hands, and a flash of golden light that lit up the inside of the protective dome as it passed through the shields.

It came in the form of the same green and gold message-globe he himself had sent out, which confirmed his surprised and delighted guess that Chinthliss had answered him immediately, interrupting whatever else he was doing to do so. There were times when the dragon came through for him.

The globe settled in his hands, weightlessly, and pulsed for a moment, as it confirmed his identity. Then it deepened in color, turning from golden green to a deep bronze, and he felt a familiar touch on his mind. He relaxed and let the message flow into his thoughts.

:I have heard, and am intrigued, Son of Dragons.: The deep bass, purely mental voice tolled sonorously in his head. :I will arrive at the usual place at the hour the sun has vanished. And in case you have forgotten, the "usual place" is the building in which you once kept all your machines.:

The globe spun on its axis then whirled and changed, fading as it discharged its energies into the air, the shields, and anything else that was able to absorb a little extra power.

Including Tanim, who was not too proud to get a little of the charge he'd put into the thing back again.

Once again, he brought the protections down, and took a quick glance at Joe. The young man was not watching him; instead, he had taken up a "guard" position at the doorframe, and his alert stance told Tanim that his erstwhile protégé was perfectly prepared to fight anything that tried to cause trouble. Obviously Joe had not made the assumption that because the challenger was a woman, she could be dismissed.

Good. At least that's one lesson he won't have to learn the hard way.

"Joe?" he said quietly. The young man turned and nodded.

"Nothing out there that I can see," he said. "Nobody watching us as far as I can tell. Did your friend send you a return fax?"

Tannim had to smile at the ease with which Joe had accepted his own offhanded terminology. "As a matter of fact, he did," Tannim replied. "He's going to be here tonight. We'll have to come out here to meet him."

"And until then?" Joe asked, his expression stolid, only his eyes showing his nervous tension as he continually glanced from side to side, making certain nothing could creep up on them.

"First I need to make a phone call, and I want to do that from a private phone, not from home," Tannim told him. "My friend's going to need a hotel room, so why don't we go arrange that for him, and I can use the phone in the room."

Joe nodded, and Tannim reflected that it was really useful having someone like Joe around, a young man who was used to taking orders without question. Questions like, how was this friend going to get out here, and why couldn't he arrange his own room, or stay with Tannim's folks?

Setting aside the fact that Joe was in the only other guest room besides Tannim's old room—Joe could, after all, return to Frank Casey's house. No, Joe simply accepted that Tannim knew what he was doing, and waited for explanations instead of demanding them. Sometimes repressed curiosity was a lot easier to deal with than open curiosity.

Well, there was no point in standing around here in the hot sun; already his scalp was damp with sweat, and only the armor kept him relatively cool. Joe must be ready to drop; there was sweat trickling down his forehead, and his t-shirt was damp. "Let's get out of here before anything else happens."

"Right." Joe turned and strode to the barn door.

And there he stopped, crouched over, scanning quickly from side to side. Tannim watched in amazement; he had never seen anyone so young with such moves! These kinds of tactics had apparently become second nature to Joe. Jeez, another good reason to have him around.

He waited until Joe waved an "all clear" to him before joining him at the door, crouching beside him with one hand on the rough wood. "I can't spot anything out there, sir," Joe said in a soft voice. "The birds aren't disturbed, either, so I don't think there's anybody hiding in the grass."

"You can work point any time, Joe," Tannim told him quite seriously.

Joe flashed him a shy grin before returning his gaze to the field beyond the barn. "I'll go first."

"Go," Tannim said, and pulled out his keychain, pushing the button for the radio-transmitter that controlled the doors and the engine. On the other side of the wall, the Mustang rumbled into life. "There. The doors are unlocked."

Joe nodded and was gone in a flash, scuttling through the weeds in a bent-over run, rather than crawling. There wasn't a real reason to crawl, unless bullets or other projectiles started flying, and a formidable reason in the form of ticks and chiggers not to crawl. Tannim followed in the same way as soon as he got around the corner of the barn and out of sight.

He felt a little foolish as he crouched beside his car door, listening intently. But better to feel foolish than not feel at all. "Dead" was a hard condition to cure.

He slipped into the Mustang and punched up the a/c, backed into position so that he could drive straight

out, and waited. Nothing rushed at them from the weeds, and there were no vehicles in sight in either direction once they reached the road. It looked exactly as it should: a sleepy section-line road that seldom saw much in the way of traffic.

Tannim did not drop even a fraction of his watchful caution, however, and it was easy to see by Joe's tense posture that he felt the same. Out here it would be easy enough for someone to perch in a tall tree and watch their progress. Not that he could really picture her, in that flame-red silk jumpsuit, clambering up a tree.

But if she can make herself and her Mustang vanish, she can certainly change her wardrobe as easily, he reminded himself. Or, for all I know, she has flunkies out here keeping an eye on us.

For that matter, she was a mage, and she could be using any of the birds around here as "eyes." There was nothing he could do about that—not without endangering himself and his passenger. Anything he did to make the Mach I less visible to birds would make it less visible to other human drivers. The drivers around here were bad enough without complicating the situation by tricking their minds into thinking he wasn't there.

He passed both gloves to Joe, who locked them in the glovebox without a word. There was one thing he could do; birds had distinct territories, and in the summer they didn't tend to venture out of them. Right now, the best thing he could do, if she was using birds as her scouts, was to drive some distance before stopping at a motel. With luck, she'd lose him and not find him again.

Unless, of course, she's using something like a bald eagle. Well, there was only so much he could do without his precautions hedging his actions so much that he couldn't move.

He drove around in circles for about an hour, stopping once at a convenience store for Gatorade for the two of them, before finally seeking out a motel for Chinthliss.

The south side of Tulsa was a lot more upscale than Bixby; it was where the Yuppies collected in expansive, milling herds, and was thick with condo-complexes with gates and expensive, fenced-in houses set on quarter-acre lots. The blight crept farther south with every year. Tannim figured that he'd be able to find something to suit Chinthliss out here. Nothing less than a palace would make the dragon happy, but at least he wouldn't complain as much as he had the time he shared a room at the Holiday Inn with Tannim and FX.

High and mighty dragon couldn't unwrap the little soaps by himself. Poor baby.

With a little bit of searching, he found exactly what he was looking for: one of those high-end "suite motels." If it became too dangerous to stay with his folks any longer, he and Joe could just move in with Chinthliss. He pulled up to the office, and left Joe in the car with the motor running and the a/c on while he took care of throwing money at the clerk.

He returned with a grin on his face and slid into the seat. "Amazing what a paid-up Gold Card will do, even in this neighborhood. I got a two-bedroom with a parking slot guaranteed to be in the shade all day," he said, and tossed Joe a key. "That's for us, if we need someplace else to go. Hang onto it for me."

"Sure," Joe said obediently, pocketing the key.

"Now, let's go see what kind of digs poor Chinthliss will have to stoop to." He pulled the Mustang

around to the side of the complex and found the slot assigned to Chinthliss' suite. As promised, it was in the shade. They locked the car and ventured into the depths of the complex. The suite was supposed to be like a townhouse: two-story, with two bedrooms upstairs and living area and kitchen down. The door wasn't more than a few feet from the parking slot, and when he opened it, cool air rushed to meet them, faintly perfumed with disinfectant.

It was as advertised, and would probably suit His Draconic Majesty just fine. Joe went immediately to the living room and turned on the TV. Tannim let the a/c blow through his hair for a moment, then went to the kitchen. As the clerk had instructed, he filled out the grocery list with things he knew Chinthliss liked. Someone from the staff would be around in the next couple of hours to stock the refrigerator; an extra service invoked by the Gold Card's near-bottomless cornucopia effect. After this, the maids would keep the fridge stocked the same way. This was going to make life much easier for him, even if he was in for over a grand already. I'll have to put the old lizard up in places like this more often. He can prowl around and poke into things to his heart's content, take showers as long as he wants without using up all the hot water, pop every bag of microwave popcorn in the place. This's going to be a lot easier than taking him to restaurants.

He did not want to think about the last time he'd taken Chinthliss to a real restaurant. Fortunately, it had been one that catered to the elves at Fairgrove, and the staff was used to some of the customers acting peculiarly.

Like ordering escargot and jalapeño pizza with bleu cheese, and eating it with chopsticks.

While Joe relaxed for the first time since she had shown up, sprawling in the living room and watching cable, he left the grocery list on the doorknob and found a phone in one of the bedrooms.

Dottie answered it on the second ring, which was a relief. There was no mistaking her sugar-sweet phone voice. She would know that if he said he needed to talk to Keighvin, he really needed to talk to the boss there and then.

"Fairgrove Industries, Kevin Silver's office," she chirped. "How may I help you?"

"Dottie, it's Tannim," he said. "I need to talk to Keighvin. Something came up out here."

That last was a code signal among Fairgrove employees; it meant something had gone seriously wrong. "I'll page him, I think he's out in the plant," she said immediately, every trace of sugar gone from her voice. "Hold on a minute."

She didn't put him on hold, just put the phone down on the desk, so he heard her when she used the pager. "Keighvin, Line One. Keighvin, Line One. Charlie Tannim."

That would tell Keighvin that he needed to get to the phone immediately without telling any visitors to the plant that there was something wrong somewhere. It would also tell him that he needed to get to a secure phone, one without any outsiders anywhere around.

"Okay, I've paged him," Dottie said, picking up the phone again. A moment later a click and the background whine of turbines signaled the fact that Keighvin had just picked up a phone somewhere in the complex.

"I have it, Dottie." Keighvin Silverhair's resonant tenor was as unmistakable as Dottie's phone voice.

"Yes, sir," she said, and hung up.

"It's Tannim, Keighvin," the young mage said. "And I've got a problem here."

Briefly he outlined the appearance of the mysterious lady and everything that had happened associated with her. Except for one small detail; he did not reveal that she was the one he had been dreaming about for years. Somehow he just couldn't bring himself to; the dreams were so intimate, so much a part of him. And how could they be germane to the situation, anyway?

Keighvin remained silent all through the narrative, but Tannim knew him well enough to know that his mind was working at a furious pace, analyzing everything Tannim had told him.

"You've been challenged, lad," he said at last. "It's definitely in the style of the Sidhe, too. But I canna explain those bits of Death Metal; in no way could any Sidhe handle those. She canna be Seleighe nor Unseleighe herself, but she knows our style. Is this the lady ye've been dreamin' of all these years, lad?"

Tannim felt himself flush with anger. "Damn, Keighvin, have you left anything in my mind alone?"

"Aye, more'n ye know, lad, but that's na important now. It's her then, is it?"

"Yeah. I think."

"Mmm."

"That's it, just mmm, Keighvin?"

"Mmm-hmm. As I said, ye've been challenged with the gloves."

"So what's it mean, really, having gloves delivered?" he asked. "Other than the obvious challenge."

Silence on the other end of the line, as Keighvin Silverhair tried to twist Old World feudal customs into words that a twentieth-century hot-rodder would understand.

"It implies one of two things," he said finally. "I believe that we may eliminate the notion that you hae somehow insulted the lady's honor."

Not unless she somehow found out about my dreams. . . .

Keighvin's accent always thickened when he harkened back to his "other self," Lord Sir Keighvin Silverhair, ruler of Elfhame Fairgrove and all who dwelt therein. "So 'tother implication is that you hae been chosen by th' lass t'prove her ain worth. She didna slap ye with yon glove, did she?"

"Not unless you call pop-riveting the first one to my door a slap, no," Tannim replied. "Unless her slamming into the back of the Mach I counts. Does it?"

"Nay." Keighvin was firm on that. "The glove wasna physically involved. An' you mind, she was very careful to have no impact when she delivered the glove, aye?"

"Oh, absolutely," Tannim said. "No impact at all, or I'd have noticed it for sure. I had no clue she'd done anything until I was out of the car."

"Then she's not issued th' challenge mortal, or at least, she's not been insulted to th' point where she's wishin' your heart an' head on a platter, an' yer privates for remembrance," Keighvin replied, relief clear in his voice. "The meanin' is simply that she sees you as bein' the best t' measure hersel' against. 'Tis a bit like yon drag race; she wishes t' cast ye down, an' rise hersel' in the process. Like the young knights that would challenge their elders, the Lancelots and Gawaines—or challenge us at the crossroads of a midnight if they were truly bold. Now mind, it can still go t' the challenge mortal, but at th' moment, I'd say she wishes t' gae only to first blood."

"In other words, she's picked me. She can keep it civilized, or she can decide to go for the whole enchilada."

"In essence, aye." Keighvin went silent again as he thought. "I dinna think ye can count on her staying civilized, though."

Tannim heaved a sigh. "Yeah, we have to figure on worst-case scenario. We also can't count on her working alone."

"She could be in th' employ of our darker cousins, aye." Keighvin echoed his sigh. "For that matter, though her intent be innocent now, still, once th' Unseleighe learn of her and her intent, they may yet make it worth her while t' make this more than a contest of wits an' skill."

"Got any ideas?" Tannim asked, hoping against hope that Keighvin, with all of his centuries of experience in situations like this, just might know of a loophole somewhere.

"Don't reject th' challenge, an' don't run," Keighvin said firmly. " 'Twill reduce ye t' th' hunted animal. That's the rules of th' game: run, an' ye become a coward, an' th' coward can be squashed like a bothersome insect. Aye, and anyone with him. Run, an' Joe an' your parents coul' be sacrificed, or used as bait t' bring ye in."

Tannim cursed softly, hearing his own thoughts confirmed.

"But, for all that she seems t' know a fair bit about ye, she canna assume she knows all," Keighvin continued, raising his hopes. "So—my advice is pretend ye dinna understand."

"You mean play dumb? Like I've never heard of the challenge game?" The idea had its appeal. "How long can I drag things out that way?"

"Depends on how much she knows, an' who she knows. If she's hand-in-glove wi' our cousins, she'll find out soon enough 'tis an act, and challenge ye outright." Keighvin put one hand over the mouthpiece and spoke to someone else for a moment. "Conal reminds me of another aspect t' all of this. As th' challenged party, 'tis you who has the choice of weapons. Ah, here—"

Some fumbling on the other end of the line, then Conal's thicker accent and deeper voice sounded over the speaker. "Eh, lad, has she not yon Mustang too, ye said?"

"Yeah, it's a late-model number. Depending on what she's done to it, if she's not kicking in nitrous injection or magic, we're probably a match in that department. Hers is lighter, it's reliable, it handles better. It's easy to boost the power on it with after-market stuff. Are you saying," he continued, "that I should accept her challenge and pick the cars as weapons?"

"Make it a race, lad," Conal agreed. "Set the conditions. Use yer expertise and yer magery on yon

pony-car yersel'. I've not seen a mage here t' match ye i' that department. An' I know for a fact that t'only driver we hae that is as good as ye is young Maclyn."

"What if she wants to make it—what did Keighvin call it? The challenge mortal?" He gritted his teeth, waiting for Conal's reply.

"There is that." Conal took a deep breath. "Well, an' ye find yersel' wi' the challenge mortal—where would ye rather find yersel'? Behind yon blade, i' th' mage-circle, or behind th' wheel?"

He thought long and hard before replying. "Behind the wheel," he said slowly. "I'm better off there than anywhere else."

"I wouldna say that—but I would say this. I think ye'd be safer there. I think she canna be th' driver ye are. An' once ye learn whence her magery an' her trainin' come, I think ye can best her. Ah, here's Keighvin back. The luck to ye, lad."

A moment more, and Keighvin came back on the line. "I agree with everything Conal told you, Tannim. Stall her while you learn about her, then when she delivers a challenge you can't refuse, take her to the road. Don't hesitate to call us. There's only a limited amount we can do, but what we can, we will. And we'll see to it that yon Joe and your parents stay safe. In fact, we'll begin on that this very moment; 'tis a fair amount we can do even at long distances."

"I'm working on getting someone here who can help me," Tannim told him. Relief spread through him and made him limp as Keighvin offered Fairgrove's help. That took a tremendous amount off his mind. With Sidhe mage-warriors watching over the noncombatants, he could deal with this lady with all his attention. He had the feeling she would require his entire attention.

"Keep us informed," Keighvin concluded. "Call once a day from now on, perhaps about this time. I'll be havin' some of the rest dealin' with keeping your parents shielded and safe as soon as I hang up."

"Thanks, Keighvin," Tannim said fervently, running his hand through his tangled hair. "I can't even begin to thank you enough for that."

I can even forgive you for funding the horse ranch without telling me.

" 'Tis nothing you don't have as your due, lad," Keighvin replied, warmth in his voice. "Now, I'll be off."

"Same here. And thanks again." He waited for the click that signaled Keighvin had rung off before hanging up himself. Protocol, protocol. Never be the one to hang up on an elven lord.

Joe looked at him inquisitively when he descended the staircase using every other step and entered the living room. "Good?" the young man asked.

"Good," Tannim replied. "Keighvin's taking care of some of it, and he and Conal gave me some good advice on the rest." He leveled the most authoritative gaze he had on the young man. "The moment—the instant we know that this might mean more than a simple magical drag race, you are out of here. Keighvin's going to see to it. Got that?"

"But—" Joe protested weakly. "But—"

"You're not a two-stroke engine, stop imitating one," Tannim told him, crossing his arms over his chest.



"No arguments. If this gets serious, you haven't got the training, the experience, or the power to handle fighting between two mages or between two drivers. If this turns into a Mustang shootout, I don't want innocent bystanders making it into Death Race 2000."

Joe flushed and looked chagrined. "All right," he said reluctantly. Very reluctantly, for someone who had just yesterday told Tannim that he had not wanted to get involved with magic anymore.

Sheesh, the kid's decided he's responsible for me. Or else he's feeling guilty about leaving me to take this on alone.

"Look, Joe," he said, lowering his voice persuasively, "if this were a regular fight, there isn't anyone I'd rather have working point or tail. I'd rather trust you at my back than anyone else in the state. But it's not a regular fight—it'd be like you going out into a firefight with an ordinary college freshman backing you. See?"

Joe nodded, his flush fading. "Yes, sir, I do see. You're right. I understand."

Oh, the wonders of a paramilitary education. Authority actually means something! Try telling that to one of the Fairgrove fosterlings, and you'd find him following you as closely as if you'd hooked a tow-bar to his forehead.

"I'll tell you what you can do," he continued. "You can help me keep my folks from finding anything out about all this. And if anything happens to me—well, you and Keighvin take care of them for me, okay?"

Joe straightened at that, and came very close to saluting. "Yes, sir. I can do that, sir. I will do that; your parents are—wonderful people."

"Yes," he said simply. "They are. And you have taken an enormous weight off my mind, knowing there will be someone who'll look after them. And speaking of my parents, we'd better get back; it's almost suppertime, and I think Mom is planning pasta. I know it seems kind of stupid to go back home after all this, but there are reasons for it."

Joe rose with alacrity and followed him to the door, making certain that it locked after them. Tannim found himself liking the young man more and more with every hour he spent in Joe's presence.

The odd thing was that having a promise from Joe to "take care of" his parents did take an enormous weight off his mind. He was an only child, and while he had every intention of staying alive a long, long time—well, the racing business alone was dangerous, as his own wrecks proved. Then, once you added in the other complications, well—if he'd been an insurance agent, he wouldn't have written a policy on himself.

One thing that had always troubled his sleep—besides the special side effects of those dreams about her—was what his untimely demise would do to his mom and dad, and at times like these it troubled him even more. Now, if everything went badly, they'd have Joe there to help them through the mourning and be a second son to them afterward.

And if everything goes well, they'll still have their first son, plus a second son. One that can stand horses, to make up for me.

This was nothing that Alinor and Keighvin could ever have foreseen when they asked Tannim to pick up the young man. No, this was the kind of magic that had nothing to do with elves, and everything to do

with the human heart.

Sometimes, he reflected, things worked out okay. As he popped the locks on the Mustang, he decided that letting the good things happen was the best magic he knew.

\* \* \*

SharMarali Halanyn examined herself in the mirror with a critical eye. Her facial fur was perfect; her ears were groomed immaculately, as always. In the reflection of her own green eyes she could see the mirror's glinting circle; she then banished the silvered glass with a thought. All was well. If she looked this cool after being out in the sweltering Oklahoma sunshine, she must have been devastating when Tannim had seen her. She smiled with satisfaction and no little anticipation as she sat back in her overstuffed red-silk chair and gazed at the flower arrangement that had taken the mirror's place.

This looked remarkably like an upscale Manhattan condo, except there were no windows anywhere, and no doors to the exterior, either. There were no windows because there was nothing to look out upon except the emptiness of mist-filled Chaos where she had created her home. And there were no doors, because there was no need for doors. The only possible way in or out of here—other than stumbling on the place by sheerest accident—was by Gate.

Her own Mustang rested in a heavily shielded shelter attached to this apartment, and it had its own Gate large enough to drive through. It had not been easy, bringing so much Cold Iron into this place; the very fabric of Underhill rebelled against the presence of the Death Metal, and the magics of her allies became unreliable and unpredictable around anything ferrous. That was one reason why they did not seek to visit her in her own "den"; and that was the main reason she had insisted on keeping the car here. That, plus the masking properties of silk, kept them just wary enough to suit her needs. Good.

Tannim had looked so wonderfully stunned. That old deer-in-the-headlights look. It was such a marvelous feeling, being able to wipe that self-assured grin off his face and leave him completely off balance. Without a clue! And without even a dime to buy one with!

And it had been so gratifying to know that she could do that to him anytime she wanted. She knew all there was to know about him; he knew nothing of her.

Had he guessed that she was his challenger from last night? There had been some kind of recognition, so perhaps he had. Or perhaps, just perhaps, he recognizes you from something else entirely, whispered the little voice from within. Perhaps he has dreamed of you, even as you have dreamed of him. Remember the candles and satin, and the warmth of his body over you, in you, cupping you and pouring deep. . . .

She shook the voice into quiescence with a toss of her hair. How could he possibly dream of her? He had no notion that she even existed! Whereas she had known of his existence from early adolescence. Hadn't she been trained and groomed to be his opposite number, his ultimate rival, yin to his yang, even as her father was Chinthliss' ultimate rival? She had watched him, studied him for years, and she knew he had no inkling that she—or someone like her—was anywhere in any universe.

Even Chinthliss had never told him, although Chinthliss knew very well that she existed, though he did not know where she was. Her father Charcoal had seen to it that Chinthliss was kept abreast of her progress.

The jerkoff. Her father Charcoal, that is, not Chinthliss. Charcoal was no longer a part of her life, and that was the way she wanted it.

No, there was no reason to think that Tannim had recognized her from dreams. Particularly not the kind of dream passages that she had about him.

Erotic? Oh, a tad. They had certainly been far more satisfactory than anything shared with her Unseleighe lovers.

She frowned a little at that. There would be no more dalliances with the Unseleighe; she had cut them off from that years ago when she realized how much they were using her. They had no consideration for her pleasure in their spurious loving intimacies; their only thoughts were for their own satiation. She preferred a fantasy-dream with Tannim any night over a real-life assignation with an Unseleighe, however comely the elven twit might be.

Not that the Sidhe were extremely attractive to her. It was just that Tannim was anything but uncomely. When it came down to it, he was far better looking in the bright sun of day than he ever had been in her misty dreams, or in much of the covert spying she had done on him. If he were kitsune, she'd be even more in lust with him.

She closed her eyes, and he sprang into her mind with extraordinary vividness.

He looked far younger than his true years; he shared that with her, despite his purely mortal origins. He had a fine face; not handsome in the classical sense, but one that was not likely to be forgotten: high cheekbones, broad brow, firm and determined chin, sensual mouth given to smiles and laughter.

Unlike these dour Unseleighe, who smile only when they kill and laugh only when blood spills across their hands. They all think they are such great kings and warriors. What a bunch of complete weenies.

Despite the fact that Tannim was as slim as a young girl, there was strength to him, in the broad shoulders, the wiry muscles. Good bones, her mother would say. And, ah, that wild mane of dark and curling hair; women must go mad to run their hands through it!

But it was the eyes that caught you, when he wasn't staring at you like a rabbit trying to guess the make of the car about to run it over. Huge green eyes that changed hue with the changing of his emotions. Vulnerable eyes; eyes that promised something wonderful to those whom he gave his loyalty and affection. And she had every reason to believe those implied wonders were real, for she had seen how generously he gave of himself once his trust and heart were pledged.

Ah, lucky one, who becomes his true lover. . . .

It was that little internal voice again, and with annoyance she squashed it down. She had no business with such thoughts; he was a human and she was most decidedly not, for one thing. And for another—

She was his mirror.

Whether she would be his fate, as the Unseleighe wished, remained to be seen.

She opened her eyes again and interlaced her hands over the red silk covering her knee, thinking in silence. Unlike Tannim, music distracted her. For him it was a focus.

He had, as yet, given her no sign that he recognized the challenges for what they were. Then again, she had given him no chance to respond. She enjoyed this game; she wanted to stretch it out as long as

possible, and by teasing him like this, she fulfilled the letter of her agreement with the Unseleighe without actually taking any action against him.

Given how much time he had spent with Keighvin Silverhair, though, he surely must have recognized a Challenge by now. But she could continue to tease him for several days without giving him an opportunity to answer the Challenge. Eventually, of course, the Unseleighe would become impatient with her, and force her to conclude the opening steps of the dance, but for now, she was free to improvise her own patterns on the stage.

A glissando of subtle energies chimed upon her inward ear, and a rustle of stiffer silk than she wore alerted her to the presence of someone who had just crossed the Gate into her private pocket of Underhill. Since that Gate was guarded against everyone but her parents—and since she had long since barred her father from coming anywhere near her without her specific permission—there was only one person it could be.

"Mother!" she exclaimed with pleasure, rising to her feet and whirling to meet the Honorable Lady Ako with outstretched arms. The Honorable Lady Ako stepped across the threshold in a flutter of ankle-length, fox-red hair and a rustle of blue-green kimonos, serene as a statue of a saint and graceful as the most exquisitely trained geisha, and she smiled to see her daughter running to greet her.

The Honorable Lady Ako—magician, healer, shape-shifter, bearer of some of the most noble blood in or out of Underhill, and nine-tailed kitsune—met her daughter's embrace and accepted it. But something in Ako's eyes told Shar that this visit was not a social call.

Nevertheless, the amenities of civilization must come first.

Shar led her mother to the seat of honor, and with a brush of her hand, changed the silk of the couch to a blue-green that harmonized with her mother's kimonos. Should there be a tea ceremony? she wondered, as she settled at her mother's feet. Perhaps—

But Ako laid one gentle hand on her daughter's before Shar could summon the implements for a proper tea ceremony. "Tea, but no ceremony, my love," Ako told her firmly. "I must speak with you, and I have little time."

Shar summoned perfectly brewed tea and translucent porcelain cups with a gesture, handing the first cup to her mother before taking up her own. Ako took a sip, then placed the cup back down on her own palm. The amenities had been observed. Now for business.

"I have learned that you have been abroad," Ako said delicately. "That you have been there at the behest of—your father's friends."

Ako would not mention the Unseleighe by name, nor Charcoal. She had long ago fallen out with the blood-father of her daughter—rightly, Shar thought, since Charcoal was insufferable in all ways. She would have no commerce with Charcoal's friends and allies. And when Ako declined to mention someone by name, it meant that she declined to acknowledge their existence, given the option of doing so.

Reluctantly, Shar nodded. She was too well-trained to flush, but the feeling of faint shame was there, as if she had been caught in something dishonorable.

Ako studied her daughter's face, her green eyes grave in the white-porcelain doll-face beneath the

crimson waterfall of her hair. It was all that Shar could do to maintain eye contact with her mother. "I know what it is that they wish you to do," Ako said finally. "You know that I do not approve. This young man has done nothing to harm you; he has done nothing, save to be the protégé of Chinthliss. But that is not to the point. Are you so certain that you wish to visit destruction upon this young man?"

For a single, bewildered moment, Shar wondered if her mother could somehow have learned of her years of dreams. She shook her head, and bit her lip. "Honorable Mother, I am not to be commanded by such as—my father's friends. I do what I will. At the moment, it amuses me to occupy this young man. It may amuse me to deliver him to them. But it will be of my will or not at all."

She raised her chin defiantly, willing her mother to recognize that she would not be tamed by any creature.

Ako looked deep into Shar's eyes, and the young female found herself hot with the blushes she had conquered earlier. "I will say only this to you: look deeply into your thoughts and your heart, your instincts and your memories, before you commit yourself to any action," she said. "Do nothing irrevocable until you have determined that you can live with the result for all of your life. I say this, my dearest child, so that you do not follow in the path of your mother. Do not make mistakes you will regret, and prove unable to correct."

And with that, as Shar sat in stunned silence, Lady Ako rose with the grace of a bending willow, and summoned the Gate to life. She glided toward it, and paused on the threshold.

Then she turned, and caught Shar's eyes, so like her own, one more time. "Remember the past," she said simply.

Then she stepped across the Gate, and was gone.

\* \* \*

Stuffed full of pasta and garlic bread, Tannim and Joe arrived at the old barn just at sunset. Once again, Joe spotted for Tannim as he drove—carefully—into the long grass and parked the Mach I beside the barn. Joe was the first one out of the car, and Tannim waited for him to give the "all clear" signal before he got out himself.

If the mysterious woman was watching, and she meant no more than a simple challenge, their behavior would seem very consistent for someone who had not understood the meaning of what she had done. And if she meant worse than that, well, she would see that they were alert and would be hard to catch off guard twice.

Once he and Joe were inside the barn, he activated the entire set of protections on the place. It was a pity he couldn't get the Mach I in here anymore now that the door was a wreck, but the Mustang had its own defenses.

The protections rose, layer on layer, forming a shifting golden dome inside the barn. It would take something like a magical bomb to penetrate the shields on this place now, plus a physical one to do otherwise.

"Remember, you can't leave till I take this all down," he reminded Joe, who stared in wonder at the glowing dome over them. "Chinthliss did a lot of this; I don't know everything it's set against, I only know that I haven't come across anything that can break in or out."

"Won't somebody see the light and think—I don't know, maybe it's a UFO or something?" Joe worried.

Tannim laughed and hit the young man in the shoulder lightly. "You've been hanging around elves too much," he chided. "Turn your mage-sight off."

He watched as Joe frowned in concentration, then grinned with relief. "Nothing," the young man said. "There's nothing there."

"Right, it's only visible to those with the ability to see it." He considered the lovely golden dome overhead. "I suppose there might be a few folks around here who would notice it if they looked this way, but they're also the kind who'll stay out of anything they haven't been invited to. Not because they aren't curious—but because they'll have learned 'don't touch' the same way I did. The hard way. Nothing like getting your hand burned to teach you to watch that fire."

He grinned, and Joe shook his head in mock sadness. "Maybe you shoulda had a dose of military school," Joe told him with a spark of impudence.

Tannim blinked at the unexpected display of wicked humor. "That's what my dad kept saying," he admitted. "I guess I ought to be glad he didn't have the money for it."

Joe sized him up as if he were looking at Tannim for the first time. "You'd either have done real good, or real bad," the young man replied at last. "Depending on whether you got to be the brains of an outfit or not."

"Probably real bad," Tannim told him. "When I was younger, I never could learn to keep my mouth shut. Only thing that kept me out of trouble in high school was that the jocks knew I knew how to fix cars, and if they beat me up, next time they were stuck out in the parking lot with a fuel-line block or worse, I'd keep right on trucking."

And the fact that people who beat me up tended to get blocked fuel-lines or worse—and always when they were miles away from a gas station and I had cast-iron alibis. Not my fault they never bothered to get their cars serviced regularly. A little regular maintenance, and their mechanics would have found my little presents.

Ah, well. His former tormentors were like snow on the fired-up gas grill of life, and he had a whole new set of tormentors to deal with.

So who's after my hide now that Vidal Dhu and his crew are out of the picture? That was a good question, actually, and one he would really like to have an answer to. The Unseleighe were less cohesive than a rolling barrel of bullfrogs; it was hard to get them to agree to anything long enough to get beyond the "nuisance" stage. Vidal Dhu had nursed a feud with Keighvin's folk for centuries before Tannim ever came on the scene, and he had targeted Tannim for elimination largely because he was Keighvin's most reliable outlet to the human world.

Could it be that they've decided I'm dangerous to the Unseleighe as a whole, even without my connection to Keighvin? That was possible, and it had happened before. When one human came to know too much about Underhill, that knowledge was often seen as a threat by the Unseleighe. Rightly so; they relied on invisibility in their predation on humankind, and when a human knew what they could do and how they operated, he would be able to tell when something was simply misfortune and when it was caused. And he could move to stop what was going on. Humans always had three things going for them

against all the magic of the Sidhe: cleverness, sheer numbers and Cold Iron. Those things alone could stop the Sidhe dead in their tracks.

And when a human knew how to make Cold Iron into a weapon . . .

That made him much more of a danger.

And I'm training Seleighe Sidhe in Cold Iron Magery 101. Yeah, I can see why they might tag me as a problem.

The sun set with a minimum of fanfare; after a cloudless, hot day there was very little color in the west, nothing but a fattened, blood-red ball gliding down below the horizon. It won't be long now, Tannim thought. Chinthliss has a lot of faults, but tardiness isn't one of them.

Full dark came quickly; within fifteen minutes the first stars were out, and within a half hour the only light was from the half moon directly overhead.

Moonlight poured down through the open roof, and Tannim frowned a moment as he contemplated the slowly twisting patterns of moonlight crossing the barn floor. Then he realized what was affecting the moonlight. Jeez! The Gate!

As he ushered Joe out of the way, he felt a little smug for noticing the patterns. Did Chinthliss know that his magic interfered with moonlight just before mage-senses could feel it? For now he sensed that odd internal chiming that meant someone had called up a Gate between this human world and another, and a moment later, the Gate itself appeared.

He'd seen it all before, of course, but Joe never had. The young man's eyes widened as the air where the Gate would be twisted in geometries no mathematician of this world had ever encountered. Something darkened, rotated through dimensions human eyes were not built to perceive, and formed into a gossamer arch made up of hundreds of thin threads of pure power, as if an unearthly spider had been coaxed into spinning the structure.

Then it flared, plates formed across the threads, and sheets of light played with each other in oil-on-water colors.

Tannim patted Joe's shoulder. "Don't worry about it," he said easily. "It's just Chinthliss' way of being invisible."

"But—" Joe said, gesturing at the light show. Then he grinned as he realized what Tannim really meant. "Oh. Yeah."

The entire Gate-structure flared again, and the mage-light built until it would soon be impossible to look at. Tannim pulled out his Wayfarers and flicked them open. Joe shielded his face and winced away. Tannim simply put on his shades and smirked.

Then a note deeper than that of a huge bronze temple-gong vibrated across the barn. It thrummed in Tannim's chest, and he had to close his eyes behind the protection of his dark glasses when the final flare ended.

And then came the deafening silence. Magic was like that sometimes.

The crickets resumed their interrupted nuptial chorus, and Tannim reopened his eyes and took off his glasses.

Directly below where the peak of the arch had been, framed by the blackened walls and silvery moonlight, stood a gaunt but obviously powerful man. His thin features were vaguely oriental. He wore an impeccably-tailored Armani suit, and Tannim knew, although the moonlight was too dim to see colors, that it would be bronze silk.

The man straightened his bolo tie, and the eyes of the little dragon curling around the leather winked with bright topaz flashes.

The man raised one long eyebrow at Tannim in a gesture that Tannim knew perfectly well had been copied after long study of Leonard Nimoy.

"Could you manage subtle, do you suppose?" Tannim asked wistfully, thinking of all the Sensitives for miles around who would be suffering with strange dreams and unexplained headaches thanks to Chinthliss' lust for the dramatic.

His mentor simply raised that eyebrow a little higher, though Tannim could not imagine how he'd done it.

"No," he replied.

## CHAPTER FIVE

"Well," Tannim said as they walked into the suite. "It's not home, but it's much."

Chinthliss gazed about with delight and immediately began exploring all of the amenities. Joe was perfectly willing to show him around.

Once they reached the bedrooms, with amazingly spacious closets, Chinthliss produced luggage from somewhere. Armani, of course. Tannim had no idea where the luggage had appeared from, since the dragon hadn't brought anything across the Gate and hadn't loaded anything into the Mach I. Still, Chinthliss spent the first half hour unpacking.

And people accuse me of being a clotheshorse! Then again, Chinthliss didn't wear this form very often, and Tannim knew he found the concept of clothing-as-persona fascinating. Just please, God, don't let him have brought any leisure suits.

Tannim waited, joked, and curbed his own impatience. There was no point in rushing Chinthliss. He would get around to the problem at hand when he felt settled, and not before. Rush him, and you were apt to end up with more trouble than you had in the first place.

At least he was happy with the suite, which was a relief. When Chinthliss was annoyed, he grew uncooperative, and right now, Tannim needed glasnost more than detente.

His old friend finished with his prowling and settled onto the sofa in the living room as Tannim tuned in the local classical station on the radio/TV console. On the table at his mentor's elbow was a tall cola with a great deal of ice; unlike the elves, Chinthliss had no trouble with caffeine, and unlike most of his



relatives, he hated tea with a passion. His jacket had been tossed carelessly over the back of a chair, and he had rolled his silk shirtsleeves up to his elbows. He was ready to work.

"Now, tell me again everything that has happened when this young lady appeared, in as much detail as you can recall," Chinthliss ordered, leaning forward to listen intently. The topaz eyes of the dragon bolo tie at his neck glowed with their own muted power.

Tannim obeyed, closing his eyes to concentrate. When he finished, he fished the gloves out of his jeans pocket and handed them over. "They're custom work, I can tell that much," he said as Chinthliss studied the gloves minutely, then applied the same care to studying the parchment slips. "I didn't realize it until later, but they're both from the right hand, so evidently she doesn't mind wasting whole pairs of custom-made gloves. There's no maker's mark on them, no labels, and the leather isn't stamped. I think they're deerskin, but they're made of very light leather, lighter than any deerskin I've ever seen. They seem to be hand-stitched—"

"They are," Chinthliss interrupted. "With silk thread, which is unusual, to say the least. And the 'string' of the backs is also silk."

Tannim gnawed his lip, and reached into the pocket over his right thigh for a cherry-pop. "Where would anyone get silk yarn like that?" he asked, as he unwrapped the candy and stuck it in his cheek.

Chinthliss shook his head. "It is available in your world, but not in too many places," he replied. "And the supply is very limited. It is silk noil, made from the outer, coarser threads of the cocoon. It is normally used to weave heavier material with a rougher texture than this—" He pointed to his shirt. "Under most circumstances, one would not waste such threads, however coarse, on making string for driving gloves. Unless—"

"Unless?" Tannim prompted.

"Unless the wearer wished to make use of some of the magical properties of silk as an insulator," Chinthliss said, and shook his head. "The leather is unusual also; not deerskin, but fawnskin. Very difficult to obtain, and unless I mistake your laws, not legal in this country. The paper, as you probably noticed, has no watermark, and the texture is too even; it might not have been manufactured, it might have been produced magically. The quotes were written with a real quill pen, not metal, but a goose-quill; you can see how the nib has worn down on the longer piece by the time she reached the end of the quote. See there, where the lines are just a little thicker. The ink is of an old style that does not dry quickly and must have sand sprinkled over it to take up the excess. Here—"

He held out the second quote, and tilted the small square of paper to catch the light. Sure enough, the light sparkled off a few crystals of sand stuck in the ink.

"All of this points in only one direction, unless your mysterious lady is so very eccentric that she drives modern cars yet uses the most archaic of writing implements. And unless she is so very wealthy that she can afford to discard hand-tailored driving gloves made with materials one would have to search the world to find."

"Well, we knew she must be using magic," Joe said thoughtfully. "But you're implying there's more than that."

Chinthliss nodded. "These small things indicate a radically different upbringing than you would find in your America, Tannim. I believe these things indicate that she cannot be from this culture, perhaps not

this world. She may well not be human."

Joe looked queasy. Tannim wasn't so sure about his own health at the moment.

"Unless she was using illusion to change her eyes, she isn't Sidhe," Tannim interjected. "The Sidhe all have cat-eyes, with slit pupils, not round."

"But most, if not all Sidhe, Seleighe and Unseleighe, use illusion to cover their differences when dealing with mortals," Chinthliss countered. "There is no reason to think that she would change that pattern with you."

Tannim sucked thoughtfully on the cherry-pop and nodded. "Why two right-hand gloves?" he asked.

"Because at the moment she does not wish to kill you," Chinthliss replied. "As my brother taught me once, there is a reason why the left hand is called the `sinister' hand."

Tannim swallowed. "Well, that's handy," he said as dryly as he could. Which was not very. He could not help thinking that she had two perfectly good left-hand gloves somewhere, doing nothing, taking up drawer-space. . . .

And where in the hell was Fox? He hadn't shown in over twenty-four hours!

Wait a minute. . . . "FX was with me just before she showed up the first time. He took one look out the back window of the Mach I, said `Oh-oh,' and flat disappeared," he said. "He hasn't been back since, and he had been bugging me hourly. Old lizard, I think he recognized her. I think he knew her. Wouldn't a kitsune recognize another kitsune, even if a human didn't pick up anything at all? Sort of like a scent on the wind—"

"You are more likely being hunted by a succubus or the like, but that is a very good point, and the answer is probably yes," Chinthliss responded. His brow creased and his eyes narrowed. "Bear in mind though, just as a Sidhe would be sensitive to the `scents' of those creatures from his world, a kitsune is going to be more sensitive to the `scents' of those from his. A gaki, for instance, or a nature-spirit. But that does give me something to work from."

"Can't you do something magical with those gloves?" Joe asked. "I mean, can't you use magic to find out something about her from them?" He bit his thumbnail as Chinthliss turned to look at him, obviously ill at ease with the whole concept. "Isn't that why you shouldn't let something that belonged to you fall into a wizard's hands, because they can use it to put a hex on you or something?"

"Cogent," Chinthliss agreed. "And if these were ordinary gloves, from an ordinary person, such things would bear fruit. But they are the gloves of a mage, and she has made use of the properties of the materials to remove as much of the essence of herself from them as she can."

"Which means it will take some real work to get anything useful out of them," Tannim translated for Joe. "And probably a lot of time."

Chinthliss put the gloves down and stretched. "I shall be comfortable here, and I will need nothing. It grows late. You should sleep, Son of Dragons." He lanced Tannim with a penetrating stare. "You were in need of rest when you came here, as I know only too well. I will consult with my allies and send them sniffing along the path these gloves have traced."

Tannim stood up, and Joe followed his example. "Yes, Mother," he said mockingly. "And I'll take my vitamins and brush my teeth before I go to bed."

Tannim chuckled, and he and Joe let themselves out, leaving Chinthliss sitting on the couch, studying the gloves.

\* \* \*

Shar smiled and petted the little air elementals that flocked around her, vying for her attention. Cross a kitten with a dragonfly and you might have something like these creatures. Less like a classical sylph than a puffball with wings, they were some of her chief sources of information when she did not care to go and gather it herself. They were not very bright, but they could be very affectionate. They seemed to like her.

One in particular was very affectionate, and extremely reliable; that was the one she called "Azure," and set him the particular task of keeping a constant eye on Tannim. She sent him off on his duties with a shooing motion and continued with her own preparations. She had a scheduled meeting with Madoc Skean, the chief of her "allies," and she was not looking forward to it.

The Unseleighe Sidhe was a sadistic, chauvinistic, selfish braggart, and a traitor to his own kind to boot. Most Unseleighe were born "on the dark side," so to speak: boggles and banshees, trolls and kobolds. But some, like Madoc, chose that path. Until recently, he had served as a knight in the court of High King Oberon. Oberon was a fairly tolerant fellow when it came to his subjects and their "games" with mortals—outright mischief was well within the bounds of what was considered amusing. Further, if he felt some foolish human deserved punishment or needed to learn a lesson, he saw no reason why a Seleighe shouldn't do whatever was needful so long as he stopped just short of killing the mortal. But some things he would not abide—and he caught Madoc at one of them. What it was, precisely, Shar did not know, though she could guess—but it had been enough to send Oberon into a red rage. He had physically cast Madoc out, blasting him through several layers of Underhill realities before he came to rest in a battered, broken heap.

It took Madoc some time to recover; once he did, he used the powerful charisma that had made him a brilliant manipulator in Seleighe Court politics and turned it on the Unseleighe left in disarray after the demise of Vidal Dhu and Aurilia. He not only organized them, but he attracted others to his side, including Unseleighe Sidhe far more powerful than Vidal Dhu had been.

Powerful Unseleighe Sidhe tended to be solitary souls; they did not like to share their power with anyone, and would support a "retinue" composed of vastly inferior creatures that were easy to control. They formed a "court" mostly as a means of amusement; they seldom agreed on anything. Innate distrust made alliances tenuous at best—an "I won't destroy your home if you don't destroy mine" cold war. But somehow, Madoc won them. And won them to his pet project.

Get rid of Keighvin Silverhair's little pet, the mortal called Tannim.

He managed to persuade them that Tannim, knowledgeable as he was in the ways of the Sidhe and Underhill, was far more of a danger to them than their traditional enemies, the Seleighe Court elves. He convinced them that Tannim was unlikely to turn against his friends, but that there was nothing stopping the young man from marching on Underhill and taking over the areas held by Unseleighe with a small army of Cold-Iron-wielding humans.

He even half-convinced Shar. She had been trained as a youngster by the Unseleighe, after all, in the time before she had broken off with her father. Why shouldn't Tannim think that she was just the same as

them? She was the daughter of Charcoal, Chinthliss' great enemy—and she had been groomed by Charcoal to be Tannim's rival in magic ever since Chinthliss took Tannim as a protégé. Allying with Madoc Skean became a matter of self-defense.

Until she came to learn more about both Tannim and Madoc, that is. Then it became obvious, at least to her, that this tale Madoc had spun about a human mage mad for power was full of what they threw on the compost heap. Tannim was no more a conquering Patton than she was. He might consider moving into some little unused section of Underhill one day, just as she had, but conquering vast sections of it would simply never occur to him. It was only Unseleighe paranoia that made such a thing seem possible.

But by then she had already committed herself to Madoc. She'd been having second thoughts for some time now.

The very fact that her blood-father was friends with the Unseleighe was enough to make her think they were worthless. What she had learned about them since she had cut off all ties to him only confirmed that. Only her own paranoia had made her listen to Madoc in the first place; only his incredible charisma had persuaded her to give the Unseleighe one more chance.

But Madoc had grown more and more arrogant with her every time she had spoken with him since she first pledged her help. He needed her; she was the only creature allied with him that could handle Cold Iron with impunity. He knew that, and yet pretended that it was otherwise.

And the more she saw and learned of Tannim, the less she liked Madoc or wished to put up with him.

So she donned her armor; armor that the Unseleighe would understand. Her hair she braided back in a severe and androgynous style that left the impression of a helmet. She wore tunic and pants of knitted cloth-of-silver that cleverly counterfeited fine chain-mail and minimized her femininity. Her belt was a sword-belt, with a supporting baldric, and the empty loops that should support a sheath spoke eloquently for her capabilities.

She looked herself over in the mirror, analyzing every nuance of her outfit and stance for clues that might hint at weakness. She found none.

She banished the glass again and turned toward the Gate, activating it and setting it for an Unseleighe-held portion of Underhill where she could Gate to Madoc Skean's stronghold. Although this was a poor strategic move, coming to him like a petitioner, she would not permit him here. Allow him here but once, and there was no telling the mischief he could cause.

Or what he might leave behind, besides his smell.

Her Gate had only three settings: Unseleighe Underhill, her mother's realm, and her father's. The last, she would not use. To go to the human world, she must use the Gate in the "garage." A bit awkward, sometimes, but necessary.

She stepped through her Gate, felt the shivering of energies around her as it sprang to life and bridged the gap between where she was and where she wanted to be.

As usual, it was dark. She blinked, and waited for her eyes to adjust. Many Unseleighe creatures simply could not exist in bright light, so most Unseleighe realms were as gloomy as a thunderstorm during an eclipse, or dusk on a badly overcast day. She stood at the head of a path that traveled straight through a primeval and wildly overgrown forest. Forests such as this one had not existed on the face of the human

world since the Bronze Age, if then. It was the distillation of everything about the ancient Forest that primitive man had feared.

And it contained everything dark and treacherous that primitive man had believed in.

The trees were alive, and they hungered; strange things rustled and moaned in the undergrowth. There were glowing eyes up among the branches, and as Shar stepped out on the path, the noises increased, the trees leaned toward her, and the number of eyes multiplied.

Something screamed in pain in the distance, and something nearer wailed in desolation.

Shar looked about her with absolute scorn, as the sounds and eyes surrounded her, and the trees closed in.

"Will you just chill out?" she snapped, putting a small fraction of her Power behind her words. "I've been here before, and you know it. I am not impressed."

A moment of stunned silence, a muttering of disappointment, and within a few more seconds, the trees were only trees, and there were no more scuttlings in the underbrush or eyes in the branches overhead.

"Oh, thank you," she said sarcastically, and made her way to the second Gate. So much of the power of the older Unseleighe depended on fear that the moment anyone faced them down, they simply melted away. That might be why there were so few of these unadapted creatures active in the humans' world these days, and Cold Iron had nothing to do with them fleeing to dwell Underhill. The modern world was frightening enough that most people couldn't be scared by these ancient creatures. Where was the power of glowing eyes to terrify when rat eyes looked out at children every day from beneath the furniture of their ghetto apartments? How could a man be terrified by reaching tree branches when beneath the tree was a crack-addict with a gun? Moans and cries in the darkness could be the neighbor pummeling his wife and children to a pulp—and he just might come after anyone else who interfered, too, so moans and cries were best ignored.

The supernatural lost its power to terrify when so much of the natural world could not be controlled. These elder creatures were forced to abide in places like this one, where, if they were lucky, some poor unsuspecting being from another realm might stumble in to die of fright.

But the Unseleighe who had adapted found the modern human world rich in possibility. They fed on human pain and misery, so anywhere there was the potential for such things, you found them in the thick of it. Sometimes they even caused it, either as sustenance for themselves or as a hobby. Some considered inflicting suffering on humans to be an art form.

She had been taught by her father and his friends that humans were no business of hers. They were cattle, beneath her except to use when she chose and discard afterward.

But she had been taught by her mother that humans were not that much different from her. More limited, shorter-lived—but did that mean that a human confined to a wheelchair was the toy of humans with no such limitations?

For a long time she had been confused by the conflicting viewpoints, especially while the handsome Unseleighe Sidhe had been courting her, seeking her favors. They seemed so powerful, so confident. They had everything they wanted, simply by waving a hand. They were in control of their world, and controlled the humans' world far more than the mortals knew. They were beautiful, charismatic,

confident, proud. . . .

But after a few bitter and painful episodes, she began to see some patterns. Once an Unseleighe got what he wanted, he discarded her exactly as they urged her to do with the humans. Her father, whom she tried desperately to please, cynically used her childish devotion to manipulate her.

The lessons were branded deeply; as deeply as the ones she was supposed to be learning. Little by little, she changed her own approach. She began learning, fiercely, greedily. She stole knowledge, when it was not given to her.

She spent more time in her mother's company. No one, not even the powerful Unseleighe lords, dared to block the approach of a nine-tailed kitsune to her daughter, and Ako made certain they were given no reason to think she was undermining their teaching.

Then, when the time was right, after Shar had established her own tiny Underhill domain, and she had learned everything she could, she began severing her connections to the Unseleighe and to her father.

She had cast Charcoal out of her life first; he had made the mistake of trying to coerce her when she refused to cooperate with some unsavory project of his. She no longer even remembered what it was; it had been trivial, but she had not wanted to have any part of it, and for the first time, she had the power to enforce her own will.

After barring him from her domain, she began pursuing her own projects—the first of which was to spend an entire year with her mother and her mother's people.

That year had been the most eye-opening time she had ever passed. She had moved among kitsune with poise, not posturing. She had learned manners rooted in respect, not fear of repercussions. She had heard laughter that was not aimed at anyone but instead filled the room with its warmth. At the end of that year, she had withdrawn to her own domain and begun planning what she truly wanted to do with her life, and more importantly, plotting how to rid herself of the Unseleighe influence without a loss of power or status.

She shook herself out of her reverie as she approached the Gate that would take her to Madoc Skean. This one was guarded, by literally faceless warriors, but she had the signs and the passwords, and they ignored her. There were four of them, of the "immortal" type; no weapon would kill them except Cold Iron, and even then it would have to penetrate their mage-crafted armor. The Gate was a real, solid structure, four pillars supporting a dome above a platform, all of black-and-red marble. The faceless ones stood at each corner, staring out into nothingness. They had no wills of their own, never tired, never needed food or drink; they were enchanted flesh and metal, sustained by the mage-energies of their master.

She walked up onto the platform beneath the dome, closed her eyes, and "knocked" with her power. At the third "knock," she opened her eyes on the audience chamber of Madoc Skean, Lord of Underhill, Magus Major and Unseleighe commander.

As if to emphasize how different he and his Seleighe rival Keighvin Silverhair were, everything in Madoc's domain was of the most archaic mode. This "audience chamber," for instance. Shar was fairly certain that he had copied it from a movie about a barbarian king and his barbarian rivals—all the Sidhe seemed to love movies. Built of the same black-and-red marble as the Gate, the main body of it was lit only by torches in brackets along the walls, so that the high ceiling was shrouded in gloom. Pillars ranged along each side of the room, their tops lost in the shadows. The floor, of the same marble, held a

scattering of fur rugs. A fire burned in the center of the room, held in a huge copper dish supported on bronze lions' feet. At the end of the room, on a platform that raised him above the floor by about three feet so that anyone who approached him would be forced to look up at him, was Madoc. He sat in a Roman-style chair, made of gold and draped with more furs. Torches burned in golden holders on either side of him, and the rear wall was covered with a huge tapestry depicting Madoc doing something disgusting to a defeated foe. Two more of his faceless guards flanked his throne; their black armor was ornamented with gold chasing and rubies the same color as drying blood.

Madoc wore a heavy, primitive crown of gold, inscribed with Celtic knotwork and set with more rubies, on his handsome, blond head. He made no attempt to disguise his cat-pupiled green eyes or pointed ears. His costume was an elaborate and thickly embroidered antique-style tunic and treads made of gold and scarlet silk; on his feet were sandals that laced up over the legs of the treads. The leather was studded with gold, as was the heavy belt at his waist. A crimson mantle of silk velvet was held to his shoulders by matching Celtic circle-brooches. His jewelry, aside from the crown and the brooches, consisted of a pair of heavy gold armbands and a gold torc with monster-head finials.

Shar could not help thinking that he looked like an art supply catalog on two feet.

Shar stepped carefully down from the platform, which held the physical counterpart of the Gate in the Forest, and made her way across the vast and empty floor. She kept her face impassive right up until the moment that she came to Madoc's feet.

Then she allowed her face to assume an expression of amused irony. "I think you owe Frank Frazetta licensing fees," she said.

Madoc frowned, a flash of real anger, as his impassive mask slipped for a moment. Shar smiled. Madoc hated being reminded that the elves copied everything they did from humans, and he hated it even more when she recognized the source.

"Don't mention Frazetta's name to me again. He has caused the Unseleighe enough trouble. You're making no progress in dealing with Tannim," he said abruptly, as she crossed her arms over her breasts and took a hip-shot, careless stance designed to tell him without words that she was not impressed.

She shrugged. "It's coming along. You know as well as anyone that Oberon has been taking an interest in Keighvin and his crew, and that includes Tannim. Challenge him without all the proper protocols and you could wind up answering to the High King. Again. Just because he threw you out of the Court once doesn't mean he can't choose to come after you."

Madoc flushed. "You haven't stayed long enough to get Tannim's response to your challenge!" he accused. "You're toying with him! Enough of your foolishness! We are not engaged with this plan to amuse you. Deal with the man and have done with it!"

She lowered her eyelids to hide her anger at the tone of command he had taken with her. He should know better than to take that attitude with her—

Suddenly, a soft popping sound signaled Azure's arrival into the throne room, speeding towards her with obvious excitement. Something must have happened to make her pet seek her out here! She raised her hand to warn Madoc not to disturb the creature—

Too late.

He was already irritated with her, and this intrusion gave him an excuse to vent that anger on something connected with her.

He blasted the hapless creature into the back wall with a flick of his hand. It whimpered once, and died.

Shar felt stunned, as if she had taken the blow herself. She stared at the remains of her pet, then transferred her gaze to Madoc. The Unseleighe yawned, rubbed his chin, and smiled at her lazily.

"Next time," he purred, "curb your dog."

At that moment Shar made up her mind about which side she was on.

She gave no outward sign of her thoughts. Instead, she said, "What do you want me to do? Don't you realize what weapon he's likely to choose for the Challenge? Cars. Racing. His Mustang against mine." She gritted her teeth and went on with the deception. "In anything else, I could best him, but not that. He's better than I am or ever will be, and no amount of magery is going to counteract his skill."

Madoc frowned, as if that had never occurred to him. "Well, kill him, then!" he snapped.

But again, she shook her head. "Oberon," she said succinctly. "If you don't want Oberon's attention, play by the rules of the game. We've issued the Challenge; we can't kill Tannim out of hand now. Remember, if you violate the rules, no Unseleighe will ever trust you. He has to accept the Challenge, and you're going to have to figure out some way of making him choose magery or some other weapon I am superior with. That's why I've been drawing things out; I've been trying to get him off balance enough that he won't think of racing as the response when I finally let him respond."

There. Bite on that awhile.

She seethed with anger at the wanton, pointless destruction of Azure; she would mourn the poor little creature later, when her privacy was assured. But the best way to get revenge on Madoc was to frustrate him, to make him angry. If he lost control of himself, he would do something stupid, and he might lose all of his allies. That would put him right back at square one, all of his plans in ruins, all of it to do over again. But this time it would take much longer to undo all the damage. Look how long it had taken Vidal Dhu to regain his reputation after losing to Keighvin Silverhair the first time!

Madoc frowned fiercely at being confronted with the truth—but then, unexpectedly, he smiled.

"But he cannot choose racing if he has nothing to race with, can he?" the Unseleighe lord said with glee. "Tis simple enough: we steal his precious Mustang with magic, and bring it Underhill! There are pockets we can armor against the harmful effect of so much Cold Iron—and I myself have enough power to bring the vehicle here!"

She blinked, taken aback—then quickly recovered. "What if he comes after it?" she countered. "What if he brings help with him, armed with Cold Iron weapons?"

"Then he but proves my point to Oberon," Madoc retorted with triumph. "And we can lay a trap for him. Oberon cannot object to our squashing him like an impudent insect if he brings Death Metal into Underhill!"

She was too well-trained to panic, but her mind raced as it never had before. "Let me deal with the car and set the trap," she said quickly. "Why waste your energies on dealing with something I can handle with



impunity? Then you can confront him yourself, power intact."

Madoc nodded slowly. "You have a point," he admitted. "It would exhaust me to bring the car Underhill; it would serve us little if I cannot be the one to defeat him here." He straightened regally on his throne. "Very well," he said, his arrogance as heavy a mantle as the red velvet shrouding his shoulders. "Deal with it, Shar. Bring the car to the Underhill pocket nearest the Hall of the Mountain King. The Norse are used to the presence of metals; it should cause a minimum of disturbance to their magics. And if it troubles them—" he smiled, a snake's smile as it prepared to sink its fangs into the neck of the prey "—well, I offered an alliance, and they refused me. They can deal with the consequences."

She nodded shortly and turned on her heel, striding to the Gate at the other end of the hall and presenting him with her back instead of retreating, walking backward, as an underling would do. In that much, at least, she could offer open defiance. Her jaw was clenched so hard it ached, and her hands twitched as she forced them to remain at her side without turning into fists.

He had gone too far. He had neither the right nor the cause to callously slay Azure. Now it was time for her to think, plan everything with absolute care, and then act. She must kidnap the Mustang; she must make sure that Tannim would follow it. But the result of that would not be what Madoc supposed. She would best Madoc at Madoc's own game.

And, fates willing, feed him his own black heart at the end of it all.

\* \* \*

Shar crouched in the gravel of the driveway of Tannim's house. Her fur was almost black under the pale moon, and she laid out the last components of her spell with care. Her tail lashed as she spun out the energies, linked them all in together, and flung them with handlike paws at the Mach I—

She held her breath, waiting, as the spell settled into place, a gossamer web of her power laid carefully over the layers and structures of Tannim's spells on his Mustang. As delicately as this was made, it still might set off his alarms—

It didn't, and she let out her breath in a rush. It had been damned difficult to get past all his mage-alarms and shields and this close to his parents' house, even wearing the true-fox shape. She had never been so close to triggering someone else's protections in her life, and she suspected that only her form had kept her from setting off all those alarms. It would have been disaster if she somehow set off the protections on the Mustang.

She had known from the moment Madoc opened his mouth to order the Mach I's capture that Tannim would, if the car was merely taken, simply write it off as a loss. He would know it was going to be bait in a trap. When he refused to come after it, Madoc would insist that she make good on the Challenge, assuming that Tannim would have to choose some other weapon.

The trouble was, Tannim could still choose racing. He could have the damned Victor GT sent down here to him if he wanted. He could buy two identical cars off a showroom floor.

Madoc would know she could not match him on a race course. He could do something stupid to hex the race, but he would do it in the mortal world, where he could not operate as freely as she could. Yes, she could work this into Madoc's downfall, but there would be a sacrifice she no longer wanted to make.

Madoc would murder Tannim, as he had murdered Azure. SharMarali Halanyn vowed, on the spirits of

her ancestors, Madoc Skean would have no more victims.

She had to do something to make it look as if the Mach I's disappearance was an accident. If it happened while he was doing something to the car, he would not assume it was a trap.

So, she laid in a spell to open a Gate to the appointed place the moment Tannim tried to set another spell of any kind on his car. With her nipping at his heels, it couldn't be long before he did just that. She would be ready to snatch his car away before he knew what was happening.

And since the Mach I would not end up anywhere near Unseleighe domains—as per Madoc's orders—he would assume that something had backfired in the spell he had set, and come after his wandering Mustang.

Or so she hoped, for his sake. If he did that, she had a chance of saving him and engineering Madoc's downfall.

The only other way of saving him would be for the two of them to join forces and take Madoc on. She knew how strong she was—and in a head-on confrontation, Madoc would win over her. He was the better fighter. The strengths of the kitsune lay in subterfuge, trickery. The strengths of the dragon—

She had not learned. Not well enough. Her father had not taught her enough to become a rival to his power. If Ako had remained with Chinthliss, perhaps—

Perhaps changes nothing, she scolded herself, and crept carefully down the driveway, still in fox-shape. She was strong enough to hold her independence only because Charcoal would not challenge Ako and her family, and because the Unseleighe did not realize how she had come to despise them. They thought they still ruled her, and permitted her what they thought was the illusion of independence. She could not protect Tannim alone. He could not withstand the full power of the Unseleighe alone. His friends from Fairgrove could not reach him before Madoc murdered him, if Madoc struck without warning.

They would have to join forces, and for that, she would have to show herself as his ally.

She looked back over her shoulder at the house once she was safely outside the perimeter of Tannim's shields. A single light burned in the room she knew was his.

What was he doing? Trying to extract information from her carefully Cleansed gloves? Thinking? Dreaming?

Of her?

She shook her head violently, her ears flapping, and sneezed. Then she spun around three times, a little red fox chasing her tail, and reached through the thrice-cast circle for her Gate to home.

\* \* \*

Tannim pulled the Mustang into Chinthliss' slot just before sunset. His mentor had told him on the phone when Tannim called him this morning not to bother to appear before then; his own researches would not be completed before dark.

So he and Joe cruised around Tulsa in the afternoon. Fox still hadn't put in an appearance.

But the mysterious, dark-haired woman in her black Mustang certainly did. She was tailing them.

She made no attempt to hide, but she also made no further attempt at contact of any kind. In fact, the two times he had tried to turn the tables on her and force a confrontation, she had managed to vanish into the traffic.

She stayed no less than three cars behind him, and no more than five, no matter what route he chose; even when he was certain he'd managed to shake her, she always turned up again. He thought he'd lost her when they pulled into one of the malls, but when he and Joe came out again with more clothing for Joe, she was there, parked three rows away from the Mach I, watching them.

When he stopped to fill up the tank, she was in the parking lot of a fast-food joint across the street. When he turned onto the Broken Arrow expressway, she followed right behind. He got off and thought he'd lost her for sure when he didn't see her following on the little two-lane blacktop road he'd chosen—but as soon as he came to a major intersection, there she was again, as if she had somehow known where he was going.

She finally vanished when he pulled into his folks' driveway, hot and frustrated, and doing his best not to take his frustration out on Joe.

He certainly hoped that Chinthliss would have better news for him than all of this.

She hadn't shown up on the drive to the hotel, so that was a plus. Maybe following them around all day, between the power-shopping and the aimless driving, had been driving her as buggy as being followed had driven him.

She sure as hell hadn't learned anything interesting. Unless it was which stores had his favorite brands of clothing.

They piled out of the car and started up the walkway in the blue dusk. Chinthliss met them at the door, letting them in without any of his usual banter. That was enough to make Tannim take a closer look at his friend. Chinthliss had a very odd, closed expression on his face.

"What's wrong?" Tannim asked bluntly.

Chinthliss shook his head and waved them both to seats on the couch. The two gloves lay on the table, in the exact middle, side by side, both of them palm showing. As Chinthliss took his own seat, Tannim watched him closely. Something was definitely up.

"I believe I have the identity of your challenger," Chinthliss said, abruptly, with no warm-up. "I don't know why she has challenged you, for certain, but I can guess. And I hope that I am wrong."

"So who is she?" Tannim asked when Chinthliss had remained silent for far too long.

Chinthliss drew himself up and tried to look dignified, but succeeded only in looking haggard. "I would rather not say," he replied. "It involves something very personal."

That was the last straw in a long and frustrating day. Tannim lost his temper. Chinthliss liked to play these little coaxing games, but Tannim was not in the mood for one now.

"Personal, my—" Tannim exploded, as Joe jumped in startlement at his vehemence. Then he forced

himself to calm down. "Look, lizard," he said, leaning forward and emphasizing his words with a pointed finger. "I've told you a lot of stuff that was damned personal over the years, when it had a bearing on something you needed to know. You know that nothing you tell me will leave this room. Time to pay up. I have to know this stuff. It's my tail that's on the line, here!"

Chinthliss licked his lips and tried to avoid Tannim's eyes. Tannim wouldn't let him.

Finally Chinthliss sighed and let his head sag down into his hands. "It is very complicated and goes back a long time," he said plaintively, as if he was hoping Tannim would be content with that.

Not a chance. "Ante up, Chinthliss," Tannim said remorselessly. "The more you stall, the worse I'll think it is."

Chinthliss sighed again, and leaned back in his chair, eyes closed. "It all began twenty-eight years ago, in the time of this world," he said, surprising Tannim. Huh. He wasn't kidding about it being a long time. That's a year longer than I've been alive.

"This occurred in my realm. There were two young males, constant rivals. One was called Charcoal, and one, Chinthliss," his mentor continued. "They both courted a lovely lady of the kitsune clan. She was young and flirtatious, and paid the same attentions to each. Very—ah—personal attentions. Chinthliss was the one who temporarily won her, mostly because Charcoal became insufferable. But it was not Chinthliss who fathered the daughter she bore."

Tannim sat bolt upright. Chinthliss—and a kitsune?

"The daughter was charming and talented, and Chinthliss had no qualms with accepting her as a foster-daughter, even though Charcoal had gone beyond being his rival and had become his most vicious enemy. But—he had many things on his mind, and eventually the Lady Ako became disenchanted with the lack of attention he paid her, and left him." There was real pain on Chinthliss' features, the ache of loss never forgotten and always regretted. "When she left him, she took her daughter. He never saw either of them again."

He opened his eyes at last, and Tannim locked his lips on the questions he wanted to ask. "That was when Chinthliss realized that he needed others, and began looking for someone—yes, to take the places of Lady Ako and SharMarali. Stupid, I know, for one person can never replace another, but I have never been particularly wise, no matter what my student might say to flatter me. . . ." His voice trailed off for a moment, then he looked Tannim straight in the eyes. "I never found anyone to match Ako, but I did find an eager young mind to teach, a protégé, someone to take the place of little Shar. That was why I gave him the name, 'Son of Dragons'; not only as a joke on the name of his real, blood parents, but because he became a kind of son to me."

Tannim licked lips gone dry, and prompted him gently. "Is this—Shar—the one who's been following me?"

Chinthliss nodded painfully, as if his head was very heavy and hard to move. "I don't think there can be any doubt," he said. "Especially since there is only one kitsune-dragon I know of, and in the past, I heard rumors, rumors I had thought I could discount. I thought that Lady Ako had Shar safely with her; the rumors were that not long after I began teaching you, Charcoal asserted his parental rights over the girl and took her off to be trained by himself and by his allies. The Unseleighe."

At Tannim's hissing intake of breath, Chinthliss grimaced. "You see, the rumors I heard were that he

intended to make her into the opposite of you."

Joe scratched his head thoughtfully. "I can see that," he said. "It all matches, if she's supposed to be the anti-Tannim. Even the car she drives is a Mustang. Late model, old versus new. The same, only different."

"So you see why she would be challenging you," Chinthliss continued unhappily. "And why it's happening here and now, in Oklahoma, where I first found you."

Tannim shook his head and groaned. "Oh, God. I'm in an evil twin episode. If this were a TV show, I'd kick in the screen about now."

Joe snickered; Chinthliss made what sounded like a sympathetic noise deep in his throat.

Tannim looked up at Chinthliss again. "Okay, we can figure it's Shar; we can figure she's sleep—ah—working with the Unseleighe. She's challenging me, and figures she's going to wipe me. Keighvin and Conal said that since I have choice of weapons in a Challenge, I should choose racing."

Chinthliss brightened a little at that. "The laws of challenge are clear on that point; you have the right of any weapon you choose—and I rather suspect that they would never think of racing as a weapon. I cannot imagine how even Shar could best you in a contest of that sort. Unless her allies make it something less than a fair fight."

Tannim leaned back in his chair and ran his fingers through his hair thoughtfully. "Okay. Let's assume they do. What can they do? Booby-trap the course, do something to her car to turn it deadly, do something to mine to make it fail on me."

"I can prevent them from interfering with the course," Chinthliss replied quickly. "I have more practice working in this world than they."

"No matter what they do to her car, they have to get it close to mine to make any weapons work." Tannim unwrapped a pop, stuck the paper in the ashtray and the cherry-pop in his mouth. "That just takes a little more finesse on my part. I've had nasties after me. If she's never done combat-driving before, she's no match for me."

Chinthliss shrugged. "Where would she have learned?" he asked. "Who would have taught her?"

"More to the point, where would she have gotten the practice?" Tannim put in. "SERRA keeps an eye out for reports of driving `incidents'; things like that sometimes mean there's a mage out there that isn't trained or mentored. I think we'd have a tag on her if she'd been messing around on her own. Hell, she'd have run into one of ours by now, for sure."

"That only leaves—sabotaging the Mach I," Joe said. "But how do you keep someone from messing around with your car when they can do it magically?"

"Easy," Tannim and Chinthliss said in chorus. "More magic."

Joe sighed. "I shoulda known."

Tannim half grinned. "So," he said, looking into Chinthliss' eyes, "feel up to anything tonight? Time might not be on our side. Your wicked stepdaughter was trailing us all over Tulsa today."

"Mmm. I will help, yes," Chinthliss replied. "Most of today's work was not mine. And I have a few ideas that I would like you to try anyway."

"Shall we?" Tannim rose and bowed, gesturing toward the door.

"Let's shall," Chinthliss said with a sigh. "Tannim, this is not how I wanted to find her again."

"I can imagine." Tannim led the way out to the Mustang. It was fully dark now. The stars above dotted the sky even through the light-haze thrown up by Tulsa. Out in the country they would be able to see the Milky Way.

Joe automatically wedged himself into the backseat, leaving the front to Chinthliss. "If this girl's half kit-whats-it," he asked, leaning over the seat as Tannim pulled out of the parking slot, "would that be why Fox just disappeared and hasn't come back?"

"Exactly so," Chinthliss told him. Tannim let his mentor make the explanations; he was too busy watching for that black Mustang. "Shar's mother is a nine-tailed kitsune; she can shape-change into a real fox if she chooses, or into anything else. She can act and be acted upon as a real human woman. She has powers I could wish I enjoyed. Nine tails is an enormously high rank, and I have never personally heard of or met a kitsune with more tails. The number of tails indicates the rank and power in a kitsune; I doubt that Shar, in her kitsune form, has less than six. FX has only three tails, which is why he can affect nothing in this world; he could not possibly best her, and if he crossed her, she could take one of his tails."

"So?" Joe wanted to know.

Chinthliss shrugged. "So, he would definitely lose rank and power—and there are some who say that the number of tails also means the number of lives a kitsune has. Lose a tail and you lose a life."

"Oh." Joe sat back to digest this.

Tannim knew that the young man must be confused as all hell. Kitsunes, dragons, magic-enhanced cars . . . it could have flattened a less stable person. Maybe in some cases old what's-his-name was right: "that which does not kill us, makes us stronger." It sure seemed to work for Joe.

Helluva way to grow up, though.

The barn seemed the right place to go, even though they'd have to do any magic on the Mach I "without a net," outside the protections available inside the barn. But with two mages here, one of them a dragon, what could go wrong that they couldn't fix?

Joe went out ahead with a flashlight, just to make sure that their little playmate hadn't booby-trapped the access with tire-slashers. He walked all the way to the side of the barn, examining the flattened lines in the grass, and waved an "all-clear" when he reached the barn itself.

Tannim pulled up beside the barn and got out. Chinthliss followed.

He stood looking at the Mach I for a long time, fists on his hips, feet apart and braced. Then he took a deep breath, and stepped back.

"All right folks," he said quietly, as the crickets and mockingbirds sang in the distance, and a nighthawk

screamed overhead. "It's show time."

\* \* \*

Although Tannim had never done anything synchronized this way before, Chinthliss wanted to set up all of their spells in a complex net, so that they all meshed and could all be triggered together.

Tannim had argued against that, but not very forcefully, because he had known Chinthliss was right about one thing. Once Shar got a whiff of magics out here at the barn, she'd know that Chinthliss was involved. And once she knew that, she might change her mind about keeping her distance. They'd really better do everything at once, because they might not get a second chance.

The trouble was, he had no idea how well all this stuff was going to "take," given the protections that were already on the Mach I. And he had no idea how it would integrate with what was already there. Hell, he thought ruefully, as Chinthliss laid out the last of his webs of power over Tannim's own "crystalline" geometric structures, I've got no idea how half of what he wants to do is going to work! It was worse than computer programming.

Chinthliss surveyed his handiwork and stepped back a pace. "Ready?" he asked.

"Ready," his former pupil replied, though not without considerable misgivings.

"Right. On my count." Chinthliss walked to the tail of the car and raised his hands, and Tannim copied his gesture, standing at the nose. "Four. Three. Two. One. Fire."

Tannim triggered his spells.

What should have happened was that a structure a great deal like the dome inside the barn would form, then shrink down to become one with the Mach I's skin.

What actually happened was that the dome formed and shrank, all right—

But as soon as it touched the skin of the Mustang, there was a blinding flash of light.

Tannim shouted in pain, and turned away, eyes watering, swearing with every curse he had ever heard in his life. He scrubbed at his eyes frantically—What did we do to my car?

There were spots dancing in front of him, but it was perfectly clear what they had done to his car.

Because the Mach I was no longer there; only a flattened place in the grass, and a single chrome trim-ring from one of the wheels, gleaming in the moonlight.

"Ah, hell!" he half groaned, half shouted. "Now what am I gonna do? How do you explain this to State Farm?"

## CHAPTER SIX

Tannim stared at the chrome trim-ring for a moment longer, then waded through the tall grass and picked

it up. It felt warm, as if it had been sitting in the sun for a long time. "The Mach I can't have gone far," he said finally. "At least, I don't think it could have. We didn't put that much power into those spells, not enough to have teleported a car for miles—"

"If it went Underhill, 'far' is relative," Chinthliss warned. "My guess is that's where it went. It would not take a great deal of power to open a Gate into some truly outré realm."

Tannim felt himself blanch, and the bottom dropped out of his stomach. Underhill. It wasn't just Keighvin and his "good" elves who lived Underhill. So did the Unseleighe, the efrits, and a lot of other nasty characters. Underhill wasn't one place, it was many places, all lumped in the same generic basket. Some of those places held people who didn't care for Tannim very much. "If it went Underhill," he said slowly, "and the bad guys get ahold of it, I am in deep kimchee. I've got a lot of personal power invested in that car. They could get at me through it. I've got to get it back before they know it's there."

"Do you think that is wise?" Chinthliss asked, looking skeptical and a tad worried. "You could end up in more difficulties than if you simply left it there."

"I don't think I have a choice," he retorted. "It's either that, or cut it off from me entirely, which I'm not sure would work, then try to explain to my folks where my car went. They know I'd never sell it. Shoot, I'd rather deal with Unseleighe."

Not to mention the long walk back. I could say someone stole it. But then I'd have to go through the whole police show, and meanwhile I still have Shar on my tail and I wouldn't have all the protection I built into the Mustang. It did occur to him that he could borrow an elvensteed from Keighvin—after all, if Rhellan could look like a '57 Chevy, surely another 'steed could look like the Mach I. But that would mean calling in yet another favor from Keighvin, and that would still leave the problem of the Mach I in possibly unfriendly hands. It won't take them more than a couple of days to figure out that it's down there; all that Cold Iron unshielded is going to make a helluva distortion in the magic fields Underhill. It'll only get worse the longer I wait. If I just get in and get out again, everything should be fine.

Besides, he loved that car. There were a lot of important memories tied up in it. It had carried him through a lot of bad situations, and more than a few good ones. He wanted it back.

"It hasn't been down there that long; I can't imagine anyone would have found it this soon. I can use this to scry with," he continued, holding up the trim-ring as he pushed through the waist-high grass to get inside the barn. "It shouldn't take me long to find it. Once I know where it is, I can go get it and bring it back with me. It's easier to open up a Gate from there to here than vice versa. Right?"

"That depends—" Chinthliss began.

But Tannim ignored him. After all, if it hadn't been for Chinthliss insisting that they trigger all the spells together, none of this would have happened. Although how that particular batch of spells could have conspired to open up a hole into Underhill, he could not imagine.

Of course, no one knew how programmers got Windows 3.1 to run, either, and it had at least as many ways to go wrong as their cobbled mass of spells.

He put the trim-ring down on the ground once he got inside the protected area of the barn, triggered some of the primary protections, and then laid a mirror-finished disk of energy within the trim-ring. That turned the whole trim-ring into a scrying mirror, very like some of the scrying pools Underhill, but set specifically for the Mach I. Chinthliss came in behind him and conjured up a mage-light that provided



real-world illumination. In the dim, blue light, Joe wore an expression of worry and puzzlement. Chinthliss was, as usual, inscrutable.

He crouched down on his heels beside the ring as Joe and Chinthliss joined him. Joe stared nervously down over his shoulder, but Chinthliss kept chewing on his lip and casting suspicious glances everywhere except at the ring.

The surface of the mirror glowed with a milky radiance like fog lit up from within. Silently, Tannim commanded it: Show me the vehicle of which you were once a part. Show me where it is, and the condition it is in.

He continued to stare down at the ring as the light within it shifted restlessly, showing only vague shapes, and hints of wavering forms within its misty depths.

Finally, faint color tinged the fog, red and gold, purple and deep blue. He willed more power into the mirror, and the image within it strengthened and the colors intensified.

Then the whole image trembled violently, and settled; the huge oblong of deep, deep red in the center cleared and became the Mustang, while the rest of the image focused into the background.

The Mach I sat sedately in the exact middle of what could only be a huge audience chamber, literally fit for a king. She looked terribly odd there: the only modern object in a room that resonated with a feeling of ancient times. Her four tires rested on a floor of polished amber; behind her was a wall covered with a geometric tapestry of red, blue, purple, and gold. Benches of gold and amber sat beneath the tapestry, and in between the benches were ever-burning lamps of gold and tortoiseshell, or stands holding antique weaponry.

A thick patina of dust lay over everything except the car.

Tannim chewed his lip, trying to figure out just where this was. Underhill, obviously, since of the humans of this world, only a Russian Tzar could ever afford to have a room with a floor of amber, but the question was, where Underhill?

Chinthliss finally looked down at the image within the mirror and frowned. "That's the audience chamber of the Katschei, the one he used when he was in a good mood," he said. "It's not that far from the Nordic elven enclaves. Once the Katschei was dead, I'd have thought for certain that something else would have taken over his Underhill holdings, but it looks abandoned. Maybe there's a curse on the place or something."

"Yeah, look at the dust. Well. The Nordic elves are deep Underhill. Keighvin says some of them haven't come out for centuries." That gave him distance and direction; he ought to be able to Gate from here to there with Chinthliss' assistance, using the trim-ring as an anchor, then return the same way. The ring, having been part of the car, should keep the path between them open and clear.

He stood up. "Well, if it's as abandoned as it looks, this should be a piece of cake. I can Gate over and Gate back before three in the morning." He grinned at Joe, crookedly. "Be glad you're with me, otherwise Mom would have you under a curfew."

"I really don't feel comfortable with this," Chinthliss began, then shook his head. "Never mind. I fear it was my work that caused this; I shall have to defer to your judgment."

"I told you why I can't just leave it there," Tannim replied. "If we were home, I'd grab Keighvin and a bunch of the polo players and go riding cross-Underhill to get it. But I'm not, and we don't have time to call them in. If I go now, before anyone realizes the big anomaly that just plopped down there has a physical focus, we should be fine. Underhill's not that stable, and stuff causes mage-quakes all the time down there."

And people are always watching for mage-quakes, bonehead. Sometimes interesting things surface after one. Yeah, you'd better get your tail moving before somebody finds this particular "interesting thing" and gets the pink slip on it.

Chinthliss shrugged and stepped back a pace. "Have it your way. I can at least establish the Gate for you."

Tannim nodded, and cast a glance back at Joe. The young man looked very worried, but he said nothing, perhaps because he felt so out of his depth with two obviously practiced mages.

Chinthliss stared fixedly at the trim-ring for several minutes, then raised his hands slowly. The trim-ring rose smoothly and rotated sideways until it was facing Tannim and balanced on edge, forming a shining "O" that hovered in midair. Joe's eyes widened. Chinthliss spread his fingers, and the trim-ring shivered and expanded, an inch at a time, thinning as it did so, until it was about a half an inch thick and tall enough for Tannim to pass through. The scene inside the ring remained the same: the Mach I, crouched on the amber floor as if in the heart of a showroom. As the ring widened, the scene expanded so that it was possible to see a bit more: the geometrics on the tapestry proved to be only a very wide border; now the legs and lower torsos of humans and other creatures engaged in combat were visible, all of it woven in the same flat but colorful style, like a lacquer box. Then, as Chinthliss shifted the focus of the spell from seeing to going, the scene vanished, replaced by a dead-black wall.

"I can't hold it long," Chinthliss warned in a voice that showed strain. "If you're going, go now!"

Tannim did not hesitate. He stepped across the edge of the ring, closing his eyes involuntarily as he felt the internal lurch and tingle that a Gate-crossing always gave him. He experienced a moment of disorientation and blackout, accompanied by a jolt as he dropped about a foot. He flexed his legs automatically and dropped into a crouch, one hand touching the floor.

When his eyes opened again, he found himself not more than a couple of feet from the Mach I, one hand resting in about a half inch of dust. Beneath the dust, the amber floor glowed slightly, adding to the illumination in the room with a warm, buttery light.

The same depth of dust lay everywhere—except around the edge of the room, in a path about three feet wide. Odd.

He repressed a sneeze, straightened, and turned around. It was virtually the same behind him. The tapestry on that wall showed twelve lovely maidens dancing around a tree loaded with golden fruit, in the heart of a walled garden. The chamber itself was immense, as big as a high school gymnasium at least. The benches were pushed up against three of the four walls; gold and transparent amber, rather than the opaque butter-amber of the floor and walls. The fourth side held a raised platform with a gold-and-amber throne standing in lonely splendor on it. The hanging on that wall was plain purple with gold fringe as long as his arm on the bottom hem. There was no hanging on the opposite wall; it held a set of huge golden double doors, both gaping open. Beyond them lay darkness; light from the audience chamber was swallowed up by that darkness immediately, as if it was just as big as this room. Above the doors, the wall had been inlaid with mosaics of cabochon gemstones forming a pattern of flowers.

He tensed as sound came from beyond those doors. Instinctively, he sprinted to the side of the Mach I and crouched down beside the headlights, ready to use it for cover.

The noises continued; they sounded like someone shuffling, out there in the darkness. He listened carefully and caught another set of sounds: a steady brushing in a rhythmic pattern, scraping, and something like the sound of squeaking cart wheels.

What the—

Something moved out there in the darkness. He tensed, and crouched a little lower beside the fender, one hand in the dust and one clutching the chrome. He smothered another sneeze. He strained his eyes into the murk; magical ever-burning lamps might have been a neat touch, but they didn't give off a heck of a lot of light, and neither did the glowing floor. The sounds neared.

And finally, the maker of the sounds appeared.

A gnarled and twisted old man, dressed in nondescript rags, shuffled in and stood by the hinge of one of the open doors. He was mostly bald, but with a ring of long, unkempt, yellowish-white hair straggling down the back of his head, and he had an equally unkempt white beard that reached to his knees. He held a push-broom and shoved it in front of him with laborious strokes. There was a cart tethered to him by a rope around his waist, which followed him, wheels squeaking, creeping forward with every shuffling step. He made short, hesitant strokes with the broom, then put the broom down painfully, leaning it against the cart; he then reached into the cart, and picked up a whiskbroom and a dustpan.

He got down onto his knees with little whimpers of pain, felt his way to the edge of the area he had just swept, and brushed the little ridge of dust he had collected into his pan.

He got back up to his feet in the same laborious fashion, turned, and felt around the cart. His hand touched the mouth of an open bag resting in the cart, and he carefully tapped the dust into the bag. Then he picked up the broom and began it all again.

What the heck is this—the janitor of the damned?

The old derelict came fully into the audience chamber—and only then did Tannim see why he was doing his work with such slow and stilted motions.

Where his eyes should have been there were two gaping, old, but still unhealed, wounds.

Tannim's hissing intake of breath alerted the old man to his presence. The old fellow turned his sightless eyes in Tannim's direction, holding the broom defensively in front of him.

"Who be ye?" he called in a quavering, rusty voice. "What ye want?" His country-English accent was so thick that Tannim could hardly make out what it was he had actually said. I haven't heard an accent like that since I watched one of those BBC nature shows. It's almost another language entirely.

Tannim stood up slowly, but he made no move to approach the man. Appearances could be deceptive Underhill. It was hard to tell what was a trap and what was harmless.

"My name is Tannim," he said slowly and carefully, so the old man could make out the words through his own American accent. "I am here to retrieve something that was lost."

"Lost? Lost?" The old man shook his head in senile bewilderment. "Naught's been lost here, boy, 'cept me." He grimaced with pain, his face a mass of wrinkles. "This be no place fer an honest Christian. There be boggles here." He turned his head blindly from side to side, as if looking for the boggles he could no longer see. "Ye seem a good, honest lad. There's danger here. Best leave whiles ye can."

"I found what it was I was looking for, sir," Tannim said placatingly. "But I've seen no danger."

"What ye cain't see kin getcha," the old man retorted, and cackled crazily. "I come here lookin' fer treasure, an' see what it got me! No doubt ye look at all th' gold, an' there's lust in yer heart fer it. Pay it no heed, boy! 'Tis fairy gold, an' not fer any man of God! Take yerself and yer lost thing away, afore them boggles git ye, an' ye find yerself like me—" the voice shook, and tears trickled from the eyeless sockets—"all alone, i' th' dark, ferever an' ever. Never t' see m' lovely Nancy, nor m' ol' Mam. Never t' see nothin' an nobody again. . . ."

The old man stood there, weeping horribly from the ruins of his eyes, rattling on about how he had come to be here, as he clutched his broom. Tannim pieced out from the rambling discourse that the man had somehow come upon one of the rare doors into Underhill that opened at specific times—one of the solstices, for instance, or at the full moon. He had seen a rich hall beyond the door and had returned with bags to carry away the loot, full of greed.

But those who had owned the hall beyond the door were not Seleighe elves, who would have tricked him, terrified him for the sport of it, but let him go relatively unharmed. They were Unseleighe, who used that hall as a tasty trap for the unwary. They throve on pain and fear, and nothing pleased them more than to have a human captive to inflict both on.

They had tormented him until they grew bored with his antics, then had decided on one last torment. They blinded him and sent him here. Where "here" was, he had no clue. His task was to "keep the place clean"—and his life depended on it, for once a day he was to return to a specific spot somewhere in the depths of this place, and the dust he had collected would be transformed into an equal amount of bean-bread. Ironically, the rope that held him to his cart, the sack in the cart, and the cart itself were all tools he himself had brought to carry away his loot. It was an irony that obviously had not been lost on the Unseleighe.

Blinded, he could not see where he had cleaned, and apparently he was a fairly stupid man, who had not figured that he could tell where he was in a room by the echoes from the walls, as many blind people Tannim knew had learned to navigate. That was why he cleaned no farther into the room than he could reach with his broom, despite the tantalizing fact that he knew there was thick dust just beyond that point. He had ventured into the middle of a room once, and had been hopelessly lost until he had managed to crawl into a wall again. After that, he never dared make a second attempt.

He was in constant pain, he was more than half mad, and the two oozing holes where his eyes had been made Tannim sick to his stomach to look at. If he remembered his name, he never told it to Tannim. But he was—or had been—a human being, once. However stupid or greedy he had been, he did not deserve a fate like this one.

Yet when Tannim offered to take him away, the man cowered against the wall, wept, and babbled in sheer terror. Clearly, he had been tricked by Unseleighe pretending to "rescue" him before this. Every time Tannim tried to touch him, he only winced violently away. The only way Tannim would ever get the oldster into the Mustang would be kicking, screaming, and utterly mindless with terror. Which right now, could attract a whole lot of unwanted attention and get them both caught.

Finally, Tannim did the only thing he could think of to help the man. He cut bits of the gold fringe from the bottom of the tapestry at the end of the hall and knotted the pieces together until they formed a very long, heavy rope, which he gave to the old man.

"Tie this to the rope on the cart," he explained patiently. "Tie the other end to your waist. You can go as far into the center of a room as you like, and as long as you don't pull the cart after you, you can always follow the rope back to the wall."

He had to explain it several times before the old man finally grasped it, and if the lesson would last past the next meal, Tannim would never be sure. But he had tried. And the old wreck was weepingly, pathetically grateful. But not grateful enough to lose his suspicion of Tannim's motives or identity—his paranoia was too deeply ingrained for him to trust anyone to take him away.

There was something else that occurred to Tannim: time passed oddly Underhill, and the Seleigh and Unseleigh had ways of staving off old age from mortals when they chose. But those methods did not work in the human world, where magic was not as strong. Assuming that he could persuade the oldster that he was to be trusted, Tannim could rescue the poor old goat and bring him across a Gate, only to see him crumble into dust on the threshold.

Would that be a kinder fate than the one he currently had? Given a choice—

Yes, but it's his choice, not mine.

There was enough cutlery in this audience chamber alone, in the weapon-stands, for the old man to have ended his life long ago if he chose. Evidently he preferred living, however miserable that life might be. Maybe it wasn't all that miserable by his standards. Presumably he still had a home, something in his memories worth living for. Perhaps the unknown of death presented a more terrifying prospect than the quiet horror of his daily existence here.

He doesn't trust me, and I can't promise him anything, anyway.

The old derelict filled his sack to the top and shuffled off into the darkness, muttering happily to himself. The cart-wheels creaked, marking his progress, until at last the sounds were swallowed up in the thick darkness.

\* \* \*

Shar shuddered and came awake with a smothered gasp.

The internal lurch as Tannim triggered Shar's trap caught her asleep in her own pocket-domain, and took her completely by surprise. She really hadn't expected him to try anything magical for another twenty-four hours at least! She had been so tired after all her work of last night and the ruse of tailing him today that she had thrown herself down on the couch as soon as she returned "home," and must have fallen asleep. The aftershock of so much Cold Iron linked to her hitting the fields of mage-energy Underhill resonated through her as she sat bolt upright, shaking hair and sleep-fog out of her eyes.

She swore to herself as her head rung with a very physical sensation of impact. There was no way that Madoc would ignore that! And since he knew that Shar was bringing the Mustang Underhill, he would know what had caused this particular mage-quake. She massaged her temples and swung her feet down to the floor, and wondered what particular imp of ill luck she had annoyed enough to plague her with all

these miscalculations.

Oh, most excellent, she told herself sarcastically. Madoc knows where I was going to dump the car. He'll be there, either as soon as or before I can get there. He won't wait for me to tell him I've caught Tannim—he'll go to gloat over the car! He might even decide not to trust me further and set up an ambush of his own! Why didn't I think of that in the first place? I swear, I get tired of having to second-guess these Unseleighe pricks!

Tannim would, probably, follow his car as soon as he knew where it had gone. He might already be there. Oh, damnation, if he'd been in the car when it made its little journey, he would be there already!

Better count on it. If he's not, I can revise things.

Her mind buzzed with a hundred plans, but all of them hinged on one thing—whether Madoc went to the Katschei's Hall alone, or with his troop of mage-warriors. Alone, she and Tannim could probably best him and be away. But with his troops backing him, there wasn't a chance.

Ah, damnation, I've never seen him leave his hall once without a full escort. He'll have them with him.

Her plans had been based on the notion that she could bring the car Underhill without Madoc knowing when she did. Why hadn't she foreseen that the Mustang would cause such a ruckus?

Because I was basing it on my car, and I plain forgot how much of Tannim's car is steel and Cold Iron, and all of it filled to the roof with spellwork. I should have done my homework, and now it's too late—

How soon would Madoc get there? How much lead time would she have? Better plan on not having a lot. Better plan on none. Better assume that he'll beat me unless my short route is faster than his.

If Tannim was there, and she had a few minutes, she would probably be able to give him some kind of warning. If she had no time, perhaps she might still be able to do something. Convince Madoc—no, wait! He must have a dozen Unseleighe lords who all have their own plans for Tannim! If I let them know Madoc has the man, I can get them all tangled up in arguing with each other long enough to get him out of there—maybe . . .

The more she thought about it, the better it sounded. The beauty of it was that she would not even have to identify herself to let the information loose. All it would take would be a few well-placed anonymous messages. If all they had was the car, and Tannim didn't follow it immediately, Madoc's allies would be all the more annoyed that Madoc hadn't told them of his plans to trap the human.

So she delayed her departure just long enough to send Madoc's allies their little messages, magicked into pockets and other handy places by the same means she'd used to tack her first note to the panel of Tannim's Mustang, though this time sans pop-rivet. In a few moments, as they discovered their messages, they would all go looking for their titular leader. If Madoc showed up now, it wouldn't be with his own hand-selected guards, but with a following of "allies," all of whom had their own axes to grind on Tannim's skull.

She faced her Gate and set it for that first Gate in Unseleighe lands, from which platform she could descend through another series of magical portals and wind up in the Katschei's Hall, in the room beside the audience chamber. There were very few places Underhill that led directly into each other. For reasons of defense on the part of the Seleighe and neutral realms, and paranoia on the part of the Unseleighe, one could only Gate into halls, Elfhames, or other residences from carefully guarded external

Gates, which in turn could only be reached from Gates in friendly or neutral territories. Her one advantage would be that she knew a way to the Katschei's Hall that involved fewer Gates than Madoc did.

She set the Gate and stepped through, but remained on the platform where she had arrived. With a chanted phrase and a sigil drawn in the air, she reset it to another currently vacant domain.

That's where I did do my research, she comforted herself, stepping through and arriving at the edge of a swamp. If you know who used to be allies, you know where the Gates are set. Each Gate had a maximum of six destinations; many were not set for more than three or four. No one ever went anywhere in a straight line Underhill, and often a traveler would have to physically walk from one Gate to another in neutral lands in order to reach a Gate that would take him in the direction he wanted to go, and not likely even close to his true destination. It was like trying for connections at Dallas/Ft. Worth airport.

Fortunately, this was not one of those places. Shar would not have enjoyed a stroll across any swamp, but this one, which once had housed Egyptian crocodile-spirits, was particularly unpleasant. They had simply vanished over time; the theory was that something had used these swamps as hunting grounds, and picked them off, one by one. Life was dangerous Underhill; the creature that trusted in his own invincibility and immortality often discovered how misplaced that trust was.

But the Egyptians once allied with the efrits, and the efrits with the vampires of the Balkan states. Those in turn had alliances with the Nordic elves—the sort that corresponded to the Unseleighe—and they contracted an alliance with the Katschei. All of those connections were as long distant as the things that once prowled this marsh, but Shar made a point of discovering such alliances and making mental maps of all the Gates that interconnected. Such maps had served her well in the past, and no doubt would again.

Five Gates later, she walked into the audience chamber of the Katschei, a Russian creature, half-monster, half-mage, who had been defeated and killed by a clever human and a benevolent Russian bird-spirit, the Firebird. A great many of the Russian counterparts to the Seleighe and Unseleighe were bird and animal spirits. The Mare of the Night Wind, for instance, and her sons inhabited the same realm as the Firebird.

According to all that Shar had learned, there were not many creatures who cared to share the Katschei's realm with him. Most of the Katschei's underlings had either been his own creations, or creatures which quickly fled as soon as he was no more. No one had ever taken over this domain afterward, partially because of a superstitious feeling that a place where an "immortal" had been destroyed was very unlucky for other "immortals."

Most of the Katschei's palace now lay in complete darkness, except for the gardens outside and the audience chamber. The garden contained a Gate to the human world, but it came out in the heart of Old Rus, not far from what was now Moscow. Probably not the best place for an American with no passport, no luggage, and nothing but his vehicle to appear, even in the current enlightened times. . . .

Assuming Tannim was already here, and that she had so great a lead time over Madoc that she could help him get the Mach I out of the palace, into the garden, and through a Gate that hadn't been used in centuries. Assuming Tannim would cooperate.

The glow from the audience chamber lay ahead and to the right; she moved carefully across the hallway, and paused for a moment on the threshold.

He was there, all right, standing with his hands in his pockets and his legs braced apart, staring at the car.

Already it was a disruptive presence Underhill: little crackling tendrils of energy crept across the hood and roof from time to time, and the longer it remained here, the worse the effect would be.

She stepped into the room, making no effort to be quiet. The heels of her boots made muted ticking sounds on the amber floor.

He whirled, hands held out to attack or defend.

She waited for him to say something, but he remained silent. She kept her own hands down at her side, and walked slowly toward him. She did not hold her hands out; in a mage, empty hands did not mean "no threat," and such a gesture could be construed as aggressive. He showed no sign of relaxing.

She stopped when she was a few feet away from him. Already she sensed the Gate in the other room gathering energy; it would take longer to transport Madoc and his guards than it had to bring only her, but her time was still short.

But he spoke first. "I know who you are, Shar," he said flatly. "I know who your teachers were, and who you've allied yourself with, and they're not exactly friends of mine."

His use of her name shocked her into unconsidered speech, and she flinched as if she'd been slapped. How had he learned her name, much less anything else about her? Unless—

Chinthliss? Could he have contacted Chinthliss?

"They aren't exactly friends of mine, either, monkey-boy," she snapped before she thought. Then she shook her head, and continued, talking so quickly she sounded like a New Yorker so that she could get everything out before Madoc arrived. "Look, you don't have to trust me, you don't have to believe me, but I want to help you. I'm not what I seem, or what you think. But I'm going to have to play along with these jerks to get some room to act, so cut me some slack until the next time you see me, okay? Things are changing faster than you can guess, and I don't much like the idea of being your opposite. I really don't like being forced into it."

He started to answer; she waved him to silence. The Gate had just opened again. She backed up several paces, then said, "Sorry about this," and slapped a spell of paralysis on him just as a clamor of metal signaled that Madoc had come with his guards. Madoc walked through the door into their midst.

"I told you I would bring him, Madoc Skean," she said calmly, without turning around. "I told you, and I have."

Madoc didn't quite run, but he certainly hurried his walk, pushing his escort aside. His eyes gleamed with eager greed as he surveyed Shar briefly, and her prisoner in a more leisurely manner. "You did. Well done," he replied absently. "Now, if you'll just turn him over to me and—"

"Not so fast, Madoc Skean!" said another Unseleighe, who joined Madoc at her side. The sounds of many boots behind her warned that, as she had hoped, the rest of the Unseleighe lords had gotten her message and had taken it seriously. "Not so fast! I have my own claims on this mortal! Did he not slay my own sister's son, Vidal Dhu, with that Death Metal chariot? I swore I would have revenge on him!"

"And what of my claim?" cried another. He was joined by the rest, all of them claiming a piece of Tanim. Shar waited; it was her spell that held him, and protocol dictated that they could not have him until and unless she let him go.



When the clamor of voices ceased, she spoke into a moment of silence. "My claim supersedes all of yours," she said flatly. "My Challenge to him still holds. And you dare not touch him until it is discharged—you know well the rules of the Challenge. Once issued, it must be answered unless the challenger is willing to be otherwise satisfied. I am not satisfied. And High King Oberon will be less than pleased if you violate so simple a tenet of the laws that bind us all."

There was an uneasy stirring behind her as soon as she mentioned the name "Oberon." Madoc's face was set in a frozen snarl.

She could not look at Tannim's expression; she confined her gaze to a point just below his chin. She was afraid to look in his eyes and see the bleakness of betrayal there.

"But his vehicle is causing harm in the aether of Underhill," she continued. "I will release him to you, Madoc Skeep, only if you pledge to hold him unharmed until I can deal with the vehicle and take it somewhere safe. Only I have the ability to handle so much Death Metal—as well you know."

Madoc's snarl increased a trifle.

"You cannot leave this metal beast here," she reminded him. "Look you, how already it causes rifts in the energy-fields, and warps magics about itself. It will not be long until its influence reaches even to your own realm."

He nodded slowly, reluctantly. "I will hold him unharmed," he said finally. "I pledge it upon my True Name."

"Then give me your True Name," she replied immediately. The True Name did not have the power that some granted it—to give absolute control over another mage—but it did make it possible to penetrate most of his defenses. That effect was largely psychological, rather than magical.

With a growl, he leaned over and whispered it into her ear. She kept herself from smiling in triumph, and released the spell into Madoc's hands.

"Remember," she warned, "you pledged to hold him unharmed until my return to your court."

"Aye," he said, tightening his "grip" so that Tannim paled. "But mind, we all have our claims as well."

She gave him a look of warning, and he loosened the cocooning paralysis spell enough to let Tannim breathe easier again. "I will not be gone long, Madoc Skeep," she told him. "Be aware of that. This man must be in good health and unharmed, ready to take my Challenge, when I return to your court."

Madoc merely smiled. She dared not stipulate more than she had; she knew very well that Madoc had any number of ways of inflicting suffering that caused no permanent damage to body or health. She only hoped that Tannim's tolerance of such things was as good as she had been led to believe.

She did not watch as Madoc had his guards surround his prize and then released the paralysis spell. She turned her back as Tannim was escorted from the room inside a ring of guards, followed by the dozen or so Unseleighe lords who wanted a piece of him, and then by Madoc himself. She feigned indifference and pretended to study the Mach I. The less real interest she showed in the mortal, the safer he would be. Madoc would not hesitate to use him as a weapon against her, if he thought her interest was anything other than the Challenge itself.

When they were all gone, she studied the Mustang in earnest, for there was no doubt in her mind that she had better do something to make it safe, both for the sake of Underhill and for Tannim. She cast a spell of Creation, reweaving it three times before it fell correctly, and summoned a sheet of silk. That, at least, helped ease some of the disturbance its mere presence was creating, and made it less likely that the neighbors, those surly and unpredictable Nordic types, would come storming across the threshold in the next few moments.

I'll have to actually build another Gate-spell of the kind I put on it in the first place, she decided. I can't just drive it off. For one thing, I don't have the keys and I bet he's put some nasty surprises in there for anyone who tries to hot-wire it. For another, the only Gate big enough for this thing is the one in the garden. I could certainly fake my way as a Russian, but this is not a Trabant—and how in hell would I get it back to the USA, anyway? Slap a FedEx sticker on it?

So, the question now was, how much power did she have to spare to move the Mach I somewhere else? She didn't want to send it to her "garage"; that was too obvious a place, for one thing. For another, she wasn't certain she could manage to bridge that much physical distance.

Whoa, wait a moment. I told Madoc I'll be moving it, and that's just about as good as actually moving it. The very last place he'll look for it is here, and if I put enough shrouding spells on it to negate the effect of all that Cold Iron, no one will ever know that it's here. Except for that poor old blind beggar that sweeps this place, and he won't know it isn't supposed to be here, he won't even know that it's not some peculiar sculpture or piece of furniture.

The amount of power she would need for those shrouding spells was much less than the amount it would take to open a Gate for even a short distance. Look what bringing the thing here had done to her—she'd slept like a mortal for a dozen hours, then fallen asleep again as soon as she relaxed at the end of the day. There were better uses for that power.

And there was a distinct advantage to not using all that power. Madoc would assume she was drained, as he would be after such an attempt. Or else, he would believe her to be stronger than she actually was. In the latter case, he would not presume to block her, and in the former, he would seriously underestimate her strength.

She nodded to herself as she made her decision and began spinning the gossamer webs of spells that shielded the Mustang from the aether here, and the aether from the Mustang. Each spell settled over the bulk of the car like a delicate veil. Such spells broke the moment whatever they protected moved away from their protection, but that was all right. The only person who would be moving this car was Tannim himself, and if she had him in the driver's seat, it probably wouldn't matter how much disruption they caused.

Finally, the last veil settled into place, and the mists of power flowed through the hall with scarcely a ripple of disturbance.

Shar turned briskly and headed back out the door. She had done all that she could here.

Now she needed to see what she could get away with under the eye of Madoc Skean. Her draconic side knew how deadly a contest of powers this would be—but beneath all the seriousness, her kitsune heritage kept reminding her gleefully how much fun this contest would be, especially if she won.

This much was sure; if ever there was to be a test of her full abilities of craft and cleverness, this was

surely it.

\* \* \*

Things were happening a little too fast for Tannim to react to them. But he had least had one thing straight. No point in fighting six guys armed with sharp, pointy things. Especially since they'd really like it if I would. It would give them the perfect excuse to use those sharp, pointy things on my soft little body.

So Tannim stayed uncharacteristically meek and polite—and silent—as the six faceless guards marched him out of the amber room and into the darkness. Their very appearance had given him a bit of a shock, when he'd realized that behind the faceplates of their helms was nothing but empty darkness. He'd never seen this particular kind of Unseleighe before, and he wasn't certain if it was some creation, or something that had intelligence and will of its own. It really didn't matter; in either case, the guy who thought he was in charge, the one Shar had called Madoc Skean, would be only too happy for an excuse to have Tannim roughed up. It was in Tannim's best interest to make sure he had no excuses.

He was still trying to recover from the shock of Shar's little speech. He prided himself on his ability to read people, to pick up on the most subtle of body language, and everything he had "read" indicated that she was telling the truth. She sounded—she acted—as if she wanted to be on his side. Could he believe her? Could he trust his ability to read body language when he was dealing with a kitsune-dragon hybrid who only looked human?

After all those years of dreaming about her, he wanted to believe her; he wanted to believe it with an ache of longing that he simply could not deny. Yes, it was stupid to believe her. Yes, he might be pinning his hopes on a creature as evil and devious as Aurilia nic Morrigan. Like her, Shar could be a female who would betray him simply because it amused her to do so. But long ago he had made up his mind that his life was always going to be precarious at best. He could expect the worst of everyone, be paranoid and fearful, and spend his life being miserable and driving away people who really did want to be friendly. Or he could expect the best out of everyone, treat them that way, and enjoy himself. He might not increase his potential lifespan, but it was even odds that he wouldn't shorten it, either. And he just might gain himself a whole lot of allies against the day—like today—when the real enemies he had made or inherited caught up with him.

Some of the Unseleighe had left mage-lights hanging in the air of the corridor and one room beyond. They weren't much—as a whole, the Unseleighe preferred a gloomy twilight—but they helped keep him from stumbling over his own feet. By the time the guards marched him up onto a stone platform in the middle of a very dimly lit room, he had made up his mind to believe Shar, or at least believe that she intended to help him. If half of her heritage came from Chinthliss' enemy Charcoal, still, half of it came from a kitsune-woman who was clearly someone Chinthliss still cared for and admired deeply.

Besides, he reminded himself, evil isn't a genetic trait.

He and the guards stepped through the archway over the stone platform. The mental and physical jolt that accompanied a Gate-crossing hit him and disoriented him; one of the guards shoved him when he didn't move quickly enough off the new platform, and he sprawled facedown on the ground beyond it. Fortunately, it was soft turf, but he scrambled to his feet quickly before one of them could follow up the shove with a kick in the ribs.

He had expected that he would be marched immediately off into a prison or some other place where he could be locked up, but to his surprise, he found that they were standing beside a huge, naturally flat stone in the middle of a grassy meadow. To either side of them was a row of long, turf-covered mounds.

It was twilight here, the perpetual twilight he'd noted in many places Underhill; the "sky" overhead looked like that of an overcast day. His guards moved forward, and he perforce had to move with them. They marched down the row and turned between two of the mounds; there were openings in the middle of these mounds, dark holes with no doors, the sides supported by stones. His escort waited while the rest of the party caught up with them.

While they waited, he tried to remember where he had seen this Madoc Skean before, or had heard the name, and could come up with nothing. Not altogether surprising; there were a lot of Unseleighe, in a vast number of sizes and types, and he'd collected enemies from among many of them just by being Keighvin's friend. Hell, look at Vidal Dhu, for instance; he'd never done a thing to that particular Unseleighe lord, but Vidal had sworn to exterminate Keighvin's entire clan, and Tannim stood in the way of that. No doubt Keighvin or Conal could identify this particular Unseleighe lord, and likely tell off at least part of his family tree, but it took one of the elven folk to do that. It was enough to know that he wanted Tannim disposed of, and if Shar hadn't intervened, he'd likely have done the disposing then and there, back in the amber room.

That made him wonder about something else. Shar had said that she had brought Tannim Underhill; could she have been responsible for what happened to the Mach I? If so, when had she decided to turn her coat? Or had she been on his side all along, but forced into helping capture him?

His head swam with possibilities, and in the long run, none of them really mattered. What did matter was that she had forced Madoc into keeping him alive and unharmed for a time, and if she could be trusted, before that time was up she would find a way to get him out of here.

Once the entire party had assembled, the guards marched him forward into the mound. Or that was what he thought—but as he passed under the capstone of the arch, he felt that same disorientation of a Gate-crossing as he had before.

And once again he found himself on a stone platform; this time a simple slab in the middle of the mist of the Unformed areas. They took him through ten or twelve more Gates before they were through, and from the impatience he thought he felt from his captors, he didn't think all this was for the purpose of confusing him. No, they had no choice but to take this route.

Other than very occasional visits to Elfhame Fairgrove, he'd never been Underhill except to visit a couple of the other Seleighe Elfhames and the one ride through the Unformed lands between the Gate Vidal Dhu had established and Elfhame Fairgrove. He'd had no idea that travel around here was so complicated.

And now a new twist entered the picture. If travel was this difficult, it was going to make escaping a stone bitch. Without someone who knew the way from realm to realm and to the human world, he could wander around in here forever.

Finally, after passing through a Gate into a dark and eerie forest, taking a path right out of a horror movie through that forest, they reached a stone platform guarded by more of the faceless warriors. After this last crossing, he found himself at one end of a huge room of black marble that seemed hauntingly familiar. Finally, after a moment, he realized why. He'd seen it, or one just like it, in the cover paintings of sword-and-sorcery barbarian epics.

He almost earned himself a whack on the head right then by laughing out loud. Creativity. The elves just didn't have it, and here was a striking example of exactly how much they lacked it. Given the power and resources of one of these Greater Lords, a human would have come up with something at least a little original.

The elves simply couldn't; it wasn't in their natures. Everything they had was a copy of something that humans had already done, from the chrome-and-glass Art Deco splendor of Elfhame Fairgrove to the Tolkienesque groves and tree-dwellings of Elfhame Outremer. Elsewhere, he'd been told, there were realms copied from such diverse sources as Italian science fiction movies and King Ludwig of Bavaria's famous palace. It didn't matter if the source was real or fictional. There had never been a "barbarian kingdom" in the history of humanity that would have produced a throne room looking like this; the mythical, fictional character those books purported to describe never existed, nor did his kingdom and palace. But the elves had copied it as faithfully as if it were real.

In fact, this was a much more slavish copy than anything the Seleighe elves ever produced. They generally elaborated, and often improved, on the originals. Apparently the Unseleighe lacked even that ability.

He wasn't given long to gawk, however; as soon as the rest of the little party had passed through the Gate, it was time to march off again, this time down to a Hollywood nightmare of a dungeon. While part of him tried very hard to seem nonchalant, and another part of him gibbered and groveled in stark panic, a detached third part wondered if they had any idea how to use half of the stuff in here.

Of course they do. It's their specialty, he chided himself. The one place you can count on an Unseleighe to show some originality is in the ability to hurt someone.

Beads of sweat trickled down his forehead and neck, making him shiver. My only hope is that the guy in charge is going to keep his promise to Shar. Oh, please, please, make him keep his promise to Shar.

Tannim was not a coward, but at that moment he came as close as he had ever come to flinging himself at Madoc Skean's feet and blubbering. He'd had enough injuries to know only too well how it felt to have bones broken, flesh slashed, skin burned. . . .

There was a peculiar contraption hanging in one corner—literally hanging, in fact. It was a cube about four feet on a side, suspended at one corner by a chain; he couldn't decide if it was made of stone or metal. It lacked the sheen of metal, but seemed too heavy to be stone. That same detached part of him wondered what it was; he'd never seen a device quite like it before.

As two of the guards seized him by the arms and dragged him toward it, he realized that he was about to find out just what it was.

One entire side pivoted up on hinges, revealing an interior composed of panels of blunt-pointed, fat spikes, about six inches in diameter at the bottom and three inches tall, set into the walls of the interior so that their sides touched. As he discovered when the two guards grabbed his elbows and heaved him unceremoniously up off his feet and tossed him inside, they were not sharp enough to pierce, but they were certainly sharp enough to bruise. And there was no way to escape them.

They slammed the wall shut on him, leaving him in almost total darkness. Almost—because a little air came in through the top corner, where the chain was strung through a pair of holes. The box was not big enough to stand in or lie down at full length, and the spikes made it impossible to sit comfortably in any position. Despite the ventilation holes, it was stuffy in there. And to add insult to injury, water dripped in steadily from the chain.

Very clever. The "room of little comfort," new improved version. This would certainly not harm him, but it would exhaust him and keep him in a state of constant discomfort, very nicely obeying the exact letter

of the promise.

But the situation only made him think faster. What else would I do if I was one of them? Ah—I'd put a telepath on watch, to see if I was thinking of escape, and glean information.

He settled himself in a position that was as close to comfort as he was likely to get and waited, listening, both with his ears and his mind. Though no telepath himself, Keighvin had taught him how to recognize the touch of a telepath on his thoughts some time ago.

Interestingly enough, they hadn't taken anything from him, neither his watch nor the contents of his pockets. Granted, some of it, like the pocketknife, could hurt them, but he had no doubt they could find some way around that. Perhaps they meant to show him how contemptuous they were of his abilities. Perhaps they simply assumed, with typical elven arrogance, that there was nothing a mere mortal could do against their magics once they had him in their grasp. The watch alone was a godsend; with it, he knew exactly how much time was passing. After about thirty minutes, he heard the scrape of a chair on stone outside. And a moment later, he felt an insidious little brush against the outside of his mind.

Keighvin had taught him that it took a moment for a telepath to accustom himself to his target's mind, but that once he was inside it, only determined effort would keep him from learning what he wished.

Unless, of course, the target could provide something else to completely distract himself and his eavesdropper. Something as insidious as advertising jingles, for instance.

For the first time since his capture, he grinned. So. They want to know what I'm thinking about, hmm? Let's see if I can provide them with something . . . completely unexpected. Oh, Yogi, the ranger isn't gonna like this!

He cleared his throat, took a deep breath—and began to sing.

"I'm your only friend, I'm not your only friend, but I'm a little glowing friend, but really I'm not actually your friend but I am—"

Beat, beat, beat—

The manic grin spread widely over his face as the chair scraped again.

Ladies and gentlemen of the Unseleighe, you are about to be treated to a nonstop concert of They Might Be Giants. Have a nice day.

The thing about the lyrics of a lot of the songs that particular duo came up with was that they were so completely illogical that it required concentration to remember them. You couldn't just infer the next line from the line previous to it. He caroled at the top of his lungs, concentrating only on the incredibly infectious melody and the unbelievably bizarre lyrics. Get that out of your head, not-friend. I sure as hell can't!

As he began the second verse, and got to the part about ". . . countless screaming Argonauts," he thought he heard a faint whimper.

As he began his second tune, "She'd like to see you again, slowly twisting in the wind," the whimper was no longer faint.

Just wait until I start on the Apollo 18 album.

He settled back, protecting the back of his head with his hands, and sang with great gusto at the holes in the metal above him.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Joe stood back in the murky shadows cast by the ruined walls of the barn, where Chinthliss and Fox wouldn't notice him unless they really looked for him, and kept his mouth shut. Fox hadn't been here long—just long enough for Chinthliss to get both their tempers to the boiling point.

When Tannim didn't return, Chinthliss decided to do something—the first thing that apparently came to his mind was the need to interrogate FX. And despite what Tannim had said about not being able to bring FX here, Chinthliss was evidently not bound by any such constraints. A few mumbled words, a clenched fist slapped into a palm—and there was Fox, the photo-image of James Dean, except for his fox-feet and the three tails that lashed furiously behind him, his whole body tense with anger and apprehension.

This was the first argument Joe had ever seen between two mythological creatures; there was no telling in what direction it might explode, or who might get splattered when it did. He decided to stay out of it for the moment, while he let his subconscious work on the problem of getting Tannim back.

Chinthliss had backed the kitsune into what was left of the wall beside the door, and he must have done something that made it impossible for FX to disappear, because so far Fox seemed stuck right where Chinthliss wanted him. Surely Fox had made at least one attempt to get away by now, since he certainly looked as if he wanted to be far, far, away from here. Whatever he'd tried, though, it hadn't worked.

"Look," FX said, his eyes widened pleadingly, as Chinthliss loomed over him. Fox spread his hands to either side in entreaty. "What was I supposed to do? I couldn't cross her, I didn't dare! I'm a lousy three-tail, she has nine! I get in her way, and I end up being called 'Stumpy' for the rest of my short life!"

"You could have told Tannim what she was," Chinthliss growled, looking less human with every passing moment. "You could have called on me."

"How was I to know you knew her?" Fox retorted, tails rigid for a moment.

"You knew she was challenging Tannim; you knew that Tannim is like a son to me. Of course I would be interested in anything or anyone challenging him, whether I actually knew the creature or not!" Chinthliss thundered, standing tall and dark against the glow of magic shields. Joe shivered; when Chinthliss talked like that, he sounded powerful. Very powerful. Scary, too.

"You don't understand kitsune politics," Fox retorted, dropping his eyes and staring at his furred and clawed feet sullenly. "Hell, that's what got you into trouble with Lady Ako in the first place."

Chinthliss' expression darkened perceptibly, and he seemed to grow a little. Joe decided this might be a good time to intervene.

"None of this is getting Tannim back," he pointed out. "We don't even know where he is. We don't

know if he's in trouble or not—"

But FX shook his head and raised his eyes to meet Joe's. "He's in trouble," Fox replied glumly. "When I ducked out, I ran back home to check on the nine-tail who was following Tannim. There was only one unaccounted for; that was Lady Shar, and everyone knows that Lady Shar's been playing footsie with the Unseleighe. And whether or not you can smell it, old man," he added, regaining a little courage to glance insolently at Chinthliss, "this young nose tracked the scent of her all over his Mustang. She's probably the reason it went AWOL in the first place."

Chinthliss' eyes narrowed, and he tensed. For a moment, Joe was afraid that Chinthliss might actually strike the kitsune. Or worse. But Chinthliss regained control of himself with an effort after a sidelong glance at Joe.

"Fine," he said acidly. "And if you are so very clever, why don't you find out where he is now?"

"Because I can't," Fox replied, deflating abruptly. Now he looked depressed, and no longer even remotely insolent. "I tried, and I can't. Whoever has him crossed through too many Gates and I lost the scent."

Chinthliss growled and turned away. Fox hung his head and his shoulders drooped. Joe tried to pat him on the back consolingly, but his hand went right through Fox's body.

Funny: Chinthliss could touch him. . . . Never mind. The important thing was to find Tannim.

"Well, we know where the car is," he reasoned out loud. "If Tannim has been caught by somebody, that's the first place he'll go, right? And if he's just gotten lost or something, it's still the first place he'll go! Why don't we just wait there for him to show up?"

But Fox only looked panicked at that idea, and Chinthliss shook his head. "This is not like a trip to the mall, young friend," he said, just a little patronizingly. "Tannim will not simply return to where the car is parked. He may decide to abandon it; he may decide that it is wiser to come back after it with a force. He may—be unable to come."

Chinthliss' voice faltered on that last, and Joe's resentment at his patronizing tone faded into worry. "Well, what can we do?" he asked. "Should we go there and see if we can track him or something?"

Fox shook his head fiercely, his eyes wide. "No! Oh, no, no, no! She's been all over that place, and I bet she comes back! That's a very bad idea!"

"But it would be no bad idea to try tracking him from somewhere Underhill," Chinthliss mused. "Magic is more available there, and more reliable as well. We still have the chrome circle to keep track of the Mustang, and we have other things of his to use to find Tannim. Hmm. I believe we could do this."

"If you're going to start messing around with her, I'm—" Fox began, as he sidled away from Chinthliss. The latter shot out a hand and caught his jacket collar before he could sneak out of reach.

"You will remain with us to help," Chinthliss rumbled dangerously. "A nine-tailed kitsune is not the only creature that can change your name to 'Stumpy.' I can change your name to 'Mulch.' It is at least in part your fault that he is missing; you will help us to find him. And if you try to slip away, the first item I conjure will be hedge clippers. Understand?"



Fox shrank in Chinthliss' grasp, but said nothing and did not struggle.

"Now, the question is, where are we to go?" Chinthliss continued, with FX still dangling from one outstretched arm. "Not a Seleighe Elfhome; the very nature of the place would make it impossible to find him from within one. Besides, we need somewhere less—law-abiding."

"Jamaica?" Fox suggested hopefully. Chinthliss shook him a little, and his teeth rattled.

"Are there neutral places there?" Joe asked. "Like Switzerland?"

Chinthliss nodded. "The trouble is they are most often densely inhabited. There are more creatures that are neither good nor evil than there are creatures of either persuasion."

Joe thought for a moment. "Is that bad?" he asked. "I mean, would it be bad for people to know that Tanim's missing and might be in trouble? Maybe some of them would help us if we came up with the right price. And—well, if the bad guys have got him, how can it hurt to have other bad guys know? Either they're going to know already, or else they just might be pissed off that somebody else got Tanim first and try and get him for themselves."

Fox brightened considerably as Chinthliss tightened his lips and drew his brows together in thought. "We might be able to spring him while they're fighting over him," Fox pointed out. "Maybe some of the neutrals would help us because they owe Tanim a favor. You know how the neutrals are: if the scales ain't balanced, they're not happy. I know of a real good place to go looking for critters that might owe him, too. Furhold. News travels faster there than anywhere else Underhill."

Now Chinthliss smiled, a thin sliver of a smile full of sardonic irony. "Oh, yes. Indeed it does. Not surprising. The Furholders have a privileged life, and a rich economy. They have little else to do but find new ways to entertain themselves, and invent exotic drinks. Chocolate khumiss, indeed."

Joe looked from one to the other and back again, and a strange idea occurred to him. "Is this place—the one you want to go to—anything like a Mexican border bar?"

Chinthliss' lips twitched with reluctant amusement. "It is a comparison that has occurred to me, yes," he admitted.

Joe nodded, feeling a little more on secure ground. Not that he had ever been in a Mexican border bar, but plenty of the men in the Chosen Ones had, before they were "saved," and a lot of loose talk went on in the barracks. The shapes might be different, but there would be drunks and bar girls, pushers and pimps, out-of-town tourists, students looking for a thrill, out-of-work self-styled mercenaries—and he should be able to recognize each type for what it was, no matter what shape it wore.

"Let's go," he urged. "I'm not too bad in a fight."

Now Chinthliss let go of FX, turned, and looked at him sternly. "I did not mean for you to go," he protested. "Tanim would be most displeased."

"No, he wouldn't," Joe lied fluently. "Besides, I bet I'm a better shot than either of you."

"He can't take a gun across the Gate, can he?" Fox asked, looking interested and eager. His tails twitched with nervous energy.

Chinthliss shrugged. "If a Mustang can cross over into Underhill, I fail to see why a gun should not. The only question is, where can he get a weapon at such short notice?" He tilted his head in Joe's direction and waited for an answer.

Joe grinned. He was in! They were already talking as if his presence was an accepted thing. "I've got one in my baggage, back at Tannim's house," he told them both gleefully. "A .45 M1911A1, GI-issue. And ammo, too. I didn't tell Tannim, but Frank didn't want me unarmed, in case some of the old Chosen Ones might have gotten away the night of the raid. It's not that far a run; I can be there and back in no time. Besides, I'd better leave a note for Mr. and Mrs. Drake, otherwise if we aren't there in the morning, they'll be really worried."

That was something else he'd considered—what if they couldn't bring Tannim home by dawn? His parents would think something bad had happened to him. Well, something bad had happened to him, but Joe didn't want the Drakes to know that, and he was certain Tannim didn't, either.

"You don't want me there alone, if we can't get him back soon," Joe continued with warning. "They'll start asking questions I can't answer. But if I leave a note saying that an emergency came up and Mr. Silver from Fairgrove needed us to run up to Kansas City, they'll probably figure we're fine."

Chinthliss sighed and shrugged. "You are an adult by the laws of your land," he admitted. "You are fully capable of making your own decisions. We will wait here for your return."

"And I'll be back before you know it," Joe promised, and turned and vaulted the doorframe into the tall grass. Excitement chilled his skin and gave his feet extra spring as he ran out into the night.

\* \* \*

Shar did not go straight to Madoc's domain; she was fairly certain that he would keep the exact letter of his pledge. Tannim would be alive, sane, and in relatively good health when she returned. Bruises, hunger, thirst—all were easily cured, all were trivial.

She needed advice, and there was only one completely trustworthy source for that advice.

She returned to her own place and composed a carefully worded message, writing it properly in elegant calligraphy on rice paper, folding it into the shape of a flower, before finally encapsulating it and sending it away with a brief exercise of power.

Then she waited, with folded hands, for her little Gate to activate. If Lady Ako did not appear within an hour, she would take her own chances, unadvised, with Madoc Skean.

She forced herself not to look at her watch. The minutes crept past with agonizing slowness. She kept thinking of all the things that could be going wrong. And what if Tannim had contacted Chinthliss before he came Underhill? What if Chinthliss was looking for him? That was another complication that she had not counted on.

The hour ticked slowly to the end, and she rose, preparing to activate the Gate herself to take her to that relatively neutral point in the Unseleighe lands. She had actually touched it with her power, although she had not yet done anything, when the Gate came alive under her hand.

She disengaged her own magics and backed up a pace. Her mother stepped through the dark haze within the doorway as soon as she had cleared the way.

But this time Lady Ako was not the image of the proper kitsune lady.

She looked scarcely older than Shar; her long hair had been braided into a single tail in the back, and she wore a spotless white t-shirt and form-fitting black jeans. She raised a perfectly manicured eyebrow at her daughter, and set her hands on her hips.

"I have been making some inquiries among the lesser kitsune," she said without preamble. "There is a young fox that you have rattled badly, and I fear that your actions will have effects reaching up to the highest tables."

Shar flushed, although she could not imagine what her mother was talking about. Unless—

"Saski Berith, who calls himself Foxtrot X-ray, is now among the missing," Lady Ako continued. "I believe that he is in the humans' world even now. He is known to have been a friend of Tannim, and he told some of the others that a lady of nine tails was interested in `one of his friends' in a way that was likely to jeopardize that friend's health. I can only conclude that he sensed you and ran. And, unfortunately, talked. I am probably not the only kitsune who has put all the pieces together by this point in time."

Shar flushed more deeply. "I didn't know there was another of our kind about," she confessed. "Actually—to tell the truth, Mother, I didn't think to look."

Lady Ako shook her head. "Draconic carelessness," she chided, none too gently. "It may cost you. There are questions being asked. Kitsune of nine tails are not to involve themselves seriously in the lives of mortals unless that mortal is a relative, or unless the kitsune is under divine direction, you know that. And when it comes out that the young man was being challenged by you because of your involvement with the Unseleighe—"

Shar hung her head; she couldn't look into her mother's eyes. "I did not think that it would matter."

"Say rather only the first four words of that statement, and you will be closer to the truth, my daughter," Lady Ako said sternly. "And have you brought the mortal to harm by your meddling, or is the situation yet salvageable?"

Shar raised her head slowly. "He is in the hands of Madoc Skean, but will not be harmed until my Challenge is satisfied or revoked," she replied. "That is what I wished to ask your advice upon, Mother." She put pleading into her gaze, but her mother's youthful face did not lose its expression of disapproving judgment.

"You knew what you were doing," Lady Ako replied implacably. "I warned you, and you did not heed the warning. Now there is a mortal in Underhill in the hands of his enemies, it is your fault, and it has come to the attention of the clan. This is not a good thing. You will be asked to balance the scales. It would be better for you if you even them yourself, before you are ordered to do so and find you cannot, because the one you should aid is dead."

Shar clenched her jaw in anger. "How?" she demanded. "If I help him, it is only the two of us against all the Unseleighe that Madoc Skean has under his sway!"

Lady Ako shrugged, as if it mattered little to her. "The way of the kitsune," her mother said. "Trickery. Guile. Craft. Divide them; make them quarrel amongst themselves. Plant rumors; engineer incidents that

make the rumors appear to be the truth. Fling the pebble among the bandits, and see them argue over which of them tossed it. I need not tell you these things; you should know them already."

Shar remained silent, waiting for her mother to answer her real question, the one that had been in her letter.

Lady Ako pulled her braid over her shoulder, and toyed with the end of it for a moment. "As for the rest—it is sufficient that you have placed yourself in a position of obligation to this mortal. Discharge that obligation; get him free. Only then can you proceed in any other directions."

"And if I don't?" Shar asked, with a touch of rebellion.

Her mother did not respond to the tone of her voice, only to the words. "If you choose not to, you will be liable to answer to the clan; what will happen then, I cannot say. It will depend on how cleverly you argue your case. You could lose a tail; you could get off with little more than a reprimand. If you try, but cannot aid him, what happens to you will depend on whether the Unseleighe detect your meddling." She shrugged. "If you escape the Unseleighe alive at all, I suspect the clan will judge your attempt enough to balance the scales. You will be lectured, and shamed, but no more than that."

Trust Lady Ako to answer her literally! What she wanted was advice of the heart—which, having given it earlier, Lady Ako would not give a second time.

But she had to admit, her mother was right. Before she could decide what to do about Tannim, she must even the scales between them—yes, and confess what her part had been in all of this. If he could not deal with that, well, then there was no point in pursuing a mouse down a hole. All that would happen would be sore paws from trying to dig through granite.

And meanwhile—well, she had an answer of another sort. Her status among the kitsune was in danger because of her own actions. If the clan had never come to hear of this, or if that lesser kitsune had not been frightened, she might have come through this with an unsullied reputation. Now the least of it would be a blot in her record. How big a blot would depend on how well she managed to set things right. If she managed to not only set things aright, but did so in archetypically kitsune manner, spectacularly, she would even gain status from it. Kitsune respected style in any form.

She bowed formally to her mother. Lady Ako nodded her head in return. While Shar remained bent over her knees, the lady turned and left, without a farewell.

A bad sign, both for the state of her mother's temper and the temper of the other high-ranking kitsune. For a moment, Shar indulged in a fit of resentment.

Didn't she used to be a rebel? Can't she remember what that was like? To have two suitors, to ally with one but bear the child of the other? Isn't that as scandalous as anything I have done?

But her conscience came up with the answer.

It had not involved mortals. It had not changed the lives of humans. Like it or not, human mortals were considered to be beings deserving of pity for their limitations. Ako's had only changed her life—and Ako had no scales to even. That was the difference.

Scandal was one thing. Upsetting the balances was far more serious.

What could she do? She could deal with it. She could follow her mother's advice.

Or she could ignore it all, stay here, and face the consequences.

But her feet were already on a different path than indifference to what she had done to Tannim; they had taken the first steps the moment she asked him to trust her. She was under an even heavier obligation than Lady Ako knew.

So I deal with it. She nodded to herself, faced her Gate, and activated it. Now—just what kind of pebble can I throw among the feasting bandits, I wonder?

And despite her mother's real anger and the gravity of the entire situation, she felt herself smiling a true vixen's-grin.

This had the potential to be so much fun!

\* \* \*

The dripping water turned out to be less of a nuisance than Tannim had thought; it gave him something to drink to ease his throat. At least he wasn't too hoarse yet. His singing voice wasn't too bad even after a couple hours of abuse, though he didn't think there were any recording contracts in his future.

"This is where the party ends, I can't sit here listening to you and your racist friends," he sang, wondering what his enemies were making of all this. Most of the Unseleighe he'd seen with Madoc looked as if they hadn't been out of Underhill since the sixteenth century—the very meaning of many of the words he sang had changed since that time, and some words hadn't existed. They were probably analyzing every little syllable, trying to find some meaning in it. He knew he'd heard someone cry out in tones of despair, "The White Eagle I know, but what in the name of the Morrigan is the Blue Canary?" The White Eagle was an alchemical term; were they trying to find alchemical formulas in the lyrics? No wonder they were going crazy out there!

He had held the thought firmly in mind since he had begun that he was working on some kind of spell to set him free. Halfway through the lyrics of the Flood album, it had occurred to him to concentrate also on the accordion as a vessel of incredibly potent magical power just to confuse the issue even further. So now they were trying to make sense of senseless lyrics and wondering what the heck made an accordion so magical. Would there be a rash of mysterious accordion thefts from pawnshops and music stores all across the USA after this? Had he just inflicted the madness of the accordion upon the Unseleighe?

The horror . . . the horror . . .

In fact, if he hadn't been so damned uncomfortable, this would have been a lot of fun. He was pretty certain he was on his third telepath by now; one had collapsed, and the second had begun moaning and been taken away a few minutes ago.

Mom used to claim my music drove her crazy. I didn't think it would ever be the literal truth.

Since about the third song, they'd stopped giving the cube occasional shoves to set it swinging. He was rather glad of that; one major disadvantage of being so thin was that he didn't have a lot of padding between him and those spikes. He was going to be black and blue by the time they let him out of here.

There was a scrape of chair legs. "No more," a voice said firmly, and the light touch on his mind went

away. "I will bear no more of this. And I do not think you will find another to take my place, Madoc Skean. There is no treasure and no revenge worth this madness!"

Tannim grinned wider in the darkness of his prison, and sang lustily, at the top of his lungs: "When you're following an angel doesn't mean you have to throw your body off a building. . . ."

More footsteps retreating, and the muttering of voices. Were they actually giving up?

No point in taking any chances. Better start repeating the most infectious song he knew.

"Throw the crib door wide, let the people crawl inside. Someone in this town wants to burn the playhouse down. They want to stop the ones who want a rock to wind a string around. . . ."

Take that, Madoc Skean!

\* \* \*

Shar stepped through the Gate to find Madoc Skean's throne quite empty. The Unseleighe prince was in the center of a huddle of his allies and underlings. Two of them were simply monsters: an ogre, and something Shar suspected was a Greek lamia. There were about a half dozen of the Unseleighe elves, dressed in their ornate brocades and silks, enchanted armor, and elaborate jewels, the evidences of the power of their magic. The rest were retainers, each in the livery of his master's colors. "No more," one was saying, firmly, his face creased with strain. "He tortures us with his conundrums more than we torture him."

At that moment, one of the little hobgoblins that served as lower servants trotted by, singing to itself. The melody was incredibly catchy, but the words—

"They want to stop the ones who want prosthetic foreheads on their heads," the little hunched-over creature crooned happily. "But everybody wants prosthetic foreheads for their real he—"

A tremendous smack interrupted the song, as Madoc Skean whirled and slapped the small creature into the wall. "Enough!" he roared into the sudden silence. "Is it not bad enough that the fool mortal carols us with his arrant nonsense? Must I hear it from the basest servants as well?"

The hobgoblin whimpered, picked himself up off the ground, and scampered away.

Madoc turned and saw Shar. He was appallingly easy to read; she wondered if he had any idea how easy it was. Even if she had not heard him arguing with his putative allies, she would have known from his thundercloud expression that things were not going well for him. These Unseleighe made no effort to control themselves or their emotions.

Throw a pebble among the bandits? Ah—when better than right now?

"I have investigated the vehicle, Lord Madoc," she said smoothly, offering him the title of honor although she seldom accorded it to him. "I have come to some disturbing conclusions. I am not entirely certain that the creature we have now is truly the human Tannim."

Madoc's blank look of shock came very close to making her smile; she repressed it and continued, with the gravest of expressions, pitching her voice so that all the assembled Unseleighe heard it. "There are a great many traces of magery on the vehicle. They are not magics as a human would practice them; they

are not Seileighe. I cannot identify them."

That much was the strictest truth; the very best kind of misdirection.

"If I were to hazard a guess, I would say it was not impossible that these traces were from a neutral creature, or even—" she hesitated a moment, then continued "—even an Unseileighe. I do not think it would be going too far to warn you that this thing we have taken prisoner might be a shape-shifter, or a changeling. It might even have been sent as a kind of expendable assassin by one of your enemies. For that matter, Lord Madoc, you might not even be its target; it might have been intended for one of the other lords and ladies here."

She nodded at the gathered Unseileighe, who were eavesdropping without shame, their sharp features betraying their alarm at this unwelcome news. "It could be that one of your allies is the real target, and whoever sent this creature intended the blame for the death to fall upon you, Lord Madoc."

The ploy was working! Already the other Unseileighe edged slightly away from each other, casting glances of suspicion at one another and at Madoc. Lovely! Now if she could just make Tannim vanish from his place of captivity. . . .

Wait a moment—

"Perhaps we had best see if your prisoner is still there, Lord Madoc," she continued earnestly, wondering if he had noticed by now that she had called him "lord" no less than three times now. That was more honorifics than she normally accorded him in the course of a week! "If this creature is a shape-shifter, he may already have escaped. If he is more powerful than we realized, he could have vanished without you ever knowing."

One of the others laughed scornfully. "Escaped? How? When we have heard him a-singing like a foolish jongleur this past hour and more?"

She leveled a glance at the speaker, an ogre, in a way that made him snap his mouth shut on his laughter. "And how better to make you think that you had him still than to leave a voice singing there? It need not even require magic! Did this creature not come from the human world? Have none of you heard of the mechanical wonders the humans build? Did any of you think to search it for one of those human devices by which words and music may be captured and replayed? Why, such things are made that are no larger than this!" She measured out the size of the palm of her hand. "It could easily have concealed such a thing in its clothing! And there are spells enough to accomplish the same thing. Am I to understand that you are no longer keeping a mind-reader a-watching of his thoughts?"

At Madoc's reluctant nod, she shook her head, as if she was impatient with all of them. "The moment this creature knew that its thoughts were no longer subject to scrutiny, he could have made his escape. Any shapechanger could become a snake, and slip through holes. A vampire could become a mist or a fog and do the same. A changeling—who knows what it could become at the will of the one who sent it?"

"This is all speculation," snapped one poisonously lovely woman, a pale blond in an Elizabethan gown of deep green brocade with a huge ruff of silver lace about her long neck. "Let us go and see whether he is the mortal we wanted or no! If not, and if it has escaped somehow, we must recapture it and discover what it wants. And if so, well, this lady wishes to discharge her Challenge, and the sooner this is done, the sooner we may deal with the mortal."

Whatever Madoc wanted was moot at this point; the rest of his allies clamored for an immediate visit to his dungeons. Shar simply looked grave, and let them carry her along with them.

And while they were arguing about it all, she exercised just the tiniest bit of her powers in a spell of illusion.

The entire group pushed and shoved through the doors, still arguing. Shar brought up the rear, confident of what would happen and wanting to be out of the way when it did.

"Sir!" one of Madoc's guards called out over the noise. "The mortal seems to be repeating his songs now. I thought that it might be a ruse to make us open his prison; I restrained Lord Liam's liegeman from breaking the seal."

"Yes, my Lord Liam, he kept me from the performance of my duty!" another guard called out resentfully. Shar raised an eyebrow in surprise at the number of guards crowding the room. It looked as if every one of Madoc's allies had insisted on having his own guard here.

Good. That meant they trusted each other even less than she had thought. She reached into a pocket while they were looking at each other and palmed the first thing she touched that would serve for her next ruse; a cheap pocket-calculator she had broken and shoved into a pocket, then all but forgotten.

"Open it now!" Madoc ordered, waving peremptorily at the guard. This was not one of the faceless creatures Madoc generally favored, although Shar would have preferred one of those to this monster. It wasn't so much the single eye that bothered her as the very pink skin that glistened around it. The creature bowed and propped his pike up against the wall, then turned to the suspended cube and broke the seal on it. Then he swung the side up—to reveal an empty interior.

The singing stopped in mid-phrase.

The heavy side slipped from his fingers as he gawked in startlement and slammed it back into place. Another guard quickly pulled the side back up, though everyone here had already seen that the cube was completely empty, just as Shar had predicted. She reached out herself and "plucked" the calculator from the interior with a neat bit of sleight-of-hand palming.

"Look!" she said, waving it aloft. "What did I tell you? Here is the device the mortal used to trick you into thinking he was singing in there! Now he has fled, and who knows where he might be?"

She flung the calculator down at Madoc's feet. No one here would recognize it for what it was; they'd have to take her word for it. Since it was already broken, they could play with it forever and not get it to "work." And just as she expected, pandemonium erupted as one of Madoc's servants hastily scooped the device up.

Accusations flew for a moment, most of them leveled at Madoc, who had gathered his bodyguard around him and was backing up toward the door. Shar prudently got out of his way; it was never a good idea to be between an Unseleighe and his exit. But after a moment, the accusations and counter-accusations became general. Each of the Unseleighe gathered his underlings to him (or her), and followed Madoc Skean's example, backing toward the exit while screaming imprecations at everyone else. Shar's suggestion that Tannim might be an assassin had fallen on fertile ground; none of them were willing to risk the chance of being the target of that assassin.

There were some tense moments as the several parties collided at the door; those who had more



retainers with them intimidated those who had fewer. Madoc, with the most, was the first out and heading toward some place where he might barricade himself into relative safety. The ogre was next, followed by the beautiful Unseleighe elven lady. The rest sorted themselves out, glaring at each other in mingled fear and accusation, until they all got out into the freedom of the hall. Then they headed elsewhere. Where, Shar did not particularly care, so long as they left her in sole guardianship of this room for a few moments.

When she was certain that the last of the Unseleighe were gone, she swung up the unlocked side of the cube and banished the illusion of the empty interior. Tannim sat there for a moment, arms wrapped around his legs, chin resting on his knees, regarding her with a wry expression and the hint of a tired smile.

"I'd love to know how you managed that," he said finally. "I figured I was about to become Spam when I heard all the voices out there. And when they all stared at me instead of grabbing me, I couldn't figure out what was wrong. That was your doing, wasn't it?"

"Yes," she replied. "But unless you've grown fond of that thing, I suggest we might find someplace else to have a discussion about what just happened. They could be back any moment."

Tannim took the hint and scrambled out of the cube in a way that suggested to Shar that he had probably acquired a few bruises in there. He brushed himself off as he straightened up, and gave her a look that clearly said, "Now what?" But wisely, he kept silent; she had to give him a lot of points for that.

She simply gestured to him to follow. The less talking they did, the better; there were spells that could reach back in time to see what had happened in a particular area, and if there was no dialogue to tell the spellcaster what they planned to do, following them out of this room would be a matter of hit-or-miss.

Tannim seemed ready enough to trust her; or at least, he was going to trust her until he had a chance to strike out on his own, or she explained herself sufficiently to him.

Well, as long as they were in this palace, he would be very stupid to try and strike out on his own, and she hoped he had the good sense to realize just that.

There was noise enough in the direction of the audience chamber; she had a fair notion that at least two or three of Madoc's former allies were fighting their way to the Gate there. Madoc's men, in absence of any other orders, had probably assumed that the "allies" had become "enemies" and were trying to keep them from the Gate. The Faceless Ones assumed nothing, and there was no telling what they were doing. Madoc might have told them to oppose anyone who tried to leave, he might have told them nothing at all. In the latter case, the Faceless Ones would let anyone who was already on the approved list to go through the Gate as they wished.

She hoped that was the case; their own escape depended on it. The Gate in the audience chamber was always guarded, but the Gate she intended to use would very likely be as well.

There was no point in putting a dungeon underground when you were already Underhill; the reason for having a prison beneath the earth was to prevent easy escape. Well, there was no such thing as an "easy" escape for someone in Unseleighe lands and Unseleighe hands. Even if you made an escape, you were forced between one of two choices. You could take your chances on whatever Gate you might find unguarded, or you could take your chances in the Unformed. You might run into a solid wall out there; you might not. One's sense of direction went all to pieces, and people had wandered in small circles until they dropped without ever reaching a barrier or the place they had left. You might discover that the

"land" you had escaped and the Unformed surrounding it comprised an area of less than one hundred acres. You might discover it was the size of a small continent—or, as in Shar's case, the size of a generous townhouse with attached garage.

Just to make matters even more entertaining, you might or might not find a physical opening into another realm or domain. Shar knew where a few of those were, but no one knew them all. Few cared to trust their safety to the Unformed to explore the possibilities. The mist was strange stuff, very sensitive to magic and to even the thoughts of those within it. Your fears, if you dwelled upon them for too long, could become reality. . . .

Well, just at the moment, Shar had no intentions of dashing off into the dangerous mist outside the walls of Madoc Skean's realm. She had a better plan.

As soon as they penetrated beyond the prison section, she made a sharp right, away from the black-marble corridors lit with torches in gold-chased sconces, and into a hallway built of some dull gray stuff that could not even be identified. Two lefts and a right later, and they were deep into the maze of passageways that only the servants used.

There weren't too many of those about; the noise of fighting, shouts, and the occasional clash of metal-on-metal penetrated even here and warned all but the very dullest that it was not wise to be abroad just now. Only the occasional hobgoblin skipped by, humming to itself, oblivious to everything except the last task it had been given.

The corridors remained the same: gray walls, floor, and ceiling made of something that might even have been taken for plastic elsewhere. Maybe it was, anyway. Out of sight of anyone to impress, Madoc might well have eschewed tradition for sheer practicality. Plastic was one of the easier substances to ken and reproduce, after all.

There was no mistaking the light source, however. Dim witchlights bobbed at intervals near the ceiling. Madoc was not one to waste energy on creating comfort or convenience for the sake of mere servants; there was just enough light to keep from falling on your nose, and no more.

No matter. Shar already knew where she was going and could have felt her way in the dark, if need be. Madoc might not know it, but she had prowled the halls of his domain in several shapes until she knew it better than he did. She had been a hobgoblin, an Unseleighe elven lady, even one of his very own Faceless Ones. And wouldn't he have been surprised to know what she had seen in that form!

It was not the brightest of moves, to invite a shape-changer to be your guest. . . .

Two rights, a left, and a smell that just bordered between savory and unsavory wafted down the hall, telling her that she was nearing her goal. Tannim followed—flowed, actually; for a mortal, he was surprisingly graceful. A little knife in his hand told her that he was not as guileless as he looked; she wondered where he'd hidden it. A leg sheath, perhaps?

She motioned him to wait as they neared the door to the kitchen. She straightened and concentrated for a moment, shutting her eyes as she shifted her form.

When she opened them, she was quite a bit shorter, and her neck strained from the odd angle she was forced to hold her head at. Never mind; she wouldn't have this form for long. She glanced back at Tannim and grinned a little at the dumbfounded expression on his face.

Well, it probably wasn't every day he watched a "human" woman shift into a hunchbacked female troll.

Now, if luck is on my side this little while more, every servant in the Hall will have fled to places of safety while their betters are squabbling.

She shuffled into the kitchen door as if she had every right to be there—which in this servant-form, she theoretically did. The strange mix of smells nauseated her for a moment until she dimmed that particular sense down to something bearable. Some of Madoc's allies and servants ate perfectly palatable foods. But then there were creatures like that ogre—

Best not think about what might be floating in the soup kettle on the hearth. Not all the bodies from midnight gang fights on the streets of big cities ended up in the hands of the coroner. Not all the old winos who vanished in the night were ever accounted for.

Enough; her guess was correct: the kitchen was empty. The work tables were clean, since the evening meal was long since over, but the soapy water and pottery shards on the floor and the heaps of soiled dishes showed that cleanup had not been completed when the servants learned of their masters' quarrels. They might be routed out and sent back to work, but not within the next hour.

She shifted back to her preferred form and waved Tanim in, then headed to the doorway on the opposite side of the room. If it had been gloomy in the hallway, it was positively dark in the kitchen, and hot as Hades. All the light came from the fires in the two fireplaces, and both put out enough heat to melt lead on the hearthstones.

She wrestled with the bar across the door for a moment, then it came free; she lifted it and pulled the latch, slipping out into the eternal dusk outside. Tanim followed, and stood looking cautiously around as she closed the door behind them.

They were in what would have been the kitchen garden in the manor-house that this hall had been copied from. Here Underhill, in Unseleighe lands, where there was no reason to grow things for a purpose, this was simply a rank and weed-filled annex to the main garden. Black vines covered with decaying leaves clung to the walls, their branches infesting the brickwork. Where plots of herbs and vegetables would have been, spiky, gray weeds and limp, dispirited grasses attempted to choke the life out of each other. Trees reached clawlike branches against the deep gray sky beyond the weedy plots, marking the edge of the "pleasure gardens."

But Shar's interest lay here, not out there. Food for Madoc, his guests, and the horde of servants had to come from somewhere, and it was not from anywhere within his realm. Instead, there was a Gate out here, a Gate set to a neutral area where Madoc's servants could obtain the needed foodstuffs. It would probably be a fairly unpleasant place to visit, but Shar didn't intend to be there for long.

She signaled Tanim to follow her, across the garden to the wooden platform and arched roof that marked this Gate position. Somewhat to her surprise, it was not guarded; a dropped spear proved that the goblin that usually guarded this Gate had deserted his post. Beside the platform were burlap bags full of garbage, and it occurred to her then that the Gate could be as useful for disposing of kitchen refuse as it was bringing the raw material in. For a moment she toyed with trying that setting—

No, I think not. I don't believe I want to visit an Unseleighe garbage dump.

Not so much because it was a garbage dump as because such a place would be a fine place for scavengers. Unseleighe scavengers were generally not things you wanted to meet under any

circumstances.

Unless, of course, you happened to be toting an AK-47.

In her guise as a kitchen servant, she had been once to the "market," and she had noted then how the Unseleighe seneschal had set the Gate. She triggered the spell herself this time, and the crude wooden arch filled with a dark haze. She motioned to Tannim to enter; he bowed mockingly and shook his head.

"After you, lady," he said quietly. So, he didn't trust her? Well, she couldn't exactly blame him.

She walked right through the Gate, ignoring the brief internal jarring as she crossed the boundary between here and there. A moment later, Tannim joined her, and she banished the Gate quickly, before anyone in Madoc's hall could stumble into the garden and notice that it had been activated.

After the relative silence of the garden, the noise here left her a little numb. The stench of the place could only be compared to a cross between a feedlot and a garbage dump. Fortunately, the merchants here were too busy trying to sell their wares to pay any attention to a couple of human types standing beside the Gate platform looking stunned.

"Come on," Shar said, nodding her head at the Gate. "We aren't going to be here long. I can reset this thing to a place that's a little friendlier." She saw that he was staring at the rows of meat merchants and added, "You really don't want to know what they're selling. Trust me."

He was already about as pale as a human could get; he swallowed hard and nodded. "Ah—by the way, I don't suppose we could get to my car from here, could we?"

She considered the question for a moment; his suggestion had a lot of merit. She already knew the Mach I had some very complex spells worked into its fabric, and there was every reason to think that he might be using it as a kind of magical storage battery as well. It might prove very useful.

"Not directly," she said after a moment. "Why?"

"Because it has a lot of protections on it," he replied with open honesty. "Other things, too. It's Cold Iron; lots of things down here can't cope with it. We're already in trouble; couldn't we really use a safe haven, a rolling base of operations?"

She nodded, and not at all reluctantly. "It's going to take us about a dozen Gates to get there, but yes, I can get us there from here eventually."

Tannim looked over his shoulder at the marketplace and shuddered. "How about if we start now—before someone out there needs to replace his inventory?"

One of the meat merchants, a boggle, had noticed them, and his eyes narrowed with speculation. Granted, a lot of the Unseleighe had human servants, or rather, slaves—but such slaves usually didn't loiter anywhere. They didn't dare.

"Good idea," she said shortly, and turned to reset the Gate to one of its other destinations.

Anyplace with fresh air. . . .

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Tannim slid into the driver's seat of his beloved Mustang, shut the door, and simply leaned back in the familiar surroundings. He had never been quite as happy to see any material object as he'd been to see his Mustang still waiting there in the middle of the amber room. The journey to reach it had been a harrowing one in terms of all the strange and menacing slices of Underhill they'd had to traverse. He was still astonished at Shar's ability to pick her way across all of those Gates. She must have an incredible memory. . . .

But they made it, and without any opposition to speak of. For the first time since he'd come Underhill, he felt relatively safe. There was Cold Iron between him and any enemies now, and lots of it. There were spells of protection and defense built into the very sheet metal. He had reserves of magical energy stored here as well; energies that he badly needed.

And his magic-imbued crowbar, his weapon of choice in any confrontation with the Unseleighe, was right under the seat where he could grab it.

The other door opened and closed as Shar slipped into the passenger's side and shut the door as soon as she was seated. He noted that she locked it, too, and did the same on his side. She fumbled for a moment with the controls on her seat before getting the hang of it and sliding it back as far as it would go.

Shar. Now, there was a mystery wrapped in an enigma: half-kitsune, half-dragon, all perplexing—

And one I'd better figure out before she turns around and stabs me in the back.

Chinthliss himself hadn't known where she stood but had assumed she was not on the side of truth, justice, and apple pie. Tannim had been so happy to see her, though, back in that Rubik's Prison, that he hadn't given a thought to what Chinthliss had said about her. Or, frankly, a fat damn about her motives in cracking him out of there. Her motives didn't matter, as long as she was getting him free. If she was leading him into another and different trap, well, maybe it would be easier to escape or talk his way out of than the last. The important thing was that he was buying a little more time, and in an uncertain universe, every moment counted. It gave him a little more opportunity to think things through. Something unexpected might happen.

So far, so good.

"All right, we made it. Now what? Aren't Madoc and his Merry Men going to come straight here as soon as they get over fighting with each other?" he asked, opening his eyes and blinking them wearily. How long had he gone without rest? Long enough; his eyes felt puffy and swollen, very heavy.

He looked over at Shar's lovely profile; she smiled a little and shook her head. "No," she said with a ghost of a chuckle. "No, I put a lot of masking spells on your car to deaden the effect of so much Cold Iron here—then I told them that I'd moved it to a safer place. Madoc won't go anywhere in person if he has the choice. The spells work like that silk sheet we put in the trunk; your Mach I is insulated from the energies Underhill now—which means that they are not going to be able to detect it by its effect on the world around it. They have absolutely no reason to think I left it here. I don't believe any of the Unseleighe Madoc's got know these masking spells are even possible, so they're going to take me at my word if they don't see Death-Metal effects here. And scrying is so costly in terms of time and energy that I don't think they'll make the attempt. They'd have to have something of yours, mine, or the vehicle's for

scrying to find it anyway. We can actually afford to get a little rest, then be on our way."

"How?" he asked skeptically. "Drive out of here?"

To his surprise, she nodded. "This place was meant for creatures larger than this vehicle; the doors and hallways will all accommodate it, and this room is on the ground floor. We can drive it out into the garden; there is a Gate there as well as the one in here. We will have to take our chances on where it goes, though; the only setting that I know of would land us in a fairly unpleasant and unfriendly place. I can see how many other settings there are, and you can pick one, and we'll hope it takes us somewhere familiar."

He nodded. She turned to him then, pulling her hair away from her face and looking at him rather wistfully. "I don't suppose you have anything in the way of food in here, do you? I'm awfully hungry. I could get something from the garden, but I'd rather not leave the car, frankly. This is about the first time I've felt safe outside of my—my own place."

He lifted an eyebrow at her, quite well aware of gnawing hunger in his own innards. "You mean our gracious host didn't offer you dinner?"

She made a little face. "You saw the kitchen; you saw what was in it. Would you eat anything prepared there?"

He had to grin, just a little, and reached behind the seat. "Here—" he said, handing her one of the high-energy sports-bars he kept back there. "I fool my body into thinking this is food all the time. It's not exactly cordon bleu, but it'll keep you going." He looked back around the side of the seat. "I've got crackers and Spraycheeze back there too, if you'd rather."

"This will be fine," she responded, unwrapping the bar and nibbling on it.

There were dented drink-boxes of Gatorade back behind the seat as well; he fished out a pair and handed her one. She nibbled at the bar daintily, but not as if she disliked the taste. He wondered what a kitsune normally ate; not sushi, surely. Somehow she didn't seem to be the sushi type.

He made short work of his own share and reclined the seat to its fullest. After sitting in that cube for hours, the car seat felt as luxurious as a featherbed. He was going to have to get some sleep; this seemed to be the safest place for it.

But worries swarmed through his mind, preventing any relaxation. How long, real-time, had he been Underhill? Time often moved very differently here; by the chronology of his own world, he could have been down here a few minutes, or a few months. His folks would be frantic—

I hope somebody thought of a story to tell them.

Chinthliss had obviously lost the link to the Mustang; he might be able to reach back to the human world with a Gate, but only at the price of expending everything he had and leaving himself open to any attacker.

That might be just what Shar was waiting for, in fact. Just because she'd been chummy with him so far today, that didn't mean she was on his side. She could be waiting to catch him in a moment of vulnerability.

Yeah, like asleep in this car.

But he didn't want to think about that. He didn't even want to consider it. He wanted to hear that she had somehow seen what her former allies really were like and had rejected them.

I want to find out that she's turned into a good guy, darn it. I want—hell, might as well admit it. I want her to be the girl in my dreams.

Well, there was another objection to opening up a Gate on his own. He was no Chinthliss; he would need quite a bit of time to establish that Gate, and such a huge expenditure of power would signal his presence as effectively as a Las Vegas-style neon sign.

Yeah. "Good Eats Here." Bad. Very bad.

So how was he going to get home again? Drive cross-Underhill? What was that going to do to the Mustang? He could create small planes of force, like magical ramps, all day long. They weren't too tough to make. He could even create those from inside the car, while it was in motion, so that should take care of stairs, lumps, and small ravines.

And where in heck are the gas stations down here, anyway?

Where did Shar figure into all this? What was she all about? Was she friend, foe, or neither?

"So," he said carefully, staring through the windshield at the throne at the other end of the room. "Why don't you start with some explanations? Like, how come you're suddenly my friend?"

She stiffened a little, then wrapped both hands around her drink-box, propping it on her knee. "You know who I am," she stated. "Who my father is." Her voice was completely neutral, and he nodded just as neutrally.

"Your name is Shar, your father is a dragon named Charcoal. He is an enemy of my mentor, Chinthliss, and an ally of the Unseleighe." He waited for her response; it was a curt nod. "I'm assuming you are, or were, an ally of the Unseleighe yourself. Your mother is a kitsune; Charcoal and Chinthliss both courted her, and Chinthliss won her, temporarily at least. That's basically all I know."

"My blood-father is a manipulative control freak," Shar replied bitterly. "I was raised supposedly as your opposite number. I was supposed to be everything you are not. Fortunately, Mother made certain that Charcoal wasn't the only creature with a hand in my upbringing. I parted company with him some time ago; our parting was less than friendly and he has forgiven neither Mother nor myself."

She glanced at him to see how he was taking this; he kept his expression neutral, but nodded.

"Unfortunately I was taught by Unseleighe and spent a lot of time in several of their domains. I began severing as many ties with his old allies as I deemed feasible, but—much as it galls me to admit this—there were some I didn't dare cut off completely. If I had, they would have been mortally offended." She bit her lip, and looked at her hands.

"And offending an Unseleighe prince can have very permanent results," Tannim commented. He could understand that; heck, he lived it. "They hate everybody, and it's only when they want something out of you that you can trust them within limited bounds. It's just a good thing that there are rules even they don't dare break."

"Exactly." She blinked rapidly, and rubbed her eyes. "I was still supposed to be your opposite; I went on studying you, partly because it didn't do any harm, and partly because if Father wanted me to be your opposite, I wanted to see what I was supposed to be the opposite of. You posed something of a challenge, actually, trying to come up with things I could do to match your skills. I've been watching you, on and off, for years. Since you were in high school, in fact."

She'd been studying him? For years? He couldn't conceal his shock and surprise—and it was that shock that made him blurt out what he would not otherwise have revealed. "Did you dream about me the way I—"

She brought her head up like a startled deer and stared directly into his eyes, her pupils wide with shock and surprise. "You dreamed about me? When?"

Good one, Tannim. You really stepped on your dick that time. Well, it was too late now; might as well fess up. "At least once a month, sometimes as often as every other night, for years. Since Chinthliss first came across to my side of the Hill, anyway." He couldn't help himself; he felt his ears turning hot as he flushed. Would she guess just what some of those dreams had been about?

But she averted her eyes, and pink crept over her cheeks. "I—dreamed too, about you. I thought it was just because I was studying you."

Quick, get the subject back on track before you really stick your foot in your mouth. Don't ask what she dreamed about! "Right," he said more harshly than he intended. "So—now what? How do you figure into this mess? Besides challenging me, I mean; I suppose that was on this Madoc Skean's orders. Why'd you get me out of that prison?"

"I caused it," she said in a very small voice. Her blush deepened to a painful crimson, and she stared fixedly at her clenched hands crushing her empty drink-box. "It's my fault you're Underhill in the first place. I was the one who brought your car here."

So that's why—! Damn it—

"I didn't expect you to follow it so fast!" she continued, an edge of desperation in her voice, as she finally turned to meet his accusing gaze. "I was—oh, I was under pressure from Madoc Skean. I didn't know what to do, I mean, I really got a rush out of challenging you, but he kept pushing for me to—"

"To get rid of me," he supplied, flatly. "So?"

"So I was trying to buy time for both of us! I couldn't risk a direct confrontation with Madoc Skean, I didn't want to actually consummate the challenge, and I was trying to buy us both time!" Her hands tightened on the drink-box. "I thought—I thought you'd follow the car in a few days at best, and by then, I'd have some idea of how to put Madoc off further, or I'd have managed to create a rift among his other allies, or you'd have gotten in touch with your Seleighe friends. And I had no idea this car was going to make such a huge disturbance when it came across!" The muscles of her throat looked tight, and there was a line of strain between her brows. "Madoc had a lot of ideas; he thought that without the Mach I you might choose something other than 'racing' as your weapon. And in case you decided to go chasing after it, he expected to use the car as bait in a trap, and I was the only one that could bring it Underhill for him. My plan was to keep the fact that I actually had it hidden from Madoc until I could talk to you. . . ."

Her voice faltered and died, and she licked her lips unhappily. But she did not avert her gaze, and she



seemed sincere. He looked into her eyes and saw no falsehood there.

Could he believe her?

Ah, hell, why not?

"Okay," he said into the thick, leaden silence. "Okay, I'll accept that. Now, why are you helping me?"

She dropped her eyes for a moment, then looked up again, with a spark of defiance in her expression. "Because I got you into this," she said. "The scales have to be balanced before we decide on anything else; that's kitsune law and custom. I got you into this, but now I've gotten you out of this. You have to release me from that debt."

But he shook his head slightly. She was not going to get off the hook that easily. He was still Underhill, and so was the Mach I; springing him from Madoc Skean's little reception didn't even things out. "Sorry," he told her. "I can't do that. I'm not out of this yet, I'm only out of Madoc's clutches, and that may just be temporarily. I can't release you from your debt until I'm back in my world, and my car, too."

She flinched, but she nodded; she obviously saw the justice of his demand. Her cheeks were so pale that he longed to touch her and reassure her.

He wanted to do more than just touch her, if it came down to that. Unbidden dream-memories told him of any number of ways this could go—

But this wasn't a dream. He couldn't make that kind of assumption.

He tore his gaze away from hers and stared out the windshield again, trying to calm the chaos of his mind and heart.

He just wasn't certain how to act—did he behave as if she was a stranger, or as if she really was the person he had dreamed about? This was as confusing as all hell; it felt as if he knew her, as if he had known her intimately for years! It was all those damned dreams, where she'd figured as his lover. They'd had a solid feeling, a reality to them, that made the current situation positively schizoid. He didn't know her in any sense; they'd never met before she'd nailed that glove to his Mustang. Yet at the same time, all the little things she did, the tiny quirks of behavior, the ways she reacted, the bits of body language, were all exactly the way he "remembered."

"I hate to ask you what your dreams were about, if they were anything like mine," she whispered across his confusion.

"If you knew," he replied, trying desperately to make a joke about it, "you'd slap me into next week."

"Oh, I don't know about that," she said, which was exactly what he would have expected her to say if this was a dream, and not at all what he had rationally expected to hear. He looked over at her in startlement to find her smiling wanly at him. "After all, I am half-kitsune. We have a certain reputation; one that's been known to attract even dragons."

His body reacted in a predictable manner before his mind took over and gathered up all the reins firmly. This isn't the time or the place, he told his galloping libido firmly. We're surrounded by potential enemies, we're exhausted—and on top of that, the front seat of a '69 Mustang is absolutely impossible. These are bucket seats. The backseat is practically nonexistent. You'd have to be a contortionist.

"Trust me," he said firmly. "You'd smack me so hard I'd lose teeth."

He closed his eyes for a moment—just for a few seconds—

It was long enough; she struck as swiftly as a cobra. Before he could open them again, she'd writhed around in her seat, leaning over the center console, and planted her mouth firmly on his. One hand snuck around behind the back of his head, holding him so he couldn't jerk away.

Not that he wanted to!

Without the use of anything as confusing as words, she was letting him know that her dreams had probably been along the same lines as his own. And in no uncertain terms, she was telling him that she had enjoyed those dreams.

When she'd succeeded in setting every nerve afire and causing a complete meltdown of his brain, she let him go, returning to her seat with a teasing smile on her lips. "I don't think I would smack you, if those dreams were like mine—unless you asked nicely," was all she said.

"I—guess not." He blinked and tried to make his frontal lobes function again, after having the blood supply to his brain rush off elsewhere. Should he follow up on this?

If I do, I could get into more trouble than I can handle right now. If I don't, it could still be trouble, but not as complicated.

"This isn't a—a good time to get into anything—ah—distracting," he ventured. "We aren't really safe here, just safer for the moment than a lot of other places." He hoped she understood; the lover who had shared more than just his bed would have.

"You don't like it dangerous?" she purred.

"No, and you wouldn't, either."

She nodded; reluctantly, he thought, but in agreement. "Damn. You're right. I'm not happy about it, though." She smiled weakly. "I shouldn't have done that, but I couldn't resist. Let's just call that a—a promissory note, a raincheck, until a better time."

Jeez, some raincheck! Makes me want to call Fighting Eagle for a thunder-dance! He yawned, exaggerating it a little. "Look, Shar, I'm not capable of thinking or much of anything at the moment. I am beat, and I need some rest badly. Can you stay awake long enough for me to catch a couple of hours of sleep? Once I can think straight, we can make some plans, but right now, I wouldn't want to make any kind of decisions. I'm two burritos short of a combination plate when I'm this tired."

She nodded, and to his relief, she did not seem put out by the fact that he didn't follow through on her tacit invitation. But the Shar I know—knew—think I know would understand. "Get some rest, then," she said with surprising gentleness. "I'll keep watch."

Could he trust her?

Did it matter?

Not really. If he couldn't trust her, he was already doomed, and he might as well get some sleep. And if he could trust her—

—he might as well get some sleep.

"Thanks, Shar," he said, and smiled. He reached out and squeezed her hand. "Thanks a lot. It's nice to have somebody watching at my back in this."

Her reaction—blinking as if such a thing had never occurred to her—made him wonder about her past. Living with the Unseleighe would only teach you that there could be no such thing as a partner. But someone or something had to teach her that it was possible.

Has she ever had someone she could depend on? Her mother, maybe.

"I can see that it would be," she replied wistfully. Then she shook her head and became her usual, confident self. "You get that sleep; I probably need a lot less than you do, anyway. When you wake again, we'll make some plans."

"Right." He smiled again, and closed his eyes firmly. Having her so close was such a temptation—

Go to sleep, Tanim. And—jeez, if you can help it, don't dream about Shar.

\* \* \*

Joe padded up to the old barn a little more than two hours after he'd left it, sweating, but not even close to being winded. It had felt good to run full-out like that, with the cool night air all around him and the drone of cicadas coming from all directions. When he was doing something like running, he didn't have to think so much about things. Like how all of this was more than a little crazy.

He'd let himself into the Drake's house and had left a note propped on the kitchen table, explaining pretty much what he'd suggested to Chinthliss. Kansas City was far enough away that the Drakes would not expect to hear anything for at least a couple of days, especially since this was supposed to be an emergency. And if they weren't back with Tanim in a couple of days, then things really would have gone seriously wrong.

To lend credence to the note, Joe had rummaged through Tanim's room and his own, making it look as if some things, but not all, had been taken. Then he had gotten what he'd come for from its hiding place up inside the boxsprings of his bed. A .45 automatic, basically the same handgun as the military surplus he'd trained with. Pity that it wasn't an M-16 or some other fully automatic assault rifle, but—well, it wasn't supposed to have been a bullet-hose for all-out attacks but something to defend himself from one or more of the Chosen Ones until the real law showed up. He had to keep reminding himself that he was supposed to be a civilian now. Most civvies didn't even have this much firepower, when it came right down to it. They saw guys like Dirty Harry in the movies, and that was about the extent of their gun knowledge.

Which was why, of course, whenever one of them did get scared over something and get himself a weapon, the people who usually got hurt or killed by it were people in his own family. Frank had once remarked that for a bunch of paranoid nut cases, the Chosen Ones had the best gun-safety classes he'd ever heard of. Joe had not only taken those classes, he'd taught them to the Junior Guard.

He had strapped on the shoulder holster, and slung extra pouches of ammo on their web-belts around

his waist. They were heavy, but you never knew. . . . Better take all he had; there probably weren't any gun shops where he was going.

He was used to running with full pack and kit; this had been nothing, really, no kind of weight at all. He had let himself out of the house, moving so quietly he didn't even make the floor creak, and took off back the way he had come.

He was halfway afraid that Chinthliss had used his acquiescence as a ruse, or had changed his mind, and that when he got back to the barn he would find the other two gone. Then what would he do?

Call Keighvin at Fairgrove, he supposed, and let him know what had happened. And hope that he didn't let anything slip to Mr. and Mrs. Drake when they asked him where their son was.

But the glow of heavy shields over the barn told him that Chinthliss and Fox were still there, and as he ran back up the track through the tall grass, intermittent flashes of bright white light beneath the golden glow indicated that they were up to something. None of this was visible if he did that little mental trick and turned what Tannim had called his "mage-sight" off. This other kind of sight—it was so strange, seeing colored glows around people, and the occasional figure that he knew wasn't "really" there for the rest of the world. It had started when he'd seen Sarah for the first time, and thanks to the training Bob and Al had given him, it was getting stronger all the time. Every time he used it, he saw more. Was this how everyone at Fairgrove saw the world, bathed in extra colors and populated by more creatures than anyone else knew existed? Or was this something only a few people could do?

Well, he'd find all that out later, if he made it through this.

If.

He had to think of it in those terms. He had no illusions that this was going to be some romp through Wonderland; Fox was terrified, and even though Chinthliss tried to seem glib about the situation, Tannim's mentor was worried. There was danger here, much more real than the "danger" his father had prophesied.

He was about to get into something he hadn't really wanted to deal with, and something he wasn't really prepared for. Magic. What the hell did he know about magic, really? Not much when push came to shove. Not enough to use it as a weapon, probably not enough to put up an adequate defense of his own.

But Tannim, in the short time that Joe had known him, had become a "big brother," just as Jamie was his "little brother." Not a blood relationship, but one that went far deeper than blood and bone and genes. Tannim was family. You stood by your family. When they were in trouble, you helped them.

Fox stood beside the gap in the wall that had once been the doorway, his tails swishing nervously. Joe trotted up. The tall grass resisted him a little and caught on his jeans. Chinthliss stood in the center of the barn, as Tannim had stood not that long ago. He didn't seem to be doing anything, but Joe knew better than to assume that nothing was going on.

"What's up?" he whispered to Fox, wiping the sweat off his forehead with the back of his arm.

"He's building a Gate," Fox whispered back. "The whole thing; all the Gates where we want to go are booked up and unless we build our own, we can't get there from here. I gave him all the oomph I had to spare, so now he's channeling in everything he can get from outside. It's not that easy, building a Gate in

your world; magic runs thinner here. We're just lucky that it hasn't been tapped around here much."

Just as he finished that last sentence, Chinthliss exclaimed in satisfaction, and a tiny glowing dot appeared in the air in front of him, at just about eye-level. Chinthliss cupped his hands before him, catching the spark for a moment so that his hands glowed and the bones showed through the translucent flesh. Then Chinthliss slowly spread his hands wide; the dot became a glowing ring, which grew as he spread his hands, until it was a circle of light taller than he and broader than his outstretched arms. A dark haze filled it, a haze you couldn't see through, and which made Joe shiver for reasons he didn't quite understand.

"You've come exactly in time, Joe," Chinthliss said without turning around. "We are ready, now. You and I, that is," he amended. "Fox can journey there without the need of a Gate; one of the advantages of being a spirit-form."

"Right. See you at the bandstand?" Fox replied, and vanished without waiting for an answer.

"Will he really be there?" Joe said a bit dubiously, for all that Fox was his old "friend" from childhood. Even his memories painted Fox as something less than reliable and inclined to tricks.

"He'll be there," Chinthliss replied grimly. "If he's not, well, he knows that I will be looking for him when all this is over. Being called 'Stumpy' will be the least of his problems."

Joe stepped across the threshold of the barn to join Chinthliss in front of the circle of light. "So what do we do?" he asked bravely, putting the best face he could on all this. "I—I'm afraid I don't know a lot about this kind of thing."

Chinthliss looked down at him, and the dark eyes changed from hard and purposeful to warm and kindly, all in a single moment. "We simply step across," he told Joe. "There will be a moment of disorientation, then you will find yourself in the place we wish to go to. And you are doing very well, young man. You are bearing up under some very strange experiences, and doing so with more composure than many with more years than you."

Joe looked up into those odd, oriental eyes, saw or sensed far more years than he had dreamed, and swallowed. "I don't suppose you have any advice before we do this, do you?"

Chinthliss shook his head. "Nothing that would help. Are you ready?"

Joe took a very deep breath, allowed himself to be conscious for a moment of the weight in his shoulder holster, and remembered with a flush of pride how good a marksman he was. Heck, he wasn't too bad at hand-to-hand, either. Chinthliss had obviously included him in this party because of that expertise. If he simply kept his eyes, ears, and mind open, obeyed his orders, and behaved in a professional manner, everything should be all right, no matter how strange the external circumstances became.

"I'm ready, sir," he said, proud of the fact that his voice did not break or quaver, and that he stood tall, straight, and confidently. "You first, or me?"

In answer, Chinthliss gestured at the circle of light. Joe repressed a shiver when he remembered how Tanim had stepped into an identical circle and vanished. . . .

He took a convulsive grip on his belt and stepped through; his skin tingled all over, as if he'd grasped a live wire, his eyes blurred, the world swirled and spun around him, and he gasped as his stomach lurched, exactly as if he'd gone into free-fall for a moment. He flexed his knees involuntarily.

Then with a shock, he went from night into full day, and his feet landed on soft turf. Since his knees were already flexed to take the strain, he only staggered a little to catch his balance. As he straightened, he saw that he stood in the center of what looked like a city park, with a white bandstand or gazebo in the middle. By the bright light, it had to be just about noon, and where they'd come from, it was around two in the morning.

Overhead, he heard someone whistling.

He looked up in startlement to see a cartoon sun in the middle of a flat, blue sky, staring down at him jovially. You could look right at it without even blinking; lemon-yellow, it had round, fat cheeks, blue eyes, a wide mouth, and a fringe of pointed petal-like rays. It smiled at him as soon as it saw he was looking at it, winked broadly, and waved at him with one of the petals.

Stunned, he waved back automatically. It grinned, and went back to whistling and bobbing a little in time to the song—a real song—that was also being whistled by a vivid blue and red bird perched on the top of the gazebo. Puffy, flat-looking marshmallow clouds sat in the sky with the sun, a sky that was an unshaded, turquoise blue, without any variation from horizon to horizon. The emerald grass under his feet was more like carpet than grass, and did not crush down under his weight. There was no breeze, yet the air smelled fresh and clean. In fact, it smelled exactly like freshly washed sheets.

They also weren't alone. The other creatures were not very near, and they didn't seem to care that a Gate had been opened in the park, although many noticed. There were otters and foxes, though none of the foxes looked like FX. There was a massive cobalt-blue unicorn, and a centaur with a black, d'Artagnan beard. They were having a picnic with what could only be called a foxtaur, and a small golden-colored dragon, and an oddly hunched, very large bird. A white unicorn mare chased playfully after a humanoid, black-horned unicorn wearing black leather and spikes, howling taunts. And overhead, a red-and-umber gryphon with broad copper wings glided in to join the rest.

He turned as a crackling, sizzling sound beside him startled him again. There was nothing there for a second—then a familiar arm clad in Armani-tailored silk phased into existence, as if the owner was pushing his way through an invisible barrier, exactly like an expensive special effect. The rest of Chinthliss followed shortly as Joe watched in utter fascination. He seemed to arrive suspended a few inches above the plush green lawn and dropped as soon as all of him was "there."

Chinthliss landed with flexed knees, just as Joe had. He straightened, looked around, and nodded with satisfaction.

"Good," he said. "At least we made our transition safely. Now, where is Fox?"

"Right here." Fox strolled up from behind them, although Joe could have sworn that there hadn't been anyone there a moment earlier. He was in the fox-footed, three-tailed James Dean form, the one with the red leather jacket. "Now where?"

"One moment." Chinthliss glanced at Joe. "Young man, would you please grasp our friend?"

Joe didn't understand what Chinthliss was trying to prove—he couldn't touch Fox, he already knew that—but he shrugged, reached out, and made a grab for Fox's arm.

And with a shock, realized that he was holding a very solid, completely real, red-leather clad arm.

"What—" he said, startled. "How—but—"

Fox looked at Chinthliss in irritation.

"So what were you trying to prove?" he growled. "You know I'm real here!"

"That's what I was trying to prove," Chinthliss said with ironic satisfaction. "That you were not playing any of your kitsune tricks with me and projecting a spirit-form here as well, rather than risking your real self. Thank you, Joe."

"You're welcome," Joe responded automatically, dropping his hold on Fox's arm and backing up a step. He hadn't expected that. If Fox was real here—was that cartoon sun up above real as well?

He didn't want to think about it.

But then he suddenly realized that he really didn't have to think about it. His part in this mission was very simple. He didn't have to try and figure out what was real and what wasn't; all he really had to do was keep a lookout for trouble and hit it or shoot it if it got too close. And if it turned out that all this was just one big hallucination, well, no problem. He'd wake up from this dream, or in the looney bin, and pick up his life where he'd left off. Right?

Yeah. Sure.

"I think our first logical destination would be the Drunk Tank," Chinthliss continued, unperturbed. "All news comes there, sooner or later—and if any of Tannim's friends are here, that is where they will go."

Fox sighed with resignation, but shrugged. "Suit yourself," he replied. "You know this place as well as I do, and you know Tannim's friends better than I do."

"Are you going to build a Gate again?" Joe asked nervously. He hadn't liked the sensations of crossing into this place, and he wasn't certain that he wanted a repetition of the experience quite so soon.

"Build a Gate?" Chinthliss said. "Here? Good heavens, no."

"Then how are we going to get to this place?" Joe asked, more than a little confused now, since there didn't seem to be anything here except lush grass, a few fairly normal-looking trees, some benches, the gazebo, and the cartoon sky. Literally; the sky appeared to intersect with the ground no more than a few hundred yards away on all sides.

"How?" Chinthliss said, and whistled loudly, waving an arm.

And a fat taxi, bright yellow with black checks, shaped rather like an overgrown VW Bug, pulled up beside them. Joe blinked; he knew that thing hadn't been anywhere near them a moment ago, yet there it was!

A creature like a mannish badger leaned out the window. "Hiya folks!" the thing growled. "Where to?"

"The Drunk Tank," FX told it blandly.

"This is how," Chinthliss said to Joe, opening up the door and gesturing for him and Fox to enter. "We take a taxi, of course. It's too far to walk."

"Of course," Joe echoed in a daze, climbing into the rear seat. "A taxi. Of course."

"Well what else would we use?" Chinthliss retorted, as he wedged himself inside as well, with Fox squeezed between them making Warner Brothers cartoon faces. "A dragon?"

\* \* \*

The taxi accelerated toward the flat blue sky, which looked more and more like a wall as they drew nearer. Joe closed his eyes and gripped the seat—they were going to hit! He waited for the impact, his teeth clenched tightly.

But a second later, the taxi screeched to a halt. "Here we are, folks!" came the cheerful voice from the front. "Thanks for riding with me! See you soon!"

The door popped open on its own, and Joe stepped cautiously out onto the pavement.

Real pavement. Real, cracked cement.

The sky above them was dark here, with a haze of light-pollution above the buildings. This looked like any street in any bar-district in any big city he'd ever been in. The street was asphalt, the sidewalk and curb were chipped and eroded concrete with cracks in it, but there were no cigarette butts and other trash scattered around. Dirty brick buildings on both sides of the street stood four or five stories tall, with darkened storefronts on the ground floor, and lighted or darkened windows that might lead into offices or apartments in the stories above. The taxi had pulled up in front of another brick building with a neon sign in a small window, set into a wood panel where a much larger window had once been. The sign flashed The Drunk Tank twice in red, then flashed a green neon caricature of a tipsy tank with a dripping turret the third time. To the right of the building was a parking lot; to the left, a vacant lot with a fence around it. The lot was about half full of the kind of "beater" cars most people of modest means drove in a big city. They were just about in the middle of the block, which seemed to be pretty much deserted. A couple of cars and a panel-truck were parked on the other side of the street, in front of a black-and-silver sign which read Dusty's Furley-Davidson. Below it was what could only be an authentic Springer Softail. With a warning sticker.

The cartoonish taxi did not belong here, but the driver didn't seem to care. It waited until Chinthliss got out, then buzzed off down the street.

Fox still had his fox-feet, but he'd lost the tails somewhere. Chinthliss still looked entirely human.

"Do bullets work here?" Joe whispered to FX as Chinthliss led the way to the red-painted door.

"Oh, yeah," Fox replied, a little grimly. "Yeah, bullets work just fine. You're not in some kind of cartoon, no matter what it looks like. The last bunch of city planners were animation buffs and made the sky and all look like this, but this is real. This may look weird to you right now, but bullets work, knives work, crossbows and darts work, getting hit hurts a lot, and dead is very, very dead. No second chance, no resurrection, no magic spell to bring you back. Keep that in mind if trouble starts."

Joe gulped. "Right."

Fox followed on Chinthliss' heels into the bar; Joe followed on Fox's.



Inside, the bar looked a lot bigger than it had from the outside. A lot nicer, too—kind of like one of those fancy nightclubs in movies about the Roaring Twenties and the Depression. They stood in a waiting room at the top of a series of descending tiers that held two- or four-person tables. Each table was spread with a spotless white tablecloth, centered with flowers and a candle-lamp. Wall-sconces made of geometric shapes of black metal and mirrors fastened invisibly to the white walls held brilliant white lights. To Joe's left was a check-room with a hat-check girl and the hostess' stand; beyond those was a curving balcony looking out over the tables, with a few doors leading off of it. To his right was the bar, which curved along the wall behind the top tier of tables as one immaculate, unbelievably precise arc of mahogany. Everything else was done in shiny black, chrome, and glass. At the bottom of the tiers was a dance floor with a geometric pattern in black and white marble laid out on it—and somehow lit from below—and behind that a glossy black stage large enough for a complete big-band orchestra. From the stands pushed to one side and the classic grand piano, it often held such a band, but right now there was a combo composed of a keyboard-player, a drummer with a full electronic rig, a guy with an impressive synth-set, and a female vocalist. They were covering "Silk Pajamas" by Thomas Dolby, and those in the crowd who were actually listening seemed to be enjoying it. And singing along.

But Joe had to do another reality check when he looked the crowd over.

Around about half the folks here were human; plenty of them were wearing outfits that would have had them barred at the door in the real world. Said "clothing" ranged everywhere from full military kit to as close to nothing as personal modesty would allow. In the case of some people, that pretty much meant clothing-as-jewelry—or, as Frank had once put it, "gownless evening straps." Joe tried not to stare at the blonde girl in the G-string, fishnets, diamond-choker, and heels; she was centerfold-perfect—and her brawny, saturnine escort could have picked him up with one hand and broken him over his knee without breaking a sweat. He was done up in what looked like medieval chainmail, the real thing. The sword slung along his back was certainly real looking.

Fortunately, both of them were too busy watching the stage and the dancers on the dance floor to notice his stares or his blushes.

The rest of the patrons—including most of those on the dance floor—were definitely not any more human than the creatures he'd seen in the park. The couple drawing the most attention at the moment was a pair of bipedal cat-creatures, one Siamese, the other a vivid red lynx, who were showing off their dance steps. But sharing the floor with them was a female with green hair and wearing what appeared to be a dress made of leaves who was dancing alone, a couple of elves, two fox couples, a pine marten dancing with a large monitor lizard, and a pair of beautiful young sloe-eyed men, dark and graceful, with the hindquarters and horn-buds of young goats, who were dancing together in a sensuous way that made Joe blush as badly as the blonde girl had.

He averted his eyes and fixed them firmly on Chinthliss' back. The dragon was speaking to the hostess—who seemed to have a wonderful personality, if you didn't mind the fact that otherwise she was a dog. She nodded, and wagged the tail that barely showed below her Erté dress. Chinthliss made his own way towards the bar. Joe and Fox followed him.

Chinthliss ordered "yuppie water"; Fox, with a defiant glance at Chinthliss, ordered a rum-and-Coke. Joe waved the bartender away. First of all, he had no idea how he was going to pay for a drink, or in what currency—and secondly, it was a bad idea to have your hands busy with something else if a situation came up.

Chinthliss scanned the crowd, then turned back to the bartender as the man (Arabic-looking, but with pointed ears) brought him his drink and Fox's. "So, Mahmut, have you heard or seen anything of

Tanim?" the dragon asked casually, as he pushed what appeared to be a coin made of gold across to the bartender. The being slid it expertly out of sight, as he pretended to polish the bar with a soft cloth. "Not recently, Chinthliss," Mahmut replied, rubbing industriously at a very shiny spot. "Why? Are you looking for him? He never comes here anymore; in fact, as far as I know, he never goes out of the Seleighe Elfhames these days, if he leaves America at all."

Chinthliss sighed, and sipped the bubbling water. The band finished its number to the applause of the dancers and some of the people at the tables. The lights came down, and a pair of women, one very, very pale and in a long, white, high-collared dress, and one with long blond hair right down to the floor, wearing what appeared to be a dress made of glittering green fish scales, took the stage. The one in white sat down at the piano; the blonde took the microphone. A spotlight centered on the blonde, who lowered her eyelids for a moment and smiled sweetly.

The bartender tapped Joe on the shoulder; he jumped. When he turned to see what the man wanted, the fellow was holding out a pair of earplugs.

"You single?" the man asked. Joe flushed, and nodded. "You wouldn't be a virgin, by any chance, would you?" the bartender persisted, this time in a whisper.

This time Joe flushed so badly that he felt as if he was on fire.

"Thought so." The bartender nodded. "You'd better wear these if you don't want to end up following Lorelie around like a lost puppy for the rest of your short life." He held out the earplugs. Joe looked at Fox and Chinthliss, who both nodded.

"We're protected. I wouldn't worry so much about Lorelie, but her friend has appetites you wouldn't want to satisfy," Fox said solemnly. "Lamias are like that."

"Th—them?" Joe stammered.

"Yeah, them," Fox said. "Think of them as the Cocteau Twins gone horribly wrong. The L&L Music Factory, embalming optional."

Lamias? Lorelie? Something about both those names rang a dim and distant bell in his mind, but he couldn't put a finger on what they meant. Still, if not only this bartender but Chinthliss and Fox thought he ought to put in those earplugs—well, maybe he'd better.

He took them gingerly and inserted them. And he discovered, rather to his surprise, that even with them in his ears he could hear perfectly well, if a little distantly.

There were waitresses circulating among the tables, he saw now, and they were handing out more earplugs. But oddly enough, only to the men—or rather, male creatures. The two young men with the goats' legs laughed and waved them away, as did one or two others, including the pine marten and the lizard, but most of the men took them and fitted them into their ears.

Interesting.

The pale girl at the piano began singing as soon as the last of the earplug-girls retired; Joe recognized the song as "Stormy Weather," and after a few bars, Lorelie began to sing.

She had a low, throaty voice, rather than the bell-like and pure tones Joe had half expected; there was

no doubt, though, that in his world she'd have a lot of people offering her record contracts. Especially with that face and figure behind the voice. But he couldn't help but wonder what all the fuss was about—and why the earplugs?

Oh, well. When in Rome . . .

He turned his attention back to Chinthliss and the bartender.

". . . and we think he might have bitten off more than he can chew," Chinthliss was saying, as Mahmut listened attentively. "Look, I know you're on the Seleighe side of the fence, so to speak, at least most of the time. You know some of the kid's friends. If any of them show up here, can you pass that information on for me?"

Mahmut nodded gravely. "For a dog of an infidel, that one is a good boy," he replied. "For me, he arranged a lager distributor from America. He has done several of my friends a service or two in the past. For a chance to even the scales, I think that they would do much."

"What kind is his kind?" Joe whispered to Fox. FX shrugged and muttered something that sounded like "gin," although that couldn't possibly be right. It was probably the earplugs. Joe made a move to take them out; Fox grabbed his hand to prevent him—

Just as someone entered the bar, stared at the singer below, and stopped dead in his tracks, as if transfixed.

It was a young man; one with branching antlers rising from his head, but otherwise quite normal-looking. As Joe paused with his hand on the plug in his ear, the newcomer shook his head violently, turned a deathly white, and made a kind of odd moaning noise.

His eyes glazed over, and he stumbled down the stairs between the tiers of tables, ignoring everything and everyone in his path. He staggered across the dance floor towards Lorelie, who ignored his presence completely, and dropped down at her feet in a crouch, gazing up at her with the adoration of a saint at the feet of the Almighty.

If Joe hadn't chanced to look in her direction, he might never have seen the piano player's reaction. If Lorelie was indifferent to her worshipper, the pale girl was not.

She stared at the young man with such pure, naked hunger that the word "hunger" simply did not describe the expression she wore. He might have been a thick, juicy steak, and she suffering starvation. Then she licked her lips and smiled.

Her teeth were all pointed, like a shark's.

"Poor kid," the bartender said distantly. "She got another one." And somehow Joe knew what he meant. Lorelie might have snared the man, but her accompanist was going to devour him somehow. Not just figuratively, either.

Joe rounded on the bartender, suddenly suffused with anger. "So why aren't you doing anything about it?" he hissed, one hand on the Colt. "Why do you let her sing here?"

Mahmut's eyes narrowed dangerously, but his voice remained calm and even. "Look, kid, we have placards in the lobby announcing that Lorelie's singing in here. The hat-check girl would have offered him

earplugs. The hostess would have offered him earplugs. How much more do you want us to do? Shove the plugs in his ears? This is a neutral realm; Lorelie's free to sing, we're free to hire her, and he's free to ignore the warnings. Who knows? Maybe he was suicidal. You may not like it, son, but you're not in Kansas anymore, either."

This is a neutral realm. Maybe he was suicidal. They know he's going to die, and no one is going to help him.

Joe felt cold all over. He looked at Mahmut's flat black eyes; looked back down at the bandstand, at Lorelie, at her admirer, at the piano player. He shivered, and briefly considered the ramifications of running down there and trying to save that poor guy—

Then he caught Fox's eyes. The kitsune shook his head slowly. He remembered all of Fox's warnings, shuddered, and turned away.

Mahmut spoke to him again. "Sometimes we get people doing that because there are a lot of ways to drain a man. Those two know most of them. I have been told that many are pleasurable and leave the man more alive than before. Some think the risk is worth it for the experience. The young buck there isn't likely to die—and he might enjoy it."

He still might have tried to think of some way of getting Lorelie's victim free, but he never got the chance.

At that moment, one of the waitresses (a delicate creature like a winged lizard with veil-like wings sprouting from her shoulder blades) came over and tapped Chinthliss on the arm. "Sir," she said, "the lady over there would like you and your friends to join her in the Blue Room."

Chinthliss shook his head impatiently, as the young creature pointed. "I do not have time—" he began, looking in the direction she indicated.

Then he stopped speaking, frozen with shock that even Joe could read. And beside him, Fox went as white as the girl at the piano.

Joe turned to see what they were looking at.

On the other side of the room, behind the last tier of tables where the bar was on this side, there were several doors that presumably led to private dining rooms. There was someone standing in front of one of those doors.

She wore the kimono and elaborate hairstyle of a traditional Japanese woman—Joe could only think "geisha," since he had no idea who else wore the kimonos with the long, trailing sleeves, or the hair pierced through with so many jeweled pins that her head looked like a pincushion. But although the body beneath the gown was that of a human woman, the face was that of a fox.

And behind her, fanned out like the glory of the peacock, was an array of fox tails that clearly belonged to her.

"Oh, shit," FX said weakly. "It's—it's—"

Chinthliss cleared his throat with difficulty.

"Tell the Lady Ako," he managed, after several tries, "that we would be honored to join her."

## CHAPTER NINE

Shar watched Tanim out of the corner of her eye, hoping it wasn't obvious that she was watching him. If he felt her gaze resting on him, he probably wouldn't be able to sleep; he'd assume she was waiting for him to fall asleep so that she could do something unpleasant to him.

Well, she wouldn't mind doing something to him, but it wouldn't be unpleasant. If she had gotten his hormones dancing with that kiss, she'd sent her own into orbit. There hadn't been anyone who'd had that effect on her for a long, long time.

At least she knew one thing, now. She knew he'd had the same kind of erotic dreams of her that she'd had of him. The way he'd responded to her impulsive kiss had left no doubt in her mind of that. Enthusiasm under the surprise—and a great deal of heat under the control. He would feel so good. . . .

But Shar knew he was also not going to presume on those dreams. He didn't trust her yet and she couldn't blame him. But there was another thing: he didn't assume that her personality was anything like the person he'd dreamed about. He didn't know anything at all about her, and he acknowledged that. I knew he was a cautious and clever man, she mused as his breathing deepened, and he began to relax minutely. This is just one more example of that. I have the advantage here; I know that the lover in my dreams is virtually identical in personality to the real man—or at least, as much of the real man as I have been able to observe over the years.

And yet, even though he didn't trust her yet, it seemed to her that he was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt; he was apparently willing to give her the time to prove to him by her actions that she could be trusted.

She sighed quietly. If that kiss was anything to go by, he was just as talented and considerate as the dream-lover had been. A far cry from the Unseleighe, or the relatively shallow and skittish kitsune males. Those were the only creatures of male gender she'd spent any time with; she'd avoided human males simply out of disinterest. And if Charcoal and Chinthliss were examples of dragonkind—

They're either manipulative, selfish bastards who'll run over the top of anything and anyone to get what they want, or they're fast-talking, charming rogues who'd rather lose everything they have than make a commitment.

Bitter? Oh, a tad.

Tanim sighed and nestled down a little further into his seat. Was he truly asleep? She shifted slightly, touched the door handle and made it rattle just a little. He didn't stir; his eyelids didn't even flicker. There were dark shadows under his eyes, shadows that spoke eloquently of just how exhausted he'd been. In sleep, he looked frighteningly frail, and now she realized just how much of his appearance of strength depended on his personality.

Well, now what? They couldn't stay here forever; they probably shouldn't stay here longer than it took Tanim to catch up on some rest and recover a bit. So, how to get out of here?

There was the Gate in the garden; that was probably their best bet. As she had pointed out, there would

be no difficulty in simply driving the Mustang out into the hall and out the door into the garden. The Katschei had used that particular Gate to get into the mortal world to steal his collection of princesses, but there were five more settings on it. They'd have to take their chances, but at least she would recognize a potentially dangerous setting for a destination she had encountered before. That would keep them out of Unseleighe domains, even if it did dump them off into unknown territory. If they kept traversing Gates, sooner or later she'd find her way back into a place she knew.

A pity that the Katschei hadn't left at least one setting empty; she could have used that to Gate somewhere friendly. Or at least, to somewhere neutral.

I would be very happy with neutral, she decided. Particularly neutral and familiar. Most neutrals can be bought, and usually remain bought. In neutral territory I might be able to buy some help, or a way out of Underhill.

Tanim slept very quietly; barely breathing, it seemed, head turned slightly into the seat that cradled him, one hand curled up beside his face. She touched his hair hesitantly. So soft, she thought with wonder, as she pulled her hand back before it betrayed her by turning the touch into a caress.

There was nothing impulsive about the strength of her reaction to him; in a way, it was inevitable, given how long she had studied him. If he had not interested her, she would have given up on her studies a long time ago, and none of this would be happening now. If he had not attracted her as well as interested her—

I probably would have done exactly what Madoc Skean wanted me to. I'd have gotten rid of him a long time ago.

And if she had not met him in her dreams? Difficult to say. She'd enjoyed her little glimpses into his life. She found him in some ways completely alien to her. Perhaps that was part of the root of her attraction; she couldn't predict him, and her kitsune heritage would always be intrigued by anything she didn't understand and couldn't predict. Just as she would always be repelled by something that bored her.

Tanim was anything but boring. . . .

On the other hand, Madoc Skean was quite predictable, and she ought to be trying to predict what his next move would be, not hovering over Tanim like some lovesick nymph.

She sat back in her own seat, reclining it to match Tanim's, but turned her gaze outward, staring at the wall. Madoc had fled the dungeon with his own guards, and probably went straight to the isolated wing of the keep that contained his own quarters. Paranoid as any Unseleighe, he would not live in a place where he could not defend against all comers.

But as his allies fought their way to his Gate and left, and nothing whatsoever happened, he would collect his courage and his few functioning brain cells. What conclusions would he come to?

The most obvious would be that Tanim—or Tanim's impersonator—was somewhere in his stronghold still. But he had means to discover if that was true, and he would put those means in motion as soon as he knew his people had cleared the entire holding of potential troublemakers.

Sooner or later, he would learn that there his fears were completely groundless. He would learn that Tanim was not in his dungeon, nor anywhere else in his own domain. Then what?

Well, his allies had all deserted him. Even if he decided to first go after them, it would take a great deal of coaxing to bring most of his allies back. It would be possible to chase after Tannim without them, but Madoc Skean was a cautious sort, and he always preferred to operate from a position of strength. He really had two options at this point: try to mend the mess that had been made of his alliances and then pursue Tannim, or go after Tannim without any help.

She could hope that he would pursue his allies; she must plan that he would pursue Tannim. She would have to assume that Madoc would figure out that she was with Tannim, given that she had been there when they all discovered he'd "vanished."

Madoc would waste some time trying to figure out where she had gone in order to escape his stronghold. Sooner or later, he would narrow the possibilities to the Gate in the courtyard. Then he had six possible destinations; eventually he would find the Gate that led here, but unless he had a way to trace her movements, every succeeding Gate they took would lead to no less than three and as many as six more possibilities. So it was safe to assume that they had time enough for Tannim to get some sleep.

But after that—they should assume that Madoc could be no less than a single Gate behind them. Tannim and Shar could even have the misfortune to Gate into the same place at the same time as they tried to find them.

So who or what is Madoc going to have with him? Probably all of the Faceless Ones; they were the most faithful of his fighters. Madoc's own ego tolerated no better mage than himself among his followers, and she was better than they were. Madoc himself would be the one to watch out for, magically. Unseleighe got to the top of the "food chain" by cutthroat competition. Literally cutthroat, sometimes. She didn't know exactly how powerful he was, and she didn't want to find out by going head-to-head with him.

The trouble was, it was going to take a lot of work to find a way out of Unseleighe domains. Gates generally connected like with like; out of every three Gates, the odds were that only one of them would have a connection to neutral lands, and then only a single connection out of the six possible. Their best hope was that the places those Gates did go to would be empty and unused, deserted like this one, or only a transfer point.

The best thing will be to keep moving, she decided. The more we can muddle the trail, even by simply moving at random, the better off we will be.

So—given that they had no choice but to use the Gate in the Katschei's garden, where was it likely that the settings on that one went?

No love lost between him and Baba Yaga; I doubt he had one set there. In fact, he didn't have any alliances with any of the other Russian myth-figures, not even the neutrals. He did have an arrangement with some of the Chinese demons though. . . . No, that would not be a good idea. The yush eat human souls and use the bodies. I'd be safe enough, but if they all ganged up on Tannim, they might be able to take him before we got out. He had a private hunting preserve that would probably not be a healthy place to go, either.

She rubbed one finger behind her ear as she tried to recall the rest of his historical alliances. Something from India . . . oh, no, I remember now! He had something going with the rakshasha! That would be a very, very bad place to end up!

The only remotely safe places she could think of were with other national equivalents to the Unseleighe

and certain minor Unseleighe folk: ogres, trolls, and the like. Most of those folk were a great deal like the major lords Madoc Skean had courted; they had shut themselves off from the human world a long time ago, and the sight of the Iron Chariot that was Tannim's Mustang, moving through their realms and causing no end of damage in the process, could be enough to frighten them into panic. Certainly they would be confused and wary enough to leave the two of them alone while they studied the situation. She and Tannim should have time to find another Gate or another setting on the one they had just used and get out before anyone mustered up enough courage to oppose them. The only awkward part was that she would have to physically get out of the vehicle in order to read the Gate and reset it; that created a time of great vulnerability. Ah well, it couldn't be helped.

Once they found such Gates, they could only hope that the creatures there did not decide to find Madoc Skean and tell him where they had gone.

Damn. We'll be moving; it won't be possible to keep those special shields on the Mustang for long. We'll show up just by the disruption we cause. The more magic there is in a domain, the more disruption will take place.

No help for it; while she could not tell from in here just how much magic Tannim had infused into this vehicle, there was no doubt that it represented a major undertaking. Protections were layered on protection; and was that an energy reserve? It could be. They would be much safer in the Mach I than without it.

So it'll be a lot like taking a cross-country trip in a tank. Maybe we'll leave a swath behind us, but most of what people shoot at us should bounce off.

She massaged the back of her neck with the ends of her fingers. I got myself into this, she reminded herself. I have to get myself out of it. There were a hundred things I could have done to prevent all this, including simply taking shelter with Mother when Madoc Skean demanded I help him. I was so sure that I could stall Madoc and have a good time doing it—and I just didn't want to hide behind my kitsune kin.

No point in pretending that if she hadn't done what she'd done, Tannim would still be in trouble from some other ally of Madoc's. Whether or not that was true, it was irrelevant. She had made her decisions, she had put her steps on this path, obliterating all other possibilities. Now she was the one who must deal with it all.

And she had never felt quite so alone and uncertain before. Or quite so vulnerable.

\* \* \*

Joe followed in Chinthliss' wake, walking just behind FX, as the dragon moved slowly toward the fox-lady on the other side of the balcony. Fox had sprouted all of his tails again, but they trailed dispiritedly on the ground behind him, telegraphing major submission. And as they neared the door which presumably led to the private room that Lady Ako had reserved, past a very attractive and very large female bat, Fox's clothing was mutating as well.

By the time they actually reached the door, the red leather jacket had become a short, wrapped red jacket along the lines of a karate gi, and the jeans had become some other kind of loose blue pants. Both looked like silk to Joe; both were very rich and shiny. Chinthliss' silk suit was impressive enough without turning it into anything else. Joe wished he had Fox's talent; he felt terribly underdressed in his fatigued pants and white t-shirt.



Well, maybe if he pretended as if he was Chinthliss' bodyguard, he wouldn't look as conspicuous as he felt. No one ever expected a bodyguard to be dressed in any kind of fancy outfits, after all. They only wore tuxes in the movies, right? The rest of the time a bodyguard surely dressed comfortably. They weren't there to provide scenery but protection, right?

Whatever.

He kept his eyes on Chinthliss' silk-clad back as they reached the doorway, resisting the urge to stare at Lady Ako. Her head wasn't precisely like a fox; the lips were more mobile, he thought; the muzzle blunter. Her eyes were lovely, large, and exactly the same color as melted chocolate. Her hands were entirely human, but like Fox, she had fox-feet. Then there were all those tails. . . .

He tried to tell himself that she wasn't any different than those cat-creatures down on the dance floor. She certainly was not at all cartoonlike. Her wide brown eyes rested briefly on him as he passed; she blinked, and he got the oddest feeling that it was with surprise at his presence.

Now why should someone like her be surprised at him?

Then again . . . he hadn't seen too many humans down here, only people that looked human from a distance. If he'd gotten closer, who knows what he would have seen? Scales, fangs, more tails? His kind might be pretty rare, actually. He might look just as outrageous to her as she did to him.

What an odd thought that was! It made him feel acutely uncomfortable. He'd been trying not to stare at the other creatures around him, but what if they'd been gawking at him all this time?

Lady Ako closed the door behind him. Chinthliss stood off to the far side of the room, and as he took his own place, standing in a kind of parade rest behind Chinthliss, he saw that the Blue Room contained only four flat cushions, a very low table with four brown-glazed cups and a teapot on it, plus a couple of things he didn't recognize. He wasn't sure what he should do next, but Lady Ako solved the question for him.

"Please," she said, in a gentle voice that nevertheless brooked no argument. "Sit. We will have Tea."

The way she said the last word, with a subtle emphasis on it, made him think that this was not going to be a silly affair with cookies and cream and sugar. She made it sound rather like some kind of holy ritual.

"Ako!" Chinthliss exclaimed, his voice pained. "Please, we don't have time—"

"We will have Tea," she repeated firmly. "You have accepted my invitation. You will find the time."

"Don't argue with her, lizard," Fox hissed, and then bowed deeply over his knees and took his place on one of the cushions. With a grimace, Chinthliss did the same; after a moment, Joe did likewise. Fortunately, a great deal of his martial-arts instruction had been very traditional, so he was used to sitting Oriental-style on the floor.

"What's going on here?" he whispered to Fox behind Chinthliss' back, as Lady Ako clapped her hands and another brown kimono-clad fox-woman entered, carrying a few more implements on a tray. This one didn't have the elaborate hairstyle of Lady Ako, and her kimono-sleeves were much shorter.

"The Tea Ceremony," Fox breathed back. "I'll explain it all to you later; just be quiet and don't fidget. It's very important and very meaningful, and you're supposed to be contemplating the cosmos through all of

this."

Well, that confirmed his feeling that this was supposed to be some kind of ritual or other. But "contemplating the cosmos"? How did that have anything to do with drinking tea? It must be a fox thing.

The only tea he'd ever had much to do with was in the form of the gallons of iced tea he usually put away in the summer, and there wasn't much there to inspire a ceremony.

Oh, well. Hopefully, Lady Ako would ignore him. Hopefully, he wouldn't get involved with this at all.

"Who is this young human, Chinthliss?" she asked in a quiet voice with no discernible accent. "I do not know him."

"He is the pupil of my pupil, Ako," Chinthliss replied with a sigh of resignation, as she took up what looked like a small bowl and a shaving brush. "My pupil is missing; this young one wishes to help me find him. When last seen, Tannim was Underhill, but we do not know where. We fear that he is in some danger. He has enemies Underhill."

Is he going to say something about Shar challenging Tannim? Joe wondered. Is he going to say anything about Shar at all?

Chinthliss said nothing more, however, and after a glance at Joe, Lady Ako's eyes twinkled for a moment with some secret amusement. "Then, since this young man you bring is new to both Underhill and the ways of the kitsune, this will be a new experience for him," was all she said.

Oh, great. "A learning experience." The traditional three-word preamble to a burial. Terrific.

It was certainly that. Joe had never seen anyone make so much fuss over a cup of tea in his life. Lady Ako went through so many ritualistic passes you'd have thought she was concocting the Elixir of Life. It made as much sense as gold-plating popcorn kernels by hand. She was very graceful at it, however; she made the whole thing seem like a dance. Maybe that was the point. Who knew? He hadn't understood Fox all the time when he'd been a kid, and this Lady Ako made a fine art out of creating mystery and obscurity.

Anyway, when he finally got his cup of tea, he was rather disappointed, much as he had been the first time someone gave him a glass of what was supposed to be a fine vintage wine. The tea was odd, rather bitter, very strong. On the whole, he would have preferred a cola. He would have liked to add sugar at least to make it more palatable, but there didn't seem to be any, so he hid his grimaces and sipped at it while Chinthliss and Lady Ako discussed poetry and music. Joe tried not to fidget while they exchanged what were probably terribly Meaningful and Insightful remarks.

It all took hours.

Finally, finally, she clapped her hands and the other fox-woman came and took the tea things away. They all sat in complete silence while the other female carefully placed each object on her tray, bowed, and took it all away.

But when the serving-fox was gone, and Chinthliss started to rise, Lady Ako tilted her head to one side and gave Chinthliss a warning look that made him sit right back down again.

"You are seeking Tannim," she stated. "I suspect that you are also seeking my daughter."

Chinthliss wore no discernible expression at all. "There was some indication that she has challenged him or intended to challenge him in the near future," Chinthliss replied levelly. "I don't see any demonstrable connection between that and his disappearance. I am not making any accusations, nor can I imagine why Shar would want to—"

"Please," Ako interrupted. "Don't take me for a fool. You know why Charcoal asserted his rights over her. You know what he intended to do with her. Must I put it in simple terms for you? He wanted to make her the enemy of your human, this Tannim. He sees all that you are, and ever moves to make himself the image in the darkened mirror. Charcoal would steal from you whatever he can. I do not know why." She glared at him, and the mighty Chinthliss, much to Joe's surprise, seemed to shrink into himself a little. "I never knew why. I never understood this rivalry of yours."

She drew herself up in profound dignity, and Joe suspected that she had said a great deal more with those words than he had perceived. Chinthliss closed his eyes for a moment, as if in acknowledgment of that.

"Well," Ako said after a moment. "He did not succeed in his endeavor; I had far more influence over her than he ever guessed, and she broke off all connections with him four years ago. She refuses to see him, speak with him, or communicate with him in any way whatsoever."

"She did?" Chinthliss showed his surprise, briefly. "But—in that case, why challenge Tannim? What's the point?"

Ako sighed, and carefully arranged the fold of a sleeve before continuing. "She maintained some alliances with some of Charcoal's Unseleighe connections; I do not know why. She told me that these alliances amused her. I think there was more to it than that, and I can hazard a guess or two. I believe that these alliances were too powerful to flaunt, and she was too stubborn to seek shelter with the kitsune from their anger. One of those connections, an Unseleighe elven lord named Madoc Skean, wanted your pupil, Tannim. I warned her that pursuing this human would have grave consequences; she disregarded that warning, and due to her meddling, this young man was trapped by Madoc."

"What?" Chinthliss roared, starting to leap up off his cushion.

"Calm yourself!" Lady Ako snapped, before he could get to his feet. "Do you think that I would have brought you here and led you through Tea if I thought he was in any danger? We of the tails have obligations to this world and the other and to the Balance between them!"

Chinthliss sat down again, slowly, but Joe sensed that he was smouldering with anger and impatience.

Ako's nose twitched with distaste. "I advised Shar that she would have to remedy the balance herself. She agreed, and took herself back to Madoc's stronghold. Madoc had Tannim but briefly, and he has the young human no longer. Further, his allies have scattered, and his own domain is in confusion. I don't know where your young human pupil is right now—and I also do not know where Shar is. I believe that we can assume that they are together, and that she at least took my advice and freed him from the captivity that she sent him into." Lady Ako directed a chilling look at Chinthliss; the dragon gave her back a heated one. "I told her that by leading this human into captivity, she had seriously unbalanced the scales not only between them, but between our world and his; that she and she alone would have to bring them back into balance. Her actions attracted the attention of the Elders, and she will be called to account for what she has done before a Council. I informed her of this, and that how she fares will depend entirely on what she does now to rectify the situation."

"Did she tell you what she planned to do?" Chinthliss asked, after a long moment of silence. Joe glanced at FX; the kitsune gazed at Lady Ako with rapt astonishment, all of his tails twitching. Evidently, all of this was news to him as well as to Joe and Chinthliss.

"No," Ako responded. "She came to me for advice and I could give her none, other than what I just told you. I assume by the confusion in Madoc Skean's holding that she rescued him successfully, but she has not attempted to contact me nor to put herself at the disposal of the Elders, as she would do if she had also returned him to his side of the Hill."

Chinthliss nodded, slowly. "So they are still Underhill, somewhere. Where? Her own domain? I assume she has one—" He smiled, ironically. "I cannot imagine her sharing a domain with anyone."

"Oh—" Lady Ako said very casually. "I can. Eventually. Still, that does not matter at the moment. If she had reached her own domain, she would have been able to bring Tannim out of Underhill, for she has a direct outlet to the human side there, in America. So, she has not. I suspect that she is wandering Unseleighe Underhill, searching for a Gate that will bring her into neutral holdings, or even out of Underhill. I think that we must begin looking for her ourselves. Where she is, your pupil will most certainly be."

"We?" Chinthliss did jump to his feet this time. "We?"

Joe blinked. They had been looking for an ally. He hadn't expected one like this.

Wonder how good she is in a fight, he thought. Then he sized her up with a practiced eye, ignoring her sex, the fancy outfit, the hair, and the fox-face, concentrating only on the strength of the muscles, the lithe body. Huh. Pretty good, I bet!

"Of course, we," Ako said with complete composure. "You didn't think I would allow you to go chasing off after my daughter without my presence, did you?"

\* \* \*

Shar had slept in less comfortable places than the front seat of a 1969 Mustang. The front seat of her Mustang, for instance. She had chosen her own car with the view to personifying the "modern" version of Tannim—but after seeing all the electronic gear in here, and experiencing the greater comfort-factor at first hand, she was having second and third thoughts.

Tannim woke, rested and cheerful, after a few hours of very deep sleep—so deep that he had hardly moved, and Shar had needed to check him now and again to make certain he was still breathing.

It was her turn to be yawning. She was happy enough at that point to let him stand watch while she caught a quick nap; by then, even she felt the strains of the past several hours and needed to recharge.

She thought, just as she finally dropped off, that he was watching her just as surreptitiously as she had studied him, but she was just too tired to be sure. . . .

She woke with a start at a noise from outside the Mustang, a shuffling sound, the scraping of a pair of feet. She sat bolt upright in alarm, but there was nothing in the amber room with them, the noise was coming from the hallway outside. Tannim wasn't alarmed, either. He just shook his head at her.

"Don't worry about that sound," he told her, watching the hall door, a shadow of melancholy in his eyes. "I know who it is; I ran into him the last time I was here. It's just a poor old man that the Unseleighe left here. He might be more than half mad by now. I think he was English, and I'm afraid he was taken more than a hundred years ago. I can understand him—barely—so he can't have come from much longer ago than that."

The cursed human. But why would he be here? Why would the Unseleighe put one of their captives here? It's horribly hard to get to this place! Unless—they got tired of him, but they wanted to keep him alive, just in case they ran out of amusements.

That would certainly be like them. And it wasn't as if they managed to get too many humans to play with these days. Not like in the old times, when they could kidnap people at will, practically. No, by the late 1800s, they probably had figured out they couldn't snatch people off the face of the earth without it being noticed, and when they got a toy, they kept it, even if they were tired of it.

She forgot all her questions, though, as the old man shuffled into the room, pushing his broom and dragging his cart. She felt an unexpected surge of pity for the old creature—and then she caught sight of his eyeless face.

She stifled a gasp with the back of her hand. Not that she hadn't seen the cruelties that the Unseleighe worked on their captives before—but there was something about this man. He struck something unexpected inside her, clothed in his rags, with his wrecked face—held captive here, in this magnificent room, a prison whose beauty he would never see—

The contrast was so great, it shocked her. Tanim watched the poor old wreck with an expression she could not read. Then, before she could say or do anything, he popped the door and was out of the car, walking quickly, heading for the old man.

She opened her own door and hurried to catch up with him, wondering what he thought he was going to do. Tanim was already talking to him, when she caught up with them.

". . . aye, sir, an' thankee," the old man was saying, with something like a smile, if such a heap of misery could produce a smile. "I hae' bread enow for many a day, thanks to ye."

Shar couldn't help but try to analyze the accent; English, obviously, and probably from the Shires. It was an accent that hadn't changed much until the advent of a radio in every home. "Would you like more than bread?" Tanim asked, leaning forward with nervous intensity. "Would you like to be free of this place forever?"

"Free? Free?" The old man shook his head, alarmed, and shuffled back a pace or two. "There's nought free for Tom Cadge!" He held up his hands before his face in abject fear. "Are ye one o' them blackhearts, that ye taunt me wi' bein' free, an—"

But Tanim seized one of Cadge's hands and put it over his ear before the old man could pull away. "Feel that, Thomas Cadge!" he ordered fiercely. "Is there a single one of the People of the Hills that has round ears?"

The old man stopped trying to escape and stood as still as a statue except for the hand that hovered over Tanim's ear. The trembling fingers explored the top of the ear as the face assumed an expression of confusion. "Well, sir," the old man said very slowly and in great perplexity, "I dunno. I don' think so—"

"And here, follow me!" Tannim yanked the improvised rope free, took Tom's wrist, and led him in a rapid shuffle across the floor of the amber room, to end up beside the Mustang. He put the old man's hand flat against the Mach I's hood. "Feel that!" he ordered. "That's steel, Thomas Cadge; Cold Iron, from nose to tail! It's a carriage, a Cold Iron carriage, and that is how we plan to escape from here. In it! Could any of the Fair Folk, kindly or unkindly, bear so much as the presence of a carriage like this? Could any of their magics ever touch someone inside it?"

Thomas Cadge began to tremble, though Shar could not tell if it was from excitement, apprehension, hope, or all three. "N-n-no, sir," he whispered. "That they could not, and there's an end to it. They could no more bear the touch of yon carriage than I can fly."

"Then come with us, Thomas Cadge," Tannim urged. "I won't pretend that there won't be danger—we're in a strange and dangerous place, and we don't know our way out of it yet. I have to admit to you that we're just a bit lost at the moment—and that the same Fair Folk that put you here are probably after us."

Thomas Cadge shook his head dumbly. "I canna think what worse they could be doin' to me, sir," he replied, in a kind of daze. "They could only kill me, eh?"

Tannim sighed. "I don't think we can get you home. I don't think you want to go back to your home, anyway—"

Tears dripped horribly from the dark sockets where the old man's eyes had been. "Nay, sir, 'tis one'o the things they mocked me with, that the world I knew is a hunnerd years ago an' more. An' I knew it, aye, I knew that in that they spake true enough. Ye think on all th' auld ballads, an' how a day Underhill is a year in the world above, an' I knew they spake truly. Nay, sir, I canna go back—"

"But I have friends Underhill, if we can find them," Tannim interrupted. "Good people—people who will help get rid of your pain and take care of you. I'd like to leave you with them. Will you come with us, Thomas Cadge?"

"Us?" The old man was quick; he swung his blind face around, as if searching for the other person. "Us?"

"He's talking about me," Shar said hastily. "Please, come with us—I don't want to leave you here. If the Unseleighe decide they want entertainment again, and come back for you—" She left the rest unsaid. "I don't want that on my conscience," she added simply.

And although she had been aghast when Tannim first urged the old man to join them, she was surprised to find that she meant the offer as the words left her mouth. Tannim cast a surprised smile at her, one with hints of approval in it, and she was even more surprised to find that the idea of rescuing the old man felt—rather good.

Ah, well, why not? Perhaps the Elders will think of this as a sign that I am striving to rebalance my earlier actions.

"I—ye hae a sweet voice, milady," old Tom quavered shyly. "If ye will ha' me, aye, I'll come wi' ye."

It took some work to wedge Thomas Cadge into the backseat of the Mustang, but once there, he exclaimed over the softness of the seat, the smoothness of the "leather" on the cushions. And when Tannim put an unwrapped sports-bar into one hand, and a bottle of spring-water into the other, the old man nearly wept with joy. It made Shar feel very uncomfortable, and very much ashamed. To this poor

old wreck, the cramped back seat of the Mustang, the sweet treat, and the bottle of pure water were unbelievable luxury. And a few hours ago she had felt slightly sorry for herself for "having" to sleep in the front seat and "make do" with a sports-bar and a Gatorade.

Admittedly, it helped that although Thomas Cadge was shabby, he was clean. She had to admit to herself that she would not have felt so sorry for him, nor so willing to take him along, if he had been filthy and odorous.

Thomas Cadge devoured his meal in a few bites and gulps, and promptly curled up in the blanket Tanim got out of the trunk. Tanim came back with an armload of things besides the blanket; Shar welcomed the extra crowbar with fervent glee, and with another body in the car, the extra rations were going to come in handy.

So were the heavy flashlights, the highway flares, the first-aid kit, and the bayonet-knives he piled into the passenger's-side footwell. Other domains would not necessarily be lighted, and there were plenty of creatures who would fear the flame of a highway flare.

She swiped one of the breakfast bars and went over to the other side of the room to open up both doors into the hallway. When she returned, Tanim had strapped himself in—and Thomas Cadge was asleep in the back seat with an improvised bandage of white gauze from the first-aid kit thankfully covering the ruins of his eyes. Now the old man was truly a sight to inspire anyone's pity, rather than horror or revulsion. He looked like a wounded, weary old soldier from some time in the long past; still trying to keep up his pride, though the infirmities of his own body had betrayed him.

Taking her cue from Tanim, she strapped the seatbelt across her shoulders once she had shut the door. "Go out those doors, take a sharp right, and the door to the gardens will be at the end of the hall," she directed. "You'll have to use your lights; I'll get out and open the doors into the garden once we reach them. Then it's down a set of four very shallow stairs, and follow the garden path. The Gate will be at the end of it, and it will be night out there."

He nodded, and started the car. The sound of the engine seemed terribly loud in all the silence, but Thomas Cadge did not even seem to wake up. It occurred to her that this must be the first time he had slept with any feeling of safety or security in decades.

Poor, abused old man. No home but yourself.

\* \* \*

"Now what?" Tanim asked from the front seat.

Artificial stars gleamed down from a flat-black sky; the Katschei's round, silver moon sailed serenely in its track above them. Although no one had tended the garden for centuries, most of the plants here were much as they had been when their creator died; that was part of their magical nature, to thrive without being tended. Flowers bloomed on all sides, all out of their proper season. Trees had flowers, green, and ripening fruit, all at the same time. Perfumes floated on the faint breeze, and bowers beckoned, promising soft places for dalliance. All a cheat, of course—there had never been any dalliance here. The Katschei's captives had been quite, quite virginal; this was merely the appropriate setting for a dozen of the most beautiful maidens in Rus. The Katschei had surrounded them with fresh beauty and all the stage-dressing of romance. The setting was still here, and it was more romantic in its overgrown state than it had been when neatly tamed and pruned.

And even if we weren't in a hurry, we have a chaperone, damn it all.

The Gate here was a rose trellis; the rose vines had overgrown it somewhat, but it was still quite useful. Roses of three colors cascaded down over it, saturating the air with their mingled fragrances of honey, damask, and musk. Only the Katschei would have had night-blooming roses. Only the Katschei would have covered a Gate with them.

And only the Katschei would ever have placed the Gate back to their homelands in the heart of the garden his captives had been imprisoned in.

None of them could use it, of course. He would never have carried off a princess with even a touch of magical power. But he surely enjoyed the irony: his prisoners danced in and around the very means of their escape, if they could only have learned how to make it work. Doubtless, he told them that very thing. He had been an artist, in his way, juxtaposing cruelty with beauty, wonder with tragedy. If he had been the one who had captured Thomas Cadge, he would not have blinded the old man. No, he would have done something artistic with him; perhaps gelded him, shaped his face and body into that of a young god, and left him to guard his flock of lovely virgins.

Shar studied the Gate with her eyes closed, testing each of the six settings. One, she already knew, came up in Tannim's world, but only a few miles from present-day Moscow. However improved current conditions were, he would have a damned hard time explaining his presence there—and such a destination was likely to be as hazardous in the end as anything Underhill.

One definitely ended in the domain of the rakshasha; man-eating shape-changing creatures of India, and another was set for the realm of the yush. Bad destinations, both of them; neither she nor Tannim could ever hold their own against a group of either monsters.

That left three other settings, none of which she recognized. They all felt very old, older even than the setting to the other side of the Hill. They might represent alliances the Katschei made before he began his collection of human maidens.

What the heck.

She returned to the car and reported her findings. "And I can't even tell where those last three go," she warned. "The third one is the nearest, and that's all I can tell you about it."

Tannim only shrugged. "Door number three sounds all right with me," he opined, as she got into the car and strapped herself back into her seat. "If you don't recognize it, chances are whoever lives there won't recognize us, right?"

"That's the theory, anyway." She lowered the window and leaned out from inside the safety of the steel framework. Feeling very grateful that she knew the effect of Cold Iron on her magics, and knew it intimately, she reached out with a finger of power and invoked that setting.

The rose vines quivered for a moment, and then lit up from within with a warm, golden light. The magic ran through every vein, illuminating the flowers from within, as Shar stared, transfixed. How had the Katschei done that? She'd never seen anyone incorporate living things into a Gate before, at least not in a purely ornamental fashion.

Trust the Katschei to do it if anyone would.



"Now there," Tannim said with detached admiration, "was a guy who had style."

The center of the arbor filled with dark haze. Whatever lay on the other side, they were now committed to it.

"Ready?" she asked, pulling her head and arm back into the steel cocoon of the Mach I, and rolling her window back up again. Not that the glass would provide any protection at all, but at least it gave her the illusion of shelter.

Tannim managed a wan smile, and a thumb's-up. "Here we come, ready or not," he said lightly, and put the Mach I into gear, driving slowly up to and into the arbor.

Shar repressed a shudder as the dark mist seemed to swallow up the light, then the headlights, the hood, and crept toward the windshield. It was just as well that Thomas Cadge was not only asleep but blind. He'd have run screaming from the car if he'd seen this.

She closed her own eyes involuntarily. Her skin tingled as the magic field passed over her; her stomach objected to the moment of apparent weightlessness.

Then, with a jolt, it was over.

The Mach I bounced slightly as it dropped about an inch, and she opened her eyes.

And her jaw dropped as Tannim quickly hit the brakes, stopping them dead. Just in time, since they had a reception committee, and a few more feet would have put the Mach I within range of their weapons.

The weapons were the first things that she noticed; the headlights gleamed from the shining surfaces of huge battle-axes, smaller throwing-axes, spear points, and knives and swords.

Evidently someone here had sensed the Gate coming to life and had gathered a crowd to greet whatever came through it. From the looks of the group, they had not expected the visitors to be friendly.

"A little strong for the Welcome Wagon, don't you think?" Tannim said, as the twenty or so armed warriors stared into their headlights.

\* \* \*

Whoever these fellows had been expecting, Tannim figured it wasn't Ford's Finest. They obviously didn't recognize him, Shar, or the vehicle; the way they glared at the headlights suggested that they didn't even notice the passengers, only the car, and they didn't know what it was.

He didn't recognize them, either. Sidhe of some kind, that was all he could tell; pointed ears thrust through wild tangles of very blond, straight hair, and the slit-pupiled green eyes were unmistakable in the bright lights from the headlights.

Elves. Why did it have to be elves?

But the clothing they sported was not anything he recognized. In fact, by elven standards, it was downright primitive. That was the amazing part.

The elves he knew, even the Unseleighe, reveled in the use of ornament and lush, flowing fabrics, of

intricate goldwork and carved gems, of bizarre design and exotic cut. The elves he'd associated with wore armor so engraved and chased, inlaid and enameled, that it ceased being "armor" and became a work of art. They carried weapons of terrible beauty: slim, razor-sharp swords as ornamented as their armor, knives that matched the swords to within a hair, bows of perfect curve and silent grace, so elegant that their bowstrings sang, not twanged.

These warriors carried small, round shields of plain wood with copper bosses in the middle; they had no helmets at all, and only corselets, vambraces, and leg armor of the same hammered copper. The blades of their swords and heavy axes also appeared to be of copper or brass. None of the metal-work was chased or engraved; there was a tiny amount of inlay work, but not much. Under the scant armor, they had donned short-sleeved woolen tunics of bright colors, with bands of embroidery at all the hems. They wore sandals and shoes, not the tooled leather boots favored by the elves Tannim had seen. Their hair looked as if it had never seen a pair of scissors; a few of them had it bound up in braids, but the majority sported lengthy manes that would have been the envy of any human female.

They seemed frozen in place, staring at the Mach I in horrified fascination.

"You don't recognize these jokers, do you?" he asked Shar quietly. She shook her head. While the reception committee stayed where it was, he took a moment to get a look at where they had landed. Maybe the setting would tell him something.

Except that the roof took him rather by surprise.

A cave? He blinked, very much amazed. Even when an Underhill domain had originally looked like a cave, those who inhabited it usually took pains to make it look like something else—someplace outdoors, usually. This was the very first time he had ever seen a domain that looked like what it was.

It was an awfully big cave, though. Bigger than Mammoth Cave, or Meramac, or the largest room in Carlsbad Caverns. The ceiling had to be at least a hundred feet up, a rough dome of white, unworked, natural rock. The rest of the place was on a scale with the ceiling; from here to the other side of the room was probably fully half a mile. The floor between here and there was not of stone, though, but of wood, smoothed only by time and wear, and not put together with any level of sophistication. In fact, it looked something rather like a deck built by drunken beavers or very, very bad industrial-arts students. At regular intervals a round platform of stone rose above the level of the wood for about a foot, and these platforms were topped with huge bonfires. Oddly enough, though, the fires didn't seem to be giving off any smoke. That was the first evidence of magic he'd seen here.

Spitted over these fires were the carcasses of animals; deer, pig, and cow. Beside the fires were barrels that he presumed contained beer or ale—but these barrels had not been tapped, as the kegs he knew were. Instead, the end was open, and people came along and dipped their cups into the liquid to fill them.

There were fur-covered benches around each fire; some of them even held prone figures, possibly sleeping off that beer.

Most of the people in this place, however, were staring at the Mach I with the same postures of surprise as the warriors directly in front of it.

There were women out there—or, at least, Tannim assumed they were women, since they wore dresses. Hard to tell with elves, sometimes. Simple T-tunic dresses, of the same bright colors as the tunics the men wore. Over the dresses, most of the women wore a kind of apron. The straps were heavily embroidered and were attached to the embroidered panels of the front and back by large, round brooches of copper,

silver, and gold. Their blond hair was bound around their foreheads with ribbon-headbands and covered with small veils; some of them wore their hair unbound except by the headbands, but the rest wore it in two braids. Their ears were as pointed as those of the men, and the nearest had the same cat-slitted, elven eyes.

One of the nearest men, one who had a gold headband, finally got over his shock. He gestured with his copper sword and shouted something to the rest. It was a fairly long speech and involved a lot of sword-waving and pointing at the car.

It wasn't in any language Tannim recognized. He'd heard his own elves spouting off long strings of Gaelic curses often enough when they dropped something heavy on a toe, or a wrench slipped and skinned knuckles. Whatever this was, it wasn't Gaelic, and neither were these lads. Funny, it almost sounded like the Swedish Chef from the old Muppet show—

Shar narrowed her eyes as the leader continued his speech to the headlights, pointing and threatening with his blade. At that point, Tannim realized something. Huh. He's shouting at the car! Does he think it's alive?

To test that theory, Tannim tapped lightly on the horn.

With a yell, all of the fighters leapt back a pace and stared at the front of the car as if they thought it might suddenly shoot out flames.

"Oh hell—" Shar said into the silence. "I know where we are. These Sidhe haven't seen a human for fifteen hundred years! They sealed themselves off so long ago that not even Madoc could get them to come out. They're Nordic—we're in the Hall of the Mountain King!"

Tannim bit off an exclamation as all the clues fell into place. Right—copper and bronze weapons, copper armor—these were some of the first elves to be driven Underhill and seal themselves off from Cold Iron and the world above. "I don't suppose you speak their lingo, do you?" he asked hopefully. Those axes might only be bronze, but they could do plenty of damage if the fighters decided to attack the Iron Dragon. They'd go through glass just fine, for instance. "It would be really nice if you could apologize for breaking up their party, tell them that we're just passing through."

"No," Shar said shortly. "Sorry. I don't think there's anyone alive who does understand them without a telepath. They not only sealed themselves off from your world, they sealed themselves off from the rest of Underhill. Maybe there's a scholar in your world who speaks Old Norse, or Old Swedish, or Old Finnish—but I wouldn't count on it, and I doubt he's going to suddenly teleport into the back seat."

Tom Cadge? Tannim thought—

"I can't help ye, sir," came an apologetic voice from behind them. "Whatever yon spouted, 'tis pure babble to me."

Tannim studied the situation: the leader finished his speech, and he and his followers went back to staring into the headlights, as transfixed by the light as a bunch of moths.

"Shar, can you reset the Gate behind us to somewhere friendlier?" he asked quietly, and glanced out of the corner of his eye at her. She bit her lip, then cranked the window down.

Slowly.

Just as slowly, she edged one hand and a bit of her head outside, turned to face the rear of the car, and stared back at the Gate behind them.

"There's a very shallow stone platform the Gate rests on right behind us, just past the rear wheels," she said quietly. The elves didn't seem to have noticed her head and hand sticking out; maybe the headlights were obscuring whatever he and Shar did. "That was why we bumped down when we arrived. The Gate is one of those stone arches like at Stonehenge, and it looks big enough for an elephant. I think the Mach I will fit in there with no problem."

So far, so good.

"One of the settings is the Katschei's palace, obviously," she continued. "I just don't recognize the others—but if these people have been cut off for as long as I think, I wouldn't. There are plenty of places Underhill where I've never been, and plenty more that sealed themselves off from the parts that continued to progress. I don't know a darned thing about this lot, who their allies were, or anything else."

"Okay," Tanim replied after a moment of thought. "Pick one, I don't care what. I'm going to drive slowly toward these guys, and see if I can't get them to clear off enough to give me room to turn around."

This was a "dragon" made of the Death Metal, something these elves had gone Underhill to avoid completely. With luck, they were too terrified of it to touch it. With equal luck, if he was very, very careful, they would realize in a moment that he didn't want to hurt them.

Then again, maybe they were too busy thinking about hurting him to notice.

He put the car into motion, creeping forward an inch at a time.

The elven warriors backed up, an inch at a time, staring at the headlights. From the way they glared at the Mach I, they evidently read this as an aggressive move. The moment of truth was going to come when he spun the car and turned his back to them. Would they rush him?

They might. If they realized he was going to escape, they might very well.

Look, Sven, we killed the Iron Dragon and it had eaten three humans!

"Can you gear that Gate up so as soon as I get these guys cleared, I can pull a doughnut and get the heck out of here?" he asked anxiously. "I don't want to have our back to these guys for more than a minute, max."

"No argument here." Shar poked her head a little further out of the window, as he continued to creep the Mustang forward. The elves cleared back a bit more, their eyes narrowing, their knuckles going white as they clutched their weaponry tighter.

"Got it," she said, after far too long. The elves in front of him were beginning to look as if they resented being backed up, and he didn't think he'd be able to force them back much further. He took a quick glance in his rearview mirror, and another over his shoulder.

There was enough room for the maneuver he wanted to pull. Barely.

Barely is still enough!

"Hold on!" he said through gritted teeth; then he leaned on the horn.

The elves screeched and jumped back; he'd succeeded in frightening them back another precious foot or so. He floored the accelerator, smoked the wheels, and slung the steering wheel over.

The tires screamed; the rear slung sideways, then around in a complete half-circle, while the elven warriors shrieked in answer and threw themselves wildly out of the way. Tannim stabilized the spin, until the nose pointed straight at the dark haze under the trio of huge, rough-cut stones looming up in front of them. He let up on the gas for a moment, then floored it as the elves leapt at the rear of the car with hideous war cries.

The Mach I roared through the Gate as Tannim saw the blade of a throwing-axe sail past the rear end, and in the rearview mirror, the leader buried the blade of his huge battle-axe into the wooden floor, scant inches from the rear bumper.

Then there was a moment of darkness, and of dizziness, and then they were through.

He slammed on the brakes quickly, and looked up at a full moon and a sky full of stars under a snow-filled and seemingly endless plain.

"Maybe you'd better turn on the heater," Shar suggested mildly, and rolled up the window.

## CHAPTER TEN

Tannim reached over and automatically turned on the dash-heater, and a moment later was grateful that Shar had prodded him to do so.

It must be thirty below out there!

Cold penetrated the window glass, and the side-window on his side frosted over between one breath and the next.

"Where the heck are we?" he asked, peering up through the windshield at the sky. Only the fact that the stars did not twinkle proved that this was another Underhill domain and not some place on the other side of the Hill: Siberia or Manitoba. Otherwise the sky was a much more accurate copy of the real thing than the one over the garden they'd left.

Except that there didn't seem to be any constellations he recognized.

"I have no clue." Shar craned her own neck around to look up through the glass at the stars above them. "No clue at all. I don't recognize the stars up there; for all I know, they might not even represent the constellations, they were just thrown up there randomly. This could be an analog of anywhere: Alaska, the Arctic, the Gobi Desert in winter—heck, even the Great Plains. Your guess is as good as mine."

Maybe if he got out and took a look, he might get a clue. "Hang on a minute. Keep the heater running." He was going to have to get into the trunk again, anyway; it was just a good thing the trunk on a Mach I was so big and he never took his survival supplies out, no matter what. They were going to need some of

his winter emergency stash.

He opened the door and got out in a hurry; his nose was cold and his fingers were frozen by the time he reached the trunk and extracted two Mylar blankets and three of green wool. Army surplus, of course.

There wasn't a lot of snow; it wasn't much past calf-deep at the worst. It formed an icy crust over long grass, beaten flat, and held down by the weight of the ice. He crunched his way back to the front of the Mustang, hands and feet numbed, grateful for the warming effect of his armor. The driver's-side window was completely frosted over, and the air was so cold it hurt to breathe. Hopefully they wouldn't be here much longer; the Mustang's heater was not going to keep up with cold like this. He could make do with one of the wool blankets, but old Tom and Shar had probably better have the Mylar as well as the wool.

...

He pulled open the door and slid in quickly, then turned to Shar and stared.

"Hi," Shar said, turning a pointed muzzle and a pair of twinkling eyes at him. "You didn't seem to have a fur coat around, so I grew my own."

He dropped his jaw and the blankets; fumbled the latter up off the floor. The warm air curled around him as he stared at the lovely fox-woman with Shar's eyes sitting on the passenger's side of the Mustang.

An arctic fox, no less, with thick, white fur, and a blunter nose and smaller ears than the red fox FX usually morphed into. He stared like a booby, and she winked at him.

I'm taking this all very well, aren't I?

"Eh, excuse me, young sir, but if ye've brought a bit more blankets—" Tom said humbly from the rear seat as Tannim sat and gawked. "'tis gettin' a bit chill here."

He didn't move. It really was Shar. And it really was a human-sized fox. It was one thing to know intellectually that Shar was half-kitsune, but to actually see the proof of it—

"Oh, yeah, of course." Tannim shook himself out of his daze, passed back the Mylar and one of the wool blankets, and kept one of the wool ones for himself. He turned back to Shar and offered her the remaining blankets. "Do you—"

"Just give me a wool one," Shar replied. "I may have fur, but I want to spend some time studying the Gate this time before we jump, and I'll have to do it from outside the Mach I."

Wordlessly, he handed her the scratchy old wool blanket and left the little silver packet of Mylar for later.

He couldn't keep from staring at her; this had never happened in any of his dreams! Jeez, if anything came of this between him and Shar, he was going to have one heck of a fascinating love life . . . or did something like this come under the category of bestiality?

Boy, I hope not. Otherwise I'm a lot kinkier than I thought.

And to think that he'd had trouble explaining some of his other girlfriends to his mother!

"Hi, Mom, this is my girl. By the way, have you got a spare flea collar around? And she's due for her

shots." She gets one look at Shar like this, and she'll be praying for me to go back to Teresa and her red Mohawk!

Shar didn't seem to be in the least offended by all of his staring. "I—ah—" he began.

"You're taking this very well. Oh, I don't do this very often around humans, not nearly as often as Mother," she offered casually. "Being brought up around the Unseleighe, I tended to keep to the elven look. It was bad enough that I wasn't Sidhe; they tend to regard any of the anthropomorphic forms as very much inferior. Has Saski Berith—FX—ever gone completely fox on you?"

"Not for long," Tannim admitted. The thick, white fur looked so incredibly soft—and the eyes were still human, still Shar's. And never mind that the voice came from a muzzle full of pointed teeth, it was still Shar's voice. Shar's clothes, for that matter; she'd left them on when she changed. Fascinating.

"It has its points." She regarded her hands—very much fur-covered human hands, except for the long claws. "I can inflict a lot more damage this way if there aren't any weapons available. And raw meat and fish taste much better in this form than in the human. Still, does it disturb you?"

He shook his head. "I don't think so." Belatedly, he remembered what he'd been looking for when he'd gotten out of the car. "Oh—I think we might be in a Native American analog to the Great Plains, or to the steppes of Russia. The grasses look right, anyway. Tall grass, I think, or whatever equivalent grows on the steppes. If that's true, there's going to be a lot more Spirit Animals around here—the steppes-herdsmen have a lot of the same shamanic equivalents to the Native Americans. That's one massive generalization, of course, but what the hell."

"Really?" she said with acute interest. "I wonder why the Gate went here, then?"

"Eh, who knows?" Tom put in. "The Fair Folk, they ne'er did make allies an' enemies th' way us mortal folk do. It don't matter t' them whether a land were across the sea Above the Hill; 'tis all Underhill here."

"True enough," Tannim agreed. "The other possibility is that this place was abandoned a long time ago. Who wants to live in eternal winter? Even Spirit Animals prefer summer to winter, on the whole. It might be that this is only used when someone is doing a Vision Quest in winter, or needs to make part of the Quest through a winter setting."

"I don't know naught about quests, sir," Tom replied, "but there's a mort 'o places down here that go beggin'. Some 'un gets t' playin' with it, an' it goes wrong, they give it up an' starts over, like. Could be some 'un was tryin' for a nice place for winter huntin', long gallops an' no places for your horse t' bust his leg, an' this is what they got."

"Well, if so, it better not be fox hunting that they were planning," Shar replied, baring her teeth and snapping playfully. "This fox might just chase them!"

Tannim grinned. It really felt good to be working with Shar, even though they really knew so little about each other! He'd have to be mindful of those teeth, later, when they—

The old man had a point, though; it wouldn't do to linger here. Just because the place looked abandoned, that didn't mean it was. And if it was someone's private hunting preserve, it would be a good idea to get out of here before the hunter returned. Not that they needed any more reasons for urgency!

"Whenever you're ready, Shar," Tannim said quietly. "Take all the time you need. I've got a near-full

tank, and at idle, the Mach I won't be drinking too much gas." He thought a moment. "Actually, I have an idea."

We're both in trouble together. She's made the effort to get me out. And just in case I don't make it—I can add to her chances to survive this. Even if everything goes to hell.

"Hold on a minute before you go out there." He closed his eyes, sank his own awareness into the fabric of the Mustang, and began to chant quietly.

He didn't leave his body this time, but with his mage-sight tapped into all the myriad possibilities Underhill, he had to blink a few times to get here and now clear.

Beside him, Shar was particularly disconcerting. Lovely woman, flirtatious fox, and—something else. Not quite like Chinthliss' draconic form; Shar was more delicate, graceful, entirely feminine. But the resemblance was there. The three forms washed in and out of focus, but the strongest was not the draconic but the human, followed by the fox.

Jeez, and I swore I wasn't going to date outside my own species. Even at Fairgrove. She's so sexy!

He reached out with his real hand; Shar put hers into his without any prompting on his part. Physical touch gave him physical linkage; he pitched his chanting a tad higher and plugged her into the Mach I's energy reserves.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. And then thoughtfully, "Oh . . . my."

He sealed the connections to her and dropped back into the real world. She was sitting in absolute, Zen stillness, head cocked to one side, eyes unfocused, her attention concentrated on what he had just given her.

He watched her face; interestingly, it was as easy to read the vulpine expressions as the human ones. Finally, her eyes focused again, and she came back to reality, turning a face still full of surprise to him. "Tannim—" she said very slowly, her expression full of wonder and gratitude. "You didn't need to do that."

He shrugged, covering his mingled feelings. He was filled with pleasure at her thanks, and nervousness at having given her the key to so much of himself. "Gives us both an edge," he replied. "Gives us both a source of power to draw on when we don't want to let the locals know that we're mages. Now, you go out there and study that Gate. Here, take the other Mylar blanket, too. Put it over the wool. Sit on the hood. The engine'll keep your—ah—tail warm, and you'll have a pure and reliable power source to draw on."

Tom took all this in, head tilted to the side, a slight smile on his face. "I'll be havin' another bit of a nap, if you won't be a-needin' me, eh?" he said, when Tannim had finished.

Tannim chuckled weakly. "Sounds good to me, Tom," he said, and the old man curled up, tucking his head under an improvised blanket-hood so that his face could not be seen.

Shar laid her hand on the back of his. "Thank you," she said quietly. "Thank you very much. It is a noble gift, and a generous one. I'll never forget it."

Then, before he could reply, she popped the door open and slipped out with a crackle of plastic. She



stood wrapped in Mylar in a reversal of "woman in a silver dress, wrapped in a fox-fur cape." He turned the car around carefully, so that the nose faced the Gate. Like the one in the Mountain King's Hall, this was a simple arch of three rough stones and appeared to be the only structure here for as far as the eye could see.

She slid up onto the hood of the car and sat just in front of the air-intake, breath steaming up into the air, pointed ears perked forward. Tanim took it upon himself to sit guard for her, watching with every sense, in every direction except the one she faced, for any sign of living things.

He sensed her slipping into deep meditation; she must have felt him putting out warning-feelers, and trusted to him to guard her back.

It was the second such evidence of trust she'd granted him, the first being when she had slept for an hour or so, back in the amber room.

And despite their precarious situation, he felt his mouth stretching in a silly grin.

Or maybe not so silly. Because maybe, just maybe, this is all going to work out. . . .

\* \* \*

"You will come with me, please." Lady Ako rose gracefully to her feet; Joe discovered that he was not as practiced at sitting on the floor as he had thought, when he tried to follow her example.

Chinthliss and FX didn't seem to have much more luck than he had, fortunately, or he'd have felt really stupid.

The kitsune-lady led the way not to the door into the nightclub but to the door through which their kitsune-server had come.

"We will use the private entrance," she said, turning her head to speak over her shoulder.

"I didn't know there was a private entrance," Chinthliss observed with mild surprise.

Lady Ako smiled slightly. On a fox-head, that translated to showing the barest tips of her teeth. Definitely an unsettling sight. "You were also not aware that the majority partners in this establishment are five-tail kitsune, I assume."

FX started with surprise. "I'd wondered about the Tea Ceremony," Chinthliss replied with equanimity. "There aren't too many nightclubs equipped to perform it at a moment's notice."

Lady Ako said nothing; she only opened the door for them all and bowed without a hint of servility. They all filed through, Joe taking the rearmost position.

The door led into a perfectly ordinary, utilitarian hallway, white-painted, terrazzo-floored, with ordinary light fixtures overhead. Odd creatures squeezed by them as they passed, emerging from other doors along the hall. Some were in the uniforms of the cocktail waitresses and waiters, some in full tuxedos, a few in very little other than strategically placed spangles.

Joe blushed; he couldn't help it. Bad enough when these females were at a distance, but they brushed past him without a trace of embarrassment, full breasts practically in his face. His cheeks and neck felt as

if he had the worst sunburn in his life, and he was certain he looked like a boiled lobster.

"Two sequins and a cork," Fox muttered in his ear as they threaded their way past another group of girls with butterfly-wings in matching—outfits. "Placement optional."

Joe blushed so hard he could have blacked out from the rush of blood to his skin. And elsewhere.

Finally Lady Ako brought them to a door at the end of the corridor and opened it for them. Joe had only a moment to notice that the doorframe seemed filled with a hazy darkness—

Then, before he could stop, his momentum took him through.

His stomach lurched for a moment. A Gate? he thought in confusion; then his leading foot came down solidly on the "other side."

His eyes cleared; he shook his head to clear it as well, taking a firm grip on his weaponry.

"No need," Lady Ako said mildly from behind him.

He blinked, finding himself in bright sunlight on an immaculately groomed gravel path. Sculptured mounds crowned with carefully placed, twisted trees, stone statues, and iron lanterns rose on either side. Ahead of him was a bridge that arched over a tiny stream, with a curve as gentle as a caress. Beyond the bridge, on a perfectly shaped miniature hill, stood a pavilion with a peaked roof and white paper walls.

"You are at our embassy here; you have not left your original section of Underhill," Lady Ako stated calmly. "We will be able to search for Shar and Tannim from here—and we will be able to alert our allies and agents in unfriendly domains to watch for them."

It was not until she came around in front of them that Joe saw she had changed significantly. She was no longer a fox-woman, but was, to all appearances, perfectly human. She still wore her kimono, but she had discarded the elaborate black hairdo somewhere. Now she wore only what Joe assumed was her real hair: a long, unbound fall of fox-red, with a streak of white, ornamented by a single clasp in the shape of a carved fox of white jade. That hair color looked distinctly odd on someone with otherwise Oriental features.

She moved to the front of the group, but did not lead them to the pavilion as Joe had expected. Instead, she brought them, after a short walk, to another building altogether.

Joe got the oddest feeling that Lady Ako was giving them the runaround. But why would she want to do that? Wasn't it her daughter that was in trouble here?

He put his feelings aside; surely he was mistaken. It was just because this was all so weird that the only way his mind could cope with it was to be suspicious.

This was something like a bigger version of the pavilion; it had a wide, wooden porch around it, with more little flat tables and cushions arranged neatly and precisely. Lady Ako brought them up onto the porch and took her place on one of the cushions; they did the same, arranging themselves around her.

"Now," she said, when they were all settled, "we shall have Tea."

"We will not have Tea!" Chinthliss exploded, shattering the serene silence and frightening some little birds

out of a sculptured bush near the porch.

Ako fixed him with a look of stern rebuke. "We will have Tea," she repeated stubbornly.

But Chinthliss had evidently had enough. "We will not have any damned Tea!" he shouted, leaping to his feet. "Tannim is missing, you don't know where Shar is, an Unseleighe enemy of Tannim's and mine wants Tannim in small pieces, and you want to serve us another bowl of your damned green glop?"

"She's stalling!" Joe blurted.

All eyes turned to him—including Lady Ako's, and she was not happy with him or his observation. But Joe couldn't help it; now that his subconscious had come up with what was really going on, he had to report it to Chinthliss, his "superior officer."

"She's stalling, sir," Joe said to Chinthliss, deliberately avoiding Lady Ako's gaze. "I don't know why, but she's been taking as much time as she possibly could to do everything. It isn't just that tea-stuff, it's everything; if she really wanted to get something done, couldn't she have met us at the park? Or if she had someone watching to see if we came to the Drunk Tank, couldn't she have brought us straight here?"

The sheer numbers of people crowding that hallway, too, had been way out of line. "She even had everybody working in the club out there in the hall, just to keep us from moving through it too quickly." Now he cast a quick glance at Lady Ako; she looked distinctly chagrined. "Sir, she's been throwing every single delay at us that she could. She probably even had some kind of 'emergency' planned, so that she could shut us up someplace for a while."

Chinthliss stood, towering over her as she remained seated on her little cushion. "Well?" he asked icily.

She averted her eyes. "I haven't the least idea what the boy is talking about," she protested, though it sounded to Joe just a bit feeble. "Why would I do anything like that?"

"The reasons are as many as your tails, Ako, and only you know which of them are true." Chinthliss was clearly out of patience. "The only thing useful to have come out of this is that you have told me that Shar and Tannim are likely together, and that Tannim is pursued but no longer captured. Thanks to all this taradiddle of yours, that may no longer be the case."

He jerked his head a little, and Joe took his place behind him. FX vacillated for a moment, then joined them.

"You may do what you like, Ako," Chinthliss said, his voice coldly emotionless. "I am going to find a taxi. I suggest that you do nothing to stop us."

\* \* \*

Tannim's nose and feet were awfully cold, but the rest of him was warm enough, wrapped up with his armor beneath it all. Tom Cadge slept blissfully on in the backseat, and Shar contemplated the Gate from the hood of the car, a fox of white jade wrapped in shiny silver gift wrap.

She could have been an incense burner, with the fog of her breath for smoke. Or a baked potato in a microwave? No, she's not at all potato-shaped. And potatoes explode. Hope she doesn't do that.

Finally, though, she stirred and climbed carefully down off the hood of the Mach I. Still wrapped in her

silver cloak, she padded quickly to the door of the car, opened it, and slipped inside. The Mylar crackled annoyingly as she slid into her seat.

"This was good. With leisure to study the Gate, I was able to trace all of its destinations as to type if not actual location. Six settings, so I can't add one of my own," she said. "One is back to the place we just came from. One goes directly to the domain belonging to the yeti. We could take that one—they have another Gate that goes to the other side of the Hill—but we'd wind up in the Himalayas near Everest, and the Mach I is neither a yak nor equipped with oxygen and climbing gear."

"And I'm not a mountain climber," Tannim added. "We'd have to be damned lucky to survive the Himalayas long enough for Tibetans, monks, or some expedition or other to find us and rescue us. And if we arrived in the middle of one of their killer snowstorms, we're ice cubes. Next?"

"One leads to a swamp. I don't know who owns the swamp, but I suspect something like the Will-o'-the-Wisps." She waited for his reaction, keeping quite still, so that the Mylar wouldn't crackle.

Tannim shuddered; he'd encountered one, the real thing, not swamp gas. Will-O'-the-Wisps were not little dancing fairy lights; they were horrible creatures who lived only to lure living beings into sucking morasses in the swamps they called home. Like the other Unseleighe, they thrived on fear and pain; when their victim was well and truly trapped, and sinking to his death, they would perch nearby and drink in the panic and despair as he struggled and died. The Will-o'-the-Wisp Tannim had encountered had not been content with trying to lure him away to his death; when he had not cooperated, it had tried to frighten him into a morass. Then it decided to take the matter into its own hands.

The experience had not been a pleasant one, to say the least. "I don't think that's a good idea," he said. "Next?"

"Nazis," Shar supplied succinctly.

"Pardon?" he replied, sure that he could not have heard her correctly.

"Nazis," she repeated. "And I must admit, this does solve a little puzzle for me. The Nazis had a secret program of research into magic and the occult. I always wondered where all the Nazi sorcerers went when the Third Reich collapsed; they were too powerful to have been caught, the way the Nazi leaders were, but there was no sign of them after the end of the war. Apparently, they discovered or built a Gate, found a vacant realm and took it over for their very own. They must be some of the very few mortals to succeed in living Underhill without elven aid."

"Nazis." He shook his head. "I hate those guys."

"I doubt that even the Unseleighe would care for them," Shar replied. "They were approaching magic as a science, and their attitude would have turned even Madoc Skean off. So, that's four of the six destinations. The other two end in the Unformed."

Tannim gave that some thought. The Unformed was the generic term for pockets of odd, thick mist in completely unclaimed and untouched areas. There were a few realms that were so large that they were still surrounded by a dense and impenetrable cloud of the Unformed. Elfame Outremer had been like that—and it was out of the Unformed that their destruction had come, for the mist was psychotropic, and anyone with strong enough psychic powers could influence it, create things out of it.

In the case of Outremer, disaster had come at the hands of a seriously unbalanced child with powerful

psychic and magic powers: a deadly combination, when put together with the Unformed.

Anyone who was both psychic and a mage could find himself facing down his worst nightmares out in the Unformed. In the old days, that had often been a test of a new mage, the test that proved how good his control was not only of his magic but of himself. There were a lot of mages who hadn't survived this particular ordeal.

There were a number of unclaimed pocket domains that were the results of these trials-by-fire, as well. The one that they were in might well be one of those, come to think of it.

"Any idea how big the pockets are?" he asked finally.

Shar shook her head. "Not even a guess. Can't help you. The only thing I can tell is that one of them might have more than one Gate in it. The other might have a physical connection to another realm. You have to remember that it is very likely that every setting on the Gates there is taken up by a destination we wouldn't like. The Unseleighe and their ilk still prove out young mages in trial-by-Unformed."

"Go for the one with the physical connection?" he hazarded. "That would be my choice. The drawback I can see to the Unformed with two Gates in it is that there's twice the probability that there's something really nasty still roaming around in the mist out there, left over from a trial—and twice the chance that some new Unseleighe mage is going to pop in on us while we're there, and maybe even break the Unformed down around us while he goes through his trial."

Shar nodded thoughtfully. "I hadn't thought of that, but you're right. It's going to be hard enough to keep our own thoughts pleasant; I'd hate to meet some Unseleighe nightmares. Actually, a Nightmare may be exactly one of the things we'd meet out there."

"A Nightmare?" Tannim had only heard of those, and he had no real wish to meet one in person. Sometimes a skull-headed white horse with her retinue of nine black, man-eating foals, sometimes a grim woman in a robe of storm clouds, with the head of a fanged horse in place of her own, she was, as Dottie succinctly put it, "mondo bad news." If you were lucky, she would only force you to mount and ride her through your greatest fears.

If you weren't lucky . . .

"Anytime I can avoid a Nightmare, I'd prefer to," Shar replied, echoing his own thoughts. "They're classic Unseleighe, so they wouldn't like the Mustang's Death Metal, but why take chances?"

"Heh. Mustang versus Nightmare—now that's something I'd like the video rights to!" He cracked a smile, and Shar pretended to swat him. "So, you want to aim for what, then? The destination with the possible physical outlet?"

She shrugged. "They're all bad; that seems the one with the least risk. With luck, that physical connection will be to something neutral."

"Right." He was under no illusions here; they were in enemy territory, working without a map, and their best hope was to end up somewhere Shar recognized. Only then would they be able to make their way to safe ground.

And home. . . .

Unexpectedly his throat closed for a moment, as longing for home hit him like a physical blow, and he bit his lip. God, he was so tired of running. . . . Home had never felt so far away, so unattainable; at least in the past, he'd known where he was, what to expect, what the limits were. Here, it was all up in the air. And he would give almost anything to see a familiar face. Would he ever see anyone he knew again?

"What's the matter?" Shar asked, quickly putting one soft hand over his cold one, as his face reflected some of his feelings despite his effort to hide them.

He shook his head, intending to say nothing, but it came out anyway. "I want—to go home," he whispered hoarsely. "All this—it's all so strange. I've never been this far Underhill before. I've never been anywhere but Elfhame Fairgrove, Furhold, and—I just want to go home."

He couldn't continue. Fairgrove was a short step, and I was back on my side of the Hill. I wasn't lost. And even if someone was trying to kill me, it didn't matter, because I was standing by my friends. He had to face the reality of the situation: he could die here, and no one would ever know what had become of him. He was pretty sure by now that Shar was on his side, but they could be separated—they would be separated if they were caught—and he would die alone here.

"I've never had a home, as such," Shar said wistfully. "I have my own domain, but it's really just a place to live. I've never felt comfortable enough with the kitsune to live in their realm. I certainly don't want anything to do with my father, or his allies. I have a few friends, but not many. Maybe that's why I spent as much time on your side of the Hill as I did." Her tongue flicked out thoughtfully. "Things are simpler there. At least on your side of the Hill I know the rules, and they don't change."

"Simpler—" He nodded. "That's not a bad thing." Then he shook off his mood of melancholy with a heroic effort. They didn't have time for this. Maybe Hamlet could take time in the middle of a firefight to soliloquize, but real people had to keep on running and shooting.

"I'll go set the Gate," she said, as if reading his mind. "Be back in a few seconds."

She slipped out of the blanket and the car at the same time; a rush of cold air numbed his ears as she opened and shut the door. She stood beside the Mustang for a full minute, staring at the stone arch, one paw-hand raised to it, palm outward.

The stones began to hum.

He didn't realize what it was at first; he thought that the cold might have introduced a new note into the rumbling of the Mach I's engine. But then, as the sound built, he realized that it came from the stones in front of him, a deep note just barely in the audible spectrum, that vibrated in his chest and made his hands and feet tingle.

Shar slipped back into the car, bringing with her another rush of cold air and a sparkle of frost. "Whenever you're ready."

He put the car in motion, creeping slowly forward, as the dark mist filled the space defined by the three stones. This scene was beginning to take on the uncanny feeling of familiarity; as the Gate swallowed up the lights, the hood, crept toward the windshield, he simply braced himself slightly, the same way that he braced himself against the lurch of an airplane take-off.

This time, though, the moment of disorientation was much shorter. The blackout lasted barely long enough to blink twice, then the Mach I moved smoothly into a thick, gray fog, illuminated from

everywhere and nowhere.

He hit the brakes as soon as the tail cleared the Gate; red light washed up behind them as the brake-lights reflected through the mist. He killed the headlights and turned off the engine. There was no point in advertising their presence here with the glare of headlights, even though the fog swallowed up most of the light. Behind them, the Gate was a smooth arch carved of white stone, easily lost in the mist of the Unformed now that the haze of activation was gone.

That was probably the point. If a mage blundered too far away from the Gate, he'd better be able to use his powers to find it again, or he was going to be in trouble.

The Unseleighe were great believers in Darwinism, it seemed.

"Tannim—" Shar said suddenly. "Look at what the mist is doing!"

At first he wasn't sure what she meant; a moment later, though, as he followed her gaze to the hood of the Mustang, he realized what it was she saw.

The mist of the Unformed curled away from the Mach I, leaving a shell of clear space between the metal and the mist. Was the car repelling the mist? Was the mist reacting to the metal, trying to avoid it? The mist was charged with raw magical energy, after all. Or was the mist reacting to the spells of protection on the Mustang?

Whatever the cause, here was a visible sign that the Mach I affected the world Underhill, one that he didn't need to invoke mage-sight to read. He watched in fascination as the mist pulled back into itself, for all the world as if it reacted in pain.

Shar's features blurred briefly, and returned to the human ones he knew best. She had shifted as suddenly as a sigh, and as noiselessly as the mist. He was not entirely certain she had done so consciously.

"Probably we ought to both recon this situation," Shar said into the silence. But she made no move to leave the Mustang.

He didn't blame her; there was something about this mist, uncanny, sinister. Sad, too; his depression returned in full force, and it was all he could do to keep from giving up and curling up into a fetal ball right then and there.

Right. And if you do that, there's no way you're going to get out of here, bonehead!

Shar stared out the window, her own expression pensive, her eyes full of secrets.

"Your parents," she said out of nowhere. "I watched you with them, and I envied you for having two such people to care for and who cared for you. I could not understand why you left your home so eagerly."

It was not a question, but the questions were there, nonetheless. "It's hard to explain," he told her, knowing that it sounded feeble. "I think the world of my folks, and I know that they are prouder of me than they ever let on, but—" He snorted, as a little more of his depression lifted. "This is really going to sound trite, but they honestly don't understand me."

"Well, you are a mage, and they are—good, normal folk," Shar replied sensibly.

But Tannim shook his head. "That's only part of it. They would never understand me, even if I wasn't a mage, but that makes it astronomically worse. They don't know why I do what I do for a living, test-driving, all that. Half the time they think I'm going through some kind of a phase, and after a while I'll get tired of all this and become an accountant, or a car salesman." He ran his hands through his hair in distraction. "They worry about me, that I'll wake up some day as an old has-been driver with nothing to fall back on. And that's just the surface problem."

"And the deeper problem?" Shar prompted.

"There's the magic, the Sidhe—which I can't tell them about." He clutched his hair. "I've tried; they literally don't hear it. Won't hear it. I'm afraid to try anymore; they might think I was on drugs or something. Mom half hinted at that the last time. Usually they just act like they think I'm talking about a book I read or some movie."

"But they love you—" Shar said blankly.

"Love doesn't mean understanding," he replied, letting go of his hair and staring at his hands. "They don't share the same values I have anymore. How can I pay any attention to the package a person comes in, when so many people I'm proud to call my friends aren't even human? Then I get home, and Dad starts bitching about the 'foreigners taking over' and signs a petition to forbid every other language in America but English. And that's only the start of it. Dad's a great man—but he's coming down with hardening of the attitude; looking for some group to blame for problems, and not bothering to do something about the problems. Instead of trying to fix things, he's bitching about it."

Shar's mouth formed into a silent "oh." Tannim's lips twitched. "That's one reason why I try to keep my visits brief, because I know that I let things slip that they worry about. Mom isn't happy about my lifestyle; Dad isn't happy that I've turned my back on three generations of Drakes farming in Oklahoma. I'm not happy knowing that, deep down, they wish I was someone more like Joe." He rubbed the side of his head unhappily. "Sometimes I think I'm a changeling. I couldn't be more of a misfit in my family if I'd been left on the doorstep in a basket."

Shar was very quiet for a long time. "But I thought—you said—"

"I said I loved my parents. I do. And they love me. They just don't understand me." He laughed weakly. "Oh, Shar, it's awfully difficult to explain. Sometimes you can care a great deal about someone, and simply not understand him at all. Especially if you're related to him."

She blinked at him. "Forgive me for saying earlier that life in your world is simpler."

"Life is ne'er simple, lass." Tom Cadge spoke softly from the rear seat. "'Twasn't when I was a lad, and likely has got no better. There's more grief 'twixt relations than strangers."

"Don't misunderstand me. I love my folks, Thomas," Tannim protested. "I just don't fit in their lives anymore. Their home—just isn't home for me now. I don't belong there anymore. I can't go back without feeling like an alien."

"Well, now, that's as it should be, eh?" Tom cocked his head to the side and turned his bandaged face toward Tannim. "The chick don't go back in the shell, do he? Nor the wee bird go back to his mam's nest come spring again? Ye can't go back to a home, lad, not once ye be a man grown. Ye have to make



your home, your own home, or it ain't really your home, if ye take my meanin'."

"What about those who've never had a home, Thomas Cadge?" Shar asked softly, with a note of bitterness in her voice.

Tom turned his head toward her, creating the odd impression that despite his blindness, he still saw right through the layers of bandage over the grisly ruins of his eyes. "Those who've never got a home has all the more reason to make one, milady," the old man said with odd gentleness. "Even an old man, half mad an' all blind has a reason t' make a home. An' them as never got a home, well, mebbe they ought t' look to them as knows what a good home is, to show 'em how t' build one. 'Specially summat who's a friend. Bain't that what friends be for?"

Tannim stared at the swirling mist as the silence lengthened. "Well," he said, finally, "Before we get out of the Mustang, we'd better get ourselves in a better mood. That mist out there is going to react to what we're thinking, and even more to what we're feeling. The car's got shielding enough to keep us from creating any nightmares, but once we get out to study the situation—"

Shar straightened visibly, and her face took on an expression of determination. "Absolutely right. I think we're letting this miserable place get to us. And absolutely the last thing I want to do is conjure up my wretched father out of the Unformed." She made a grimace of distaste. "One of him is bad enough; two would be unbearable."

"Oh, I don't know," Tannim replied, managing a chuckle. "From what you've said, if you created a second Charcoal, they'd be so in love with each other we'd never have to worry again."

Shar actually smiled. "You have a point," she agreed. "Still, let's not take any chances." She pulled her hair back from her face, and closed her eyes for a moment. "Right. I assume you don't know anything about the Gates, since you haven't volunteered to examine them with me."

Tannim spread his hands helplessly. "Not a hint. Haven't the vaguest notion how to look into the things. I make my own Gates when I need 'em, but only back in America. However, I do know a bit about the Unformed, since Fairgrove got involved in the cleaning up after the disaster at Outremer. If the Gate doesn't pan out, I can probably find that physical connection to the next realm."

"You can?" Shar brightened visibly. "Oh good—I can tell there's one out there, but I can't locate it."

"Then I think we have our two tasks laid out for us; nothing like a proper division of labor. And I believe I'm ready for the mist, if you are." Tannim put his hand on the door and gave Shar an inquiring glance.

"As ready as I'm likely to be." She sighed, and opened her own door with an expression of resolution on her face.

The Unformed was not precisely "mist" as any human knew it. It was neither cold nor damp. It had no odor, no taste, nothing to feel—in fact, if Tannim had closed his eyes, he would not have known it obscured everything in every direction. Anything more than three feet away might just as well be invisible. As he understood it, the theory went that the mist was a physical manifestation of the available energy in these pockets of Underhill. Raw energy at that; the theory was that once that energy was given a form, it ceased to be random and started to obey normal laws of physics. Until then—you had this mist, potential in its purest form.

It tried to trick you into giving it a form, too. There were phantom shapes out there, shapes that teased

the mind and made it strive to put definition on the vague shadows. The more the unwary person peered, the more his mind tried to match the half-seen shape, the more the half-seen shape fitted itself to the image in a watcher's mind.

In the case of one particular child, in a sea of Unformed mist outside Elfhame Outremer, those images had been very terrible. . . .

Forget that. Don't look out there. Don't let it trap you. Just hunt for the pathway into the next domain. Shar might be the expert on Gates here, but that was something he could do, though it was a tricky bit of work, and akin to echolocation.

There was a peculiarity to the rock walls of Underhill pockets; they reflected magic. Real rock didn't do that, so Tannim could only assume that the caves of Underhill were not exactly made of rock.

I wonder if they only look like caves because that's what the creatures who first came to this place expected. The mist was psychotropic, after all. . . . If you had enough mist, could you form rock walls out of it?

But that wasn't getting anything done. The point was that the rock walls reflected magic, but a place where the rock wasn't obviously didn't. So he had to become the human equivalent of a bat.

He walked around to the front of the car, settled himself on the hood of the Mustang, absentmindedly pulled a cherry-pop out of his pocket, and unwrapped it. He tucked the cellophane neatly back in his pocket and the candy in his cheek, crossed his legs, and went to work.

\* \* \*

Shar faced the Gate, the Mach I a solid and reassuring presence behind her, and closed her eyes, sinking her awareness into the fabric of the pale stone arch. One of the settings she already knew; the frozen plain they had left behind. Her first action would be to count the number of settings this Gate had; after that, she would worry about where they went.

She tended to think of them as directions in three dimensions; forward and back, left and right, up and down. "Filled" settings pulsed with power; the "empty" places where settings would be—when there were any such empty slots, which wasn't often in a public Gate—held power, but not as much, and always felt to her as if she touched the surface of a glass, warmed by sunlight, holding a gentle glow of magic.

"Up" is the plain that we just left. Damn, the rest are active, too. No chance to add a setting of my own. Ah well, it had been a faint hope, after all. In pure reflex, she checked "down" first, and got a nasty shock when she recognized it for what it was.

One of Charcoal's domains? As a destination for us? I don't think so! Of course, as a powerful mage as well as a dragon, her father had more than one little pocket kingdom. He might not be using this one; as she recalled, it was smallish, as small as the ersatz apartment she had built for herself. Charcoal preferred grander dwellings; he mostly used this one as a place to leave people he wasn't sure were guests or prisoners. It was one of the places he had graciously allowed her to use when she was a child.

It's tempting, though. There's at least one setting on every Gate he builds that goes someplace neutral. Charcoal might be insufferable, but he wasn't stupid, and he always kept his options open.

Long familiarity with the Unseleighe let her quickly identify the other four destinations. They all were Unseleighe Sidhe holdings, and all of them places she had visited, thanks to her father's habit of playing both ends against the middle: the Shadow Tower of Bredna, the Hall of Tulan the Black Bard, the private hunting preserve of Chulhain Lorn, and Red Magda's stud farm.

Best not ask what she raises. She might feed you to them.

All of them grim destinations, and all too small to escape from readily. Smaller, even, than Madoc Skean's holding.

The one saving grace was that none of the four were on good terms with Madoc. In fact, Red Magda and Tulan had little private feuds with him that virtually guaranteed they would turn him away with a curse if he came to them on the trail of Tannim.

Of course, this did not mean that they would help Tannim. Since the young human was an ally of Keighvin Silverhair, they would probably be perfectly happy to hunt him down on their own. Magda hunted any humans she could find or kidnap just on general principles; she preferred the Great Hunt over any other kind. And as for Shar—well, they'd probably treat her the same as a human.

I have no notion how I'd stack up against them. Rather not find out by meeting them head-to-head, either.

It was rather interesting, though, to discover that she recognized all the destinations of this Gate. Were they finally getting back into familiar territory? That could be good or bad news. Good, if it meant finding a neutral destination at last—bad, if all that happened was that they worked themselves deeper and deeper into the holdings of the darker creatures. Shar had heard rumors of those who'd worked themselves into places where even the Unseleighe Sidhe were afraid to go. And once, when she was a child, her father had returned silent and stiff from one of his own journeys of exploration—and he would not talk about where he had been, only sealed off the setting on the Gate that had led there. Now that was an unsettling recollection.

It almost made a foray into one of Charcoal's holdings into a tempting idea.

She disengaged her awareness from the Gate carefully, making sure to leave behind no traces that she had been there. No magical "footprints" or "fingerprints"; nothing to betray her presence.

Moving that circumspectly took time. She only hoped that Tannim had been able to find the physical opening out there in the mist, since this Gate was pretty much a washout. Of course, they could always go back to the plain and try the other pocket of the Unformed that Gate went to. They might have better luck there.

Behind her, she heard Tannim stirring, the shh-ing of denim on the hood of the Mustang. Good! He must have found the opening into the next domain. They could compare notes, make some further plans.

The sound of fabric sliding over the metal ended with the faint thud of sneakers hitting the soft, white sand of the ground of this place. She was turning to greet him when a hint of movement out of the corner of her eye caught her attention.

Is there something out there? She peered into the mist, trying not to think of anything in particular, but whatever had been there was no longer there.

She still wasn't certain if the momentary curdling of mist had been the result of the mist "wanting" her to see something, or if it had been something very real slinking through the fog, when Tannim screamed.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tannim slid off the hood of the Mach I feeling rather pleased at how quickly he had found the entrance he'd been searching for. He was straightening up, his defenses momentarily down, when the mist-thing streaked out of nowhere and sank its teeth into his arm.

He never got more than a glimpse of it; his brief impression was of a long, lean creature about the size of a Great Dane, as white as the mist, and impossibly fast.

It was possessed of an obscene number of sharp, white teeth, thin as razor blades, most of which seemed to be scraping his arm bones.

Maybe it was a giant white shrew, or a wild dog or an albino weasel. More likely it was someone's worst nightmare. That was certainly the way Tannim felt when the thing's teeth met in his arm as it knocked him to the ground.

He screamed, unable to stop it, no macho posturing or stoicism—he screamed.

He didn't resist the fall, he continued it, rolling over on his back and kicking at the beast as hard as he could with both legs, feet planted firmly in the creature's belly.

The thing let go of his arm as the breath was knocked out of it in a fetid puff, and the force of his kick sent it sailing over his head.

Into the side of the Mach I.

The monster screeched like a chainsaw ripping through an oil barrel. For a moment, it hung over the front fender, body convulsing as it encountered some of the protective spells. It screamed again, and a crackle of energy arced across its body, a tiny display of fireworks that obscured whatever the beast had looked like. Not that he was in any shape to notice details.

In fact, he wasn't in much shape to notice much of anything, since he was lying on his side, eyes unfocused, trying not to scream loudly enough to attract another one of the creatures.

The thing hung on the fender for a few more moments, then it slid to the ground and burst into flame.

Within seconds, as Shar ran toward him out of the mist, hands ablaze with magical energies, it was gone, leaving nothing behind to show it had ever existed. Except, of course, for the ragged remains of his shirtsleeve, which hardly amounted to more than a few ribbons of cloth over the armor.

And the bleeding puncture wounds, where the beast's teeth had gone through the armor.

He clamped his teeth shut on his own pain and stared at the sluggish blood dripping down his arm in shock as the pain turned to numbness, though he knew that state was only temporary. The shock was not only because he had been wounded, but because he had been wounded through the armor.

Shar dropped to her knees beside him but did not touch him. "Is that arm broken?" she asked, her voice tight.

He shook his head, unable to speak, for now the pain began all over again, worse than before, and his arm felt as if he had—he had—

Ah, God this hurts!

With that assurance, Shar carefully picked his arm up by the wrist, and with one crooked finger, deftly made a slit along the joining of the top row of scales. The armor peeled back from his wounded arm, revealing a half-circle of wide, oozing punctures, all of them turning an ugly shade of purple around the edges.

"Is that poison?" he asked in pain-filled and masochistic fascination.

"No," Shar replied absently, "just fast bruising. Mother taught me some Healing; I'm not in her league, but let me see what I can do."

\* \* \*

Shar's reaction was automatic and immediate: I've got to help him! Without a second thought, she dashed in the direction of the scream, war-magics ready and burning to be thrown, only to see Tannim go over on his back and flip his assailant against the fender of the Mach I.

That was the end of that; Shar didn't need to watch the beast convulse and burst into flames to know that it was finished.

She dropped down beside him and went to work, ignoring the blazing mist-creature, although she thought it was a species that she recognized. The beast, before it had vanished, seemed to be one of the guard creatures Charcoal had created, or else something cooked up along the same plan. Charcoal did that sort of thing on a regular basis, rather than recruiting other creatures to his service. In fact, when she was young, he had made a habit of going to pockets of the Unformed specifically to create such monsters and chimera, bringing them back to his own domains to serve as watchdogs. Madoc Skean had gone Charcoal one better, creating the Faceless Ones the same way. Both of them preferred the expenditure of personal energy in order to obtain servants that were utterly loyal. The only trouble with these little expeditions was that it was quite difficult to keep the new creations rounded up. They always lost one or two every couple of trips, leaving the creatures roaming the mist, waiting for unwary prey.

That explains why Father had a Gate set here, she thought, as she engaged the little set-spell that parted Tannim's armored scales and slit it along the top of his wounded arm. This pocket of the Unformed must be particularly sensitive. The mists were not uniformly psychotropic, and those who used them to create living creatures kept the locations of the best mist pockets as a valuable resource.

She couldn't help but notice Tannim's start of surprise at her ability to open his armor. But at the moment her greatest concern was with his damaged arm; if that creature really was one of Charcoal's "shrogs" (her father's "clever" name for a thing based on shrews and dogs—what an idiot), the wounds could and would go septic in a heartbeat, and there wasn't exactly an emergency room with antibiotics handy.

She sank quickly into a Healing trance, held her hands around the wounds, and forced Healing energies into his cells. She worked from inside out; that way she wouldn't Heal the wound only to leave the

infection still active inside. There was no telling if there were any more of the creatures nearby, nor when they would appear if there were more, but Tanim's injury had to be dealt with now.

As she penetrated his defenses, she realized something else.

There was something very erotic about this; it was the first time that she had Healed anyone other than herself of a serious injury. Shar had closed up other peoples' cuts and soothed abrasions, but this was deeper, much deeper. She was aware of him in a way that she had never experienced with anyone else; the touch of her hand on his arm sent pulses of sensuous electricity through her arms; she felt what he felt directly, from the tiny ache where he'd hit the back of his head, to the caress of the silk-smooth armor over the rest of his body, including the places where it was so closely fitted that it held swelling down.

Hmm. They didn't allow for it to expand much, did they?

She had never been so aware of a male in her life, or on so many different levels. Not the level of telepathy; neither of them were telepaths. No, this was on a visceral level, where the instincts lived. Was this how an empath felt? Small wonder most of them got into Healing of one sort or another and pursued all Arts of the body.

She wasn't good enough to mend the bites completely; she cleaned out the sites of possible infection, dulled down the pain, and stopped the bleeding. Then she accelerated the cell growth as much as she had the skill and the power to do. In another day, he would have a half-circle of mostly healed punctures, and in two, a half-circle of tiny scars.

She got into the car for a bottle of water and washed the blood off him with it, then got a pad of gauze from the first-aid kit. Figuring that nothing preventive was going to hurt, she dabbed each wound with a spot of antibiotic salve, then wrapped the arm in a thin layer of gauze and resealed the armor over the whole.

It was only when she looked up from the final motions of sealing up the scales that she looked up to see his expression of complete disbelief.

"How are you doing that?" he asked, voice a little harsh from the screams, but harsher still with suspicion. She would have been a little hurt by that suspicion if she hadn't been well aware that she would feel the same if a secret of hers had been uncovered. "How did you know how to unseal my armor?"

"Very rapid deductive reasoning," she replied as she let go of his arm, and he flexed it to test it, wincing at residual pain. "You're Chinthliss' pupil, there are only a limited number of ways you can seal armor like this, and I know all of the ones Chinthliss uses. The easiest would be the most logical, since you're obviously going to have to get in and out of it at least once a day, and you might have to get into it when you're hurt. Like now. So I tried the first spell, and it worked."

She tilted her head to the side and waited for his reply. It wasn't long in coming.

"Oh—" he said, "but—Chinthliss told me that no one had ever had armor like this."

"He was right," she told him. "No one has. Most people simply work spells into standard armor. A few more have enchanted Kevlar, or something else high-tech. No one has ever combined anachronism, high-tech, and magic to make something like this. But there are still only a limited number of ways armor like this can be opened."

Tannim sighed explosively. "Well, damn. And damn it again; he told me the armor wouldn't stop everything, but I'd gotten kind of used to it doing just that."

Shar nodded, with sympathy this time. She recalled the time that she had first discovered that she was not invulnerable in her draconic form. It had been a painful revelation. Literally.

"It's not going to stop everything—maybe in your world, but not here. Any time you have a situation where there's a seam, there's a weakness," she told him. "I still have scars on my ankle to prove the truth of that."

"I'm sorry," he said, as if he meant it. "You shouldn't have scars anywhere."

She held her breath, and looked up, to meet his intensely green gaze. "Oh," she said, unable to think of anything else.

What are you doing, Shar? You're a kitsune, you're supposed to be unpredictable, wild, willful. What are you getting yourself into?

Just because you've always found this man fascinating, intriguing—just because he's the only male you've ever imagined trusting at your back—and at your front—that's no reason to sit here like a love-struck ninny, gazing into his eyes.

That's no reason to want to kiss him. Or to pull him right down next to you on this relatively soft ground and finish stripping off that armor.

Like hell it isn't!

"Bloody hell!" said a voice just above her head. "What was that 'orrible screeching?"

Tom Cadge had his nose stuck out of the open window; apparently he'd managed to figure out the mechanism to lower it. Both she and Tannim jerked upright; he with a curse as it jarred his arm, and she with a curse for a different reason entirely.

"Nasty piece of Unseleighe work," Shar said, as she got up off the ground and offered Tannim her hand. He was not too macho to accept it, or to accept her help in getting to his feet. "It bit Tannim," she continued, trying to sound matter-of-fact.

"I'll be all right," Tannim added hastily. Then, in an undertone, "I will be all right, won't I?" he asked Shar. A stray lock of hair fell over his worried eyes, and his complexion was pale. "I don't feel all right."

"Don't play any tennis with that arm for a little, and go have a Gatorade. You're just in shock," she assured him. "In fact, it might not be a bad notion to move the car just to that opening you found, and then sit there for awhile. The intersections of domains tend to be rather chaotic and stressed, and I think perhaps that the Mach I won't make as much of a disturbance there." She gave him a sharp look, as she noticed that he was leaning very heavily against the side of the Mustang. "I can drive, if you can direct me."

"I think maybe you'd better," Tannim replied honestly. "I really don't feel very good at the moment."

He went around to the passenger's side and opened the door with a little difficulty. She slid into the driver's side and found the keys waiting in the ignition. As soon as she settled herself, she cast another

long look at him, and did not like what she saw. Pale and sweating, he was obviously still in a lot of pain, and very shocky. "Here," she said, fishing behind the seat for another Gatorade. "Just tell me where to go, and I'll get us there. You rest—and when we get there, you should take a longer rest."

"I'm not going to argue," Tannim told her, as he leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. "Not at all. Forward, about two o'clock."

She followed his directions, murmured between gulps of Gatorade, through the absolutely directionless white mist. Finally, the rock wall of the boundary loomed up in front of them, gray and smooth, rather than craggy as a natural rock face would be. "Right," Tannim said. "I mean, go right, along the wall. You'll find it in a moment."

She did; in fact, she spotted the place where the opening was by the turbulent swirling of the mist ahead of them. The mist itself was no longer white or drifting; stained with pale colors and random shifts of light, it eddied and flowed restlessly. It still avoided the Mustang, however, which was comforting; anything that lived in it would probably be as vulnerable to Cold Iron as the creatures spawned in the quieter areas.

She parked the car and turned off the engine. "Rest," she told him. "The problem might just be a bit of shock; give your body and mind a chance to catch up with what I did."

He started to protest, then evidently decided better of it. "How bad are ye hurt, lad?" Tom Cadge asked with evident concern.

"Not too bad," Tannim replied, as Shar rummaged for a Gatorade of her own. "Been hurt worse."

"But we are not going any further until you are completely ready for anything," she told him in a voice that would permit no argument. "I never got a chance to tell you back there, but we've got more than one choice. We can try this unknown pocket of Unformed ahead of us, or we could try something that has—well, risk. The Gate goes to one of Charcoal's smaller domains. He might be there, he might not—but it's a place I know, and I can get to neutral territory from there."

He sipped his Gatorade, a lock of his hair falling over his eyes, as he sat in thoughtful silence. "So, the choice is the total unknown, versus a place where we know there's an enemy, one who may or may not be home right now."

She grimaced, but nodded. "If it were me—I'd go for the mist. I haven't been in that particular place for a long time, and Charcoal may have laid some nasty traps for the unwary in there. And anyway, even if he isn't there, his serving-creatures will be, and I don't think I could pass them anymore. But I thought you ought to know that the option is there; you have as much say in this as I do. If you think we should risk the known danger for the sake of a known way out—"

But Tannim shook his head decisively. "I'd rather take the unknown. You probably know Charcoal better than anyone else, and I'm strongly in favor of trusting an expert." He raised an eyebrow at her. "I take it that the rest of the destinations were equally unattractive?"

She smiled thinly and recited the other four destinations. His eyes widened for a moment at the mention of Red Magda and the Black Bard, confirming her guess that he just might know something about them.

And they just might know something about him, too. I rather doubt that they want to make certain he gets invitations to all their weddings and bar mitzvahs.



"The last possibility is to go back where we came from," she finished. "We could try the other settings on that Gate. The drawback is that if someone is following us, we might meet them."

"The other side of this rock wall sounds better all the time," Tannim said after a significant pause.

"A little rest, first," Shar said firmly. "You need it."

And I am not going to drive his car into another domain. If there's any trouble—I know who the good driver is in this car, and it isn't me or Thomas Cadge.

\* \* \*

Chinthliss stalked off down the garden path, with Joe right behind him, and Fox making a reluctant third. "You really shouldn't do this, you know," FX said plaintively. "Lady Ako has some powerful friends. She could cause us a lot of trouble."

Chinthliss did not reply. His stiff back said it all. As their feet crunched along the gravel path, Joe glanced from side to side, nervously. He could not believe that Lady Ako would let them go so easily after detaining them for so long.

He was right. Two massive guards in fancy lacquered armor stepped, literally out of nowhere, to bar their path. It was really weird; they unfolded out of the air on either side of the gravel walkway, then stepped onto it with curved swords bared. Chinthliss stopped abruptly; Joe loosened his weapon in its holster.

"I told you she could cause us trouble! We're doomed," Fox said from the rear of the group.

With a growl, Chinthliss turned abruptly; Joe stepped out of the way, leaving Chinthliss face-to-face with FX. The kitsune backed up a couple of steps after one look at Chinthliss' expression of rage. The guards didn't move, and Joe opted to disregard them for the moment, in favor of keeping Chinthliss from disemboweling Fox right then and there.

Fox held up his hands placatingly. "Hey, it was just a comment, you know? A little information? A bit of a reminder?"

Chinthliss took another step towards him.

Fox's hands transformed into a pair of fur-covered paws.

"Wee paws for station identification?" FX continued, with a nervous, feeble grin. "Ah—please accept my apology for the social fox-paws?"

The corner of Chinthliss' mouth twitched, although Joe could not see anything that would have been funny in that last sentence. But evidently the dragon did, and Joe breathed a little easier. Maybe Chinthliss wouldn't kill the kitsune quite yet.

"I did not bring you along as my court fool," Chinthliss replied coolly. "Whatever capacity Tannim has you in. I brought you because you are a kitsune and Shar is half kitsune, and I assumed your knowledge of her would be useful."

"What about the information Shar's mother could give you?" The sweetly feminine voice coming from behind Joe had a distinct edge to it. Joe turned again, and the two armor-clad bulwarks parted to let Lady Ako pass between them.

"Your information would be damned useful, my lady, if you could just bring yourself to part with it instead of offering endless Tea Ceremonies," Chinthliss replied, his own voice honed to an icy sharpness. "Failing that, we will simply seek help elsewhere."

"I have not been your lady for a very long time. You will not need to look elsewhere." Lady Ako made this a statement without a hint of apology to it. "There are circumstances surrounding this sad state of affairs that required you be detained." Her tone said, as clearly as words, that she did not intend to apologize for anything, nor did she intend to give any further explanation than this. She matched Chinthliss stare for stare.

Finally Chinthliss broke the silence. "Fine," he said abruptly. "I suppose I'm going to have to assume this has something to do with internal kitsune politics, the secrets of which mere mortals are not free to plumb. As long as your little game is over with, I'll put off looking for that cab."

He crossed his arms over his chest and waited, wrapped in dignity, for her to reply.

She bristled. "Do not presume to dictate my actions to me, Chinthliss!"

"I wouldn't dream of it," the dragon replied dryly. "Nor will I be drawn into an argument so as to permit you to delay us even further."

Fox looked from one to the other of them, and finally held up both paws. "He's called your bluff, Lady Ako," the kitsune said bluntly. "You might as well admit it, and give us some real help."

Lady Ako stared for a moment longer, then sighed. "He has indeed called my bluff. And the best I have is a pair of twos," she admitted. "All right; I can't seem to delay you any further, so we might as well get down to the business of actually finding them." She started back toward the building they had all stalked away from, and with a glance to the rear at the impassive guards, Chinthliss, Joe, and FX followed her.

"I've had someone watching the boy's car since it came Underhill," she said, as they mounted the steps to the graceful porch, and a few kitsune sitting on the flat cushions watched them with covert curiosity. "Not actually watching it, you understand, but keeping track of it by means of the disturbance it causes in the magic-fields. Shar managed to cloak it somewhat, but that much Cold Iron was bound to wreak a certain amount of disturbance no matter how skillfully she shielded it—a disturbance of a distinctive flavor, as you know."

"That makes sense." Chinthliss mounted the wooden steps of the building, keeping pace beside her. The steps creaked slightly under him, as if he weighed far more than his appearance would suggest. "But why track the vehicle instead of the people?"

"Because Shar is better than I at cloaking spells, and I do not know Tannim." Lady Ako held the scarlet-painted door open for them, and they all filed through—except for Chinthliss, who took the brass handle from her and bowed her inside. It seemed to Joe that she smiled faintly at the gallantry. "I knew that Shar would bring Tannim to his vehicle if she found a way to free him, because it represents a powerful weapon of defense," she continued. "And I know that Madoc Skean has no allies other than Shar who could do anything with so great a concentration of Death Metal. Further, I suspected that only Tannim would have whatever other devices were needed to make it work, such as a key. So it followed

that no one but Shar or Tannim would be able to move it. Not long ago, my intuition bore fruit; the car moved, and as soon as it moved, Shar's cloaking-spells destabilized, making it easier to track. Since we saw no motive-spells working, it must have moved under its own power."

Chinthliss stopped right in the middle of the white-paneled room. "It did? Where? And where is it now?"

Lady Ako beckoned them to follow, past a room full of flat cushions on the floor, through a sliding paper screen instead of a door, and into the kind of room Joe had not expected to find here.

It was a room full of computer equipment, mostly deep blue and bright red, with huge screens. There were at least a dozen SPARC stations and Silicon Graphics computers that they could see, with about half of them being used by creatures that were more or less foxlike. Some only had fox tails, some fox tails and feet, and some were humanized foxes as Lady Ako had been when they had first seen her.

They were all dressed in varying costumes, from futuristic jumpsuits to the full kimono-kit that Lady Ako wore. The lady bent over the shoulder of one of the silver foxes in a pearl-gray jumpsuit; this one had long, flowing white hair crowning her fox-mask and cascading down her back.

"It isn't that easy, Chinthliss," Ako said at last. "We know that the vehicle is moving, and we know in general where it is, but we can't tell specifically." She shrugged helplessly. "You simply cannot map Underhill; I have tried, with no success. You can go north, then east, then south, and find yourself facing north again. You can go up several levels only to find yourself four levels below the place you had started. The Gates do not connect domains in any kind of logical fashion. This room holds the closest thing anyone has to a map of Underhill."

"They're somewhere in the predominantly Unseleighe region, my lady," said the silver fox, tapping the screen with one furry forefinger. "If they can just get into one of the larger domains, one where we can pinpoint them by what Gates they are near, I can give you coordinates. But now—well, the sensors and programs we are using only show that they've used Gates to make domain-jumps, but since we don't have those specific Gates in our lists, it can't locate them precisely." The silver fox looked at everyone assembled. "We have magical sonar, and there's a lot of noise. We don't get a ping on them until they do something."

"You see?" Ako held up her hands helplessly. "We can track the perturbation and know that they are moving. Once they reach and use a Gate that we have in the computer, we know where they truly are. But until then, we'd be jumping blind."

Joe nudged Chinthliss. "Sir," he said hesitantly, "what about the trim-ring? Tannim used it to find the Mustang. Couldn't we do the same thing?"

"I wouldn't do that if I were you, sir," the silver fox replied respectfully, before Lady Ako could say anything. She turned around to look Chinthliss right in the eyes. "That much iron and steel is warping the magic fields down there in ways I can't predict, and neither can the computers. We just can't model chaos that well. If you tried to use that artifact to create a Gate, you might end up tearing a hole in the fabric of Underhill. Or you might just end up Gating somewhere you wouldn't like. The odds of actually going where you wanted to go are pretty low. We could run a simulation—but if we had enough data to make an accurate simulation, we'd have enough to find the vehicle, too."

"Laini is my best tech," Ako said, placing a hand on the silver fox's shoulder. "If she says it's dangerous, I'd believe her. And if she doesn't like the odds, I wouldn't take the risk."

Chinthliss eyed both of the kitsune dubiously. "So what would you do if you were in our position?" he asked.

Laini thought for a moment. "You might use the trim-ring as a magic-mirror, just to show you where they are. We use an optical link through a magic-mirror to connect to Internet from here. The Internet is great for hiding things and communicating with obscure locations on Earth—Underhill enclaves with outerworld fronts, allies, informants—just bounce encrypted files from one anonymous site to another. Anyway, we use a tuned laser beamed through two stationary mirrors—one here in Furhold, and one on the other side. If you use a magic-mirror, you get a super clear image most of the time. You might recognize something we could use, or get a photograph sharp enough that we could cross-reference it through our Silicon Graphics image systems here." She pointed one delicately-clawed paw—hand—at the crimson boxes whirring away. "We have thousands of subrealms identified and imaged, and some of them are mapped down to ten-meter grid squares with local magical data. We just don't know all the Gates that lead to them, because that takes a lot more than remote viewing. But we do have some."

Laini looking thoughtful again and tapped at her silvery-black snout. She flicked an ear. "If you can determine a place, or give us enough data that we can find it, we might be able to plot a route that could get you there, using the Gates that we know of."

Joe grinned. Now that's a little more like it! he thought. Evidently Chinthliss felt the same.

"I didn't realize that you had an artifact," Lady Ako said, "or I would have offered all this a little sooner."

"Is there somewhere secure that we can use to set up a scrying-spell?" Chinthliss asked. "You know what I mean by 'secure,' I trust."

"Of course." Ako smiled sweetly. "This is the embassy, after all. We have some very secure places. If you'll follow me?"

Once again, Lady Ako led them all down a maze of corridors, this time with walls of white paper and bamboo rather than white-painted wood. How such a place could be considered "secure" was beyond Joe, but if Lady Ako said it was, he might as well take her word for it. At least no one would be able to eavesdrop on you here—you'd see his shadow through the walls first.

Maybe that was what made it secure?

At length she pushed aside a sliding door and led them into a room containing what was either a very small building or a very large box, lacquered in black, with graceful images of cranes and carp—and, of course, foxes—on the sides, formed in strokes of gold paint. "You will be secure enough in there," she said. "It will be a little crowded, but it is very well shielded."

She opened a door into the box; it looked rather like a sauna inside, with benches against two of the walls and a low table in the middle. Somehow all four of them managed to squeeze inside; Lady Ako and Chinthliss on one bench, FX and Joe on the other.

Ako shut the door; after a moment of darkness, a gentle, sourceless light came up all around them. Chinthliss placed the chrome trim-ring down in the middle of the black-lacquered table.

Here we go again. . . .

As all three of the others bent over the shining circle of chrome, Chinthliss chanted under his breath. A

drift of sparks came from his outstretched hand and settled on the ring, exactly as if he had sprinkled glitter down on it. But these sparks spread and grew, until a skin of light coated the whole trim-ring.

Mist gathered inside the ring, and all four of them leaned a little closer. "Damn," Chinthliss muttered irritably, "that tech of yours is right. The Mach I really is warping things all out of shape down there."

Ako laid one hand over the top of his, and a second shower of sparks fell on the ring. The light strengthened, and for just a moment, a picture formed in the middle.

It was the Mach I, all right; Tannim was in the passenger's seat, though, and in the driver's seat was the woman who'd shown up at the barn. There was someone else in the rear seat, too, and the whole car was surrounded by a white mist that eddied around the car as if it didn't quite want to touch it.

Then the picture faded, leaving only the shiny black lacquered surface of the table.

"Well, at least we do know that they're together," Lady Ako said into the silence.

"But who was that in the rear?" Joe asked. "And where were they?"

"The Unformed," Chinthliss growled. "There are only several hundred places they could be, with that Unformed mist around them. Damn."

But surprisingly, it was FX who shook his head. "That's the bad part; don't forget, the Unseleighe and the Seleighe both have Gates into those pockets. So do the neutrals, for that matter. It's not a big deal; we just need a little more time. We just wait for them to Gate out of there, and see if we can identify where they came out."

"Which means we sit here until the car moves again." Joe sighed.

Chinthliss nodded abruptly, scowling.

Lady Ako looked from one gloomy face to another, and finally ventured to speak. "I don't suppose," she said doubtfully, "that any of you would care for some tea?"

\* \* \*

Shar stared at the swirling, pastel-colored mist and wondered if it was half as unsettled out there as she felt. Most disturbing was the feeling that things had gotten completely out of her control.

Her reaction to Tannim being attacked was entirely out of character. If Tannim hadn't already slain that mist-creature, she would have reverted to Huntress-mode and leapt upon it to rend it with her own, sharp teeth right then and there. She never leapt to anyone's defense; she always assumed that they could take care of themselves. After all, no one was going to leap to her defense. . . .

The strength of her own feelings had shocked her; more shocking had been the way she had automatically reacted on seeing that he had been hurt. She had never expended Healing on anyone else before. Not once. She was not a "natural" Healer as Lady Ako was; it cost her a great deal to invoke a Healing spell. There had never been anyone worth the effort before.

And before my mind could weigh all the consequences, I found myself Healing him without even pausing to think about what I was doing. Very strange. Very unlike her.

Tannim did not sleep this time, but he rested as Shar had ordered, slowly regaining color as he sipped at a Gatorade and nibbled at packaged crackers. After a glance at her, which she met with a smile, he fished under the seat and came up with a car magazine. His inquiring glance asked "may I?" and her answering shrug replied "be my guest." He immersed himself in its pages as she stared out at the mist, still sorting her thoughts.

It was logic, she told herself firmly. Pure logic. This is his car, we need each other at top form to guard the other's back. I Healed him because of that. It has nothing to do with how I feel about him.

And pigs were certainly flying in tight formation over LaGuardia at this very moment.

"Ready to switch places?" he said into the silence. When she gave him a measuring look, he grinned at her with a good measure of his old cockiness.

"I would certainly not care to take the blame for anything that happened to your beloved car if I ran it into something out there," Shar replied dryly. "Please, Captain, take the helm by all means."

But before popping any doors, they both checked the mist for the telltale swirls that signaled something hiding in it. And Shar noted with some amusement that both of them scooted around the car and into their new places so quickly that it would have taken a photo to tell which of them hit the seat first.

She snapped her seatbelts in place. He quirked his eyebrows at her. "Paranoid?" he asked.

"Of course," she retorted. "They are out to get us."

"Point taken." He started the car and drove into the mist, heading for the place where the colors and eddying were the strongest.

The gap in the rock walls must have been larger than she had thought; when the rock disappeared on the left, there was no answering darkness up ahead to show where it might resume. Tannim turned the Mach I into the gap, still keeping the wall on the left. The mist was at its most turbulent here; the predominant color was a blue-green, but there were swirls of red, yellow, even purple.

"This place makes me think of an explosion in a tie-dye plant," Tannim muttered under his breath.

Shar peered ahead into the psychedelic fog, every muscle and nerve alive with tension, and started when Tom Cadge tapped her shoulder.

"Please, lass," he said quietly, "can ye tell me where this magical chariot is goin'? All I know is we been someplace cold, an' now we're someplace else."

"Did you ever—ah—see any of the places that the Unseleighe Sidhe call `Unformed'?" she asked. She hated to ask it that way, but Cadge didn't seem to mind.

"Before they put out me eyes, ye mean?" He shook his head. "I heard tell of 'em, but I ne'er saw one. I didna see much but Lady Magda's Hall, an' not much o' that."

"Well, that's where we are. It's a place full of mist, and not much else, and someone with a strong enough will and magic can make it into anything he wants," she told him. "Somebody left something nasty behind the last time he was here, and it attacked Tannim."

"Mist?" Tom shook his head. "What can anyone be doin' with mist?"

"It's a special kind of mist," Shar replied absently. "Think of it like clay. That's how most of the domains were made in the first place, right out of the mist. Either one incredibly powerful mage, like Lord Oberon or Lady Titania, or a group of mages with a single plan in mind, would move into one of these places and turn it into what they wanted."

"So?" Thomas replied. "Is that where we are, then? One o' them mist places?"

"Exactly. There are often Gates in there, and that's what we're looking for." Shar continued to stare ahead as she talked to Tom; was it imagination, or was the color slowly leaching out of the swirling mist? "People can make small things out of the mist, too, so they'll come here when they need something and create it."

"So—if ye can make anything ye like, why don't ye make a Gate now?" Tom asked with perfect logic.

Shar sighed. "Partly because I'm not certain either of us is up to creating a Gate at the moment. Partly because this iron carriage that protects us also warps magic around it, and I'm not certain what the effect of making a Gate around it would be. Partly because a Gate is one thing you can't make out of the mist with any certainty at all—it would be like you trying to juggle a dozen sharp knives at once. And lastly, making a Gate makes a fearful disturbance; there are people watching for us, and they'll know where we are and what we're doing."

"Ah." Tom nodded wisely. "So I see. This workin' of magic, it just purely isn't like—like magic, is it?" He grinned, amused at his own wit.

"Precisely." She forced a tired chuckle since he wouldn't be able to see her smile. "Well, we're going to see if we can't find another Gate in here to take us somewhere nearer to our friends."

By now the mist had definitely gone to pastel. In a few more moments, all the color would be gone, and it would be time to stop the Mustang and see if she couldn't locate another Gate on this side of the wall.

But as the color leached out of the mist, the mist itself thinned. Shadow-shapes appeared, not the moving shapes the mist itself produced, but stationary shadows, with solidity to them.

The mist thinned further as the Mustang rolled forward, and the shapes took on substance, color, and texture. "Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" Tannim asked quietly.

"I think so," Shar replied, while she cobbled together the most apt comparison she could come up with. "This is really weird. It looks like somebody's rock collection."

If it was, the collector had to be a giant. Ahead, behind, and on either side loomed huge slabs and boulders of polished, formed or crystallized stone, each piece as big as the Mach I or bigger. These slabs balanced upright somehow, defying gravity, even though their bases might be no bigger than a foot or so across. The impression of being in the midst of a rock collection was inescapable now that Tannim had pointed it out; no two of these huge "specimens" were alike, and they all appeared—at least to Shar's uneducated eyes—to be purely of a particular "kind" of rock. Here was a cluster of quartz crystal points, the smallest of them as long as her arm and the largest taller than Tannim—there a polished boulder of amethyst big enough to crush the Mach I—ahead a single giant violet diamond-shaped fluorite crystal balanced precisely on one point.

"This is bizarre," Tannim said softly, staring at the next rock, a milky yellow multifaceted crystal which balanced on a single point like the fluorite crystal now behind them. The one next to it looked for all the world like an irregular slab cut from a geode and polished on both sides. "Have you ever heard of anything like this?"

"Never," she said firmly. "But I'm not sure I like what it implies. Someone had to create all this out of the Unformed; that's the only way you'd get things like this, right? So that person had to not only be some kind of rock-nut, but he had to be a complete monomaniac."

"Rock is my life, man," Tannim said automatically, but the joke fell rather flat.

Mist writhed away from the Mach I as they passed the balanced slab and a round boulder of pink quartz appeared to the right. "To the exclusion of everything else?" Tannim hazarded. "Boy, I hope we aren't disturbing his collection, wandering around in here!" He ran a hand through his tangled curls worriedly.

"Why don't you stop for a moment, and let me see if I can find a Gate," Shar suggested, feeling as worried as Tannim looked. "If someone got in here to create all this, there has to be a way out. I think I'd like to find it before he finds us."

Tannim nodded, and stopped the Mustang between a colorful metallic cubic aggregate of selenium and a polished granite egg the size of a Kenworth. Shar got out, checking all around them with such caution that it felt as if every nerve was an antenna, tuned for danger.

Only when she was certain there was nothing within the reach of her senses or her magics did she take a seat on the hood of the Mustang and send her spirit out questing for the peculiar magical signature of a Gate.

\* \* \*

"Want to try again?" Joe suggested, as the rather stilted conversation in the crowded room died into silence again for the fourth time.

Chinthliss looked at Lady Ako, who alone of them had not lost her outward serenity. She shrugged. "I told my underlings to come inform us if the Mustang made a sizable change of location. That would indicate a Gate-passage, of course. There's no telling, though, if they were able to locate a domain within the Unformed where we saw them. Elfhome Outremer is such a place; I'm certain the Unseleighe also have domains within the mist. I know that the Grand Bazaar is in the mist, and that it is not the only neutral hold to be in the center of the Unformed."

"Is that a `yes' or a `no'?" Chinthliss asked in open exasperation. "Oh, never mind. I want to see if your precious daughter is up to anything." He bent over the chrome trim-ring, and once again chanted until a shower of sparks drifted down from his hand and settled on the chrome ring. This time the lacquer tabletop enclosed by the ring fogged over with no help from Lady Ako.

The haze cleared, and Joe leaned over the table for a closer look.

Shar sat on the hood of the Mach I, her eyes closed and a frown of concentration on her face. Tannim stood beside the car in a protective stance, his bespelled red crowbar in his hands, watching warily to all sides. The Mustang itself was parked in front of a huge gray boulder, a rock as big as two cars put together and polished to a glossy sheen. The mist of the earlier vision was thinner here, but there was still



nothing really identifiable about the place.

Joe looked up at Lady Ako to see her reaction. She was smiling: a satisfied little smile compounded of equal parts of approval and relief.

"It seems they truly are working together," the lady said with a faint air of satisfaction.

Chinthliss only grunted. "I should give a great deal to know how my foster-son's sleeve came to be so shredded," he replied.

Joe glanced back down at the little scene imprisoned in the chrome circle, and saw with a start that Tannim's right sleeve was hanging in rags. But beneath the shirt-sleeve was something altogether unexpected; armor of some kind, he guessed. Iridescent green, of tiny hexagonal scales invisibly joined together, it covered his arm as smoothly as Spandex from wrist to shoulder.

"Pretty," Lady Ako remarked, indicating the armor with a fingertip that did not quite touch the image. "I assume that this is your doing, this armor?"

"As much Tannim's as mine," the dragon admitted with a touch of pride in his voice. "I happen to think that it is very good work. Something must have attacked them, though."

"If so, it learned that he bites back," Ako observed. "Honestly, I do not recognize this place, although I will inform my techs with a description, and we will see if the computer has a match. What of you?"

"Not a clue," Chinthliss admitted, as Ako slipped what looked to Joe like a palmtop computer out of her sleeve and laid it on her lap, quickly scratching something on its screen with a fingernail before returning it to her voluminous sleeve. I always wondered what they used those huge kimono sleeves for. Heck, you could smuggle Mexicans in there!

"You seem to be having an easier time holding the vision this time, old lizard," Fox observed. "Got any idea why?"

Chinthliss shook his head. "Probably has something to do with the area they're in. Less instability, maybe. There's a lot less of the Unformed mist, anyway." He turned to Ako. "What's she doing?"

"I would guess that she is searching the area for a Gate," Ako told him. "Shar is particularly sensitive to the energies of Gates. Even if she does not recognize a setting, she can sometimes tell general things about the destination."

"No—" Chinthliss took his eyes from the vision in the chrome trim-ring for a moment to stare at Ako in astonishment. "Where did she pick up that trick? From—"

"Yes," Ako confirmed. "I myself do not know how she does this. It is not a kitsune gift."

"It isn't a dragon-talent either." He shook his head. "Evidently she is not simply a meld of kitsune and dragon; she is something more."

"As I have always maintained." Ako was too composed to beam with pride, but there was a great deal of pride in her voice.

Inside the chrome circle, Tannim walked a wary patrol around the car as Shar remained perched on the

hood. There was nothing in Tannim's behavior that suggested to Joe that he was at all worried about Shar or what she might do. If anything, his prowling suggested that he was determined to protect her from anything that might come at her out of the mist.

That certainly suggested they had come to some sort of arrangement, an agreement of cooperation, perhaps.

The vision still wasn't clear enough to make out who was in the back seat of the Mustang. The figure was blurred, as if the focus was a bit out in that one spot, although the rest of the scene was clear enough.

"I can't see what is in the backseat," Chinthliss said with a frown, echoing Joe's own thought. "That's odd. Look, you can see the front seat itself clearly enough, so it isn't the Mach I's shields that are interfering." He glanced sharply at Ako, who only shrugged.

"I could not tell you who that might be," she replied. "Shar has no allies that she would trust in a situation like this. Perhaps it was someone they met along the way?"

"Maybe another prisoner of Madoc Skean," Chinthliss muttered. "Tannim wouldn't be able to leave someone like that behind. Especially not if it was a Seleighe Sidhe."

"Can you blame him?" Fox made a face. "I wouldn't leave a dead cat in the hands of that lunatic."

"Maybe if I—" Chinthliss held his hand over the trim-ring again, his eyes narrowing as he focused his magic. "I would feel a lot better if I could just see who or what that is—"

But his efforts were not only in vain, they undid everything else he had accomplished. As Joe watched in dismay, the vision flared, then faded, leaving only the hint of haze on the black lacquer.

Then even the haze faded, and only the shiny surface remained.

Chinthliss cursed, but Lady Ako remained philosophical. "You can only hold such a vision for so long," she reminded him. "And what good would it do you to sit here and stare at it? You cannot help them until you know where they are."

Chinthliss growled under his breath, but had to admit that she was right. "But I don't have to like it," he added. Joe agreed silently. At least, if they could watch, they had the illusion that they could do something.

"I can—" Chinthliss began, then pulled his hand back before he even began the spell again. "No. No point in wasting magic that we might need later."

"A messenger will come if the Mustang makes a large enough movement for a fix," Ako promised. "I gave you my word."

At that, Chinthliss actually smiled. "I do not recall that you actually gave your word before, my lady, but now that you have—I am inclined to trust you."

Ako looked at him in some surprise, and Joe thought, she also looked a little hurt. "Have we grown so far apart, Chinthliss, that you no longer trust me without my given word?" she asked softly.

Chinthliss blinked, and turned to meet her gaze completely. The two of them stared deeply into one another's eyes, unable to look away.

Joe cleared his throat, and they both jumped and looked at him as if they had forgotten that he and FX existed.

Maybe they did forget we existed.

"Can we—ah—take a break, lady?" he asked carefully. "All that tea—"

"I don't—" Fox began, and Joe jabbed him fiercely in the side with an elbow. FX emitted a strangled grunt and fell silent.

"Certainly," Lady Ako replied, ignoring FX. "Saski can show you where everything is. Can't you, Saski?" Now she smiled at FX, to his obvious discomfort.

"Yes, Lady Ako," FX managed. Joe slid the door to the little room open, and he and Fox climbed out. The door slid shut again as soon as they were outside.

"What did you do that for?" FX hissed angrily.

"They wanted to be alone, dummy," Joe replied scornfully. "Jeez, man, couldn't you see that? Don't you remember what Chinthliss told us about him and the lady and all?"

"Of course I remember! That's why I wanted to stay there and watch!" Fox told him. "And—ow!" he exclaimed, as Joe elbowed him again. "What did you do that for?"

"Because you're rude, crude, and not even housebroken," Joe told him, shaking his head in dismay. "Man, I can't take you anywhere, can I? Why don't you show me what passes for a bathroom around here. I really did drink too much of that tea."

Fox sighed and cast a longing look back at the closed doors of the little room. "Oh well," he said philosophically. "We'll figure out whatever they've been up to when we get back anyway."

"You're impossible," Joe retorted.

Fox only snickered.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Tannim prowled around the car restlessly, the comforting weight of his crowbar filling both hands. He studied the mist as it eddied around the giant mineral specimens, watching it with wary suspicion. Mist alternately concealed and revealed the farthest of the rocks, moving in no pattern he could discern. Unless he was greatly mistaken, the farthest of those rocks was a slice of watermelon tourmaline, a huge irregular wedge of transparent pink and green. He wouldn't even have known that watermelon tourmaline existed, much less what it was called and what it looked like, if Dotty hadn't been so infatuated with the stuff.

She'd be going ape right now, trying to figure out how to cart a five-ton rock out of here. Boy, this place is surreal. I feel like I'm in the middle of a Lexus commercial.

He kept thinking that he saw things moving, just out of the corner of his eye. But any time he turned to see what it was, there was nothing there but a swirl of mist.

Too bad I'm not some kind of superhero. I could sure use an edge right now. Heros in books had magical senses to warn them of approaching danger; all he had were his eyes and ears and mage-sight. My crowbar-sense is tingling! The mage-sight wasn't doing him a heck of a lot of good; the mist itself was full of magical potential and obscured everything else.

It's doing me about the same amount of good as a guy with a heat-scope in the desert at high noon.

That left eyes and ears. Plain old human senses, backed by red-painted iron and a bit of experience. Maybe a little good sense. It would have to do.

His feet made no noise at all in the sand. None. He might just as well have been walking on a foot of packed feathers. The ground here was as strange as the rest of the place. You could dig down just as far as you wanted, and all you'd find was sparkling white, utterly dry sand. Yet neither the tires nor feet sank in more than an inch, and there was firm, excellent traction, as good as the sands of Daytona Beach. Better. As good as the Bonneville salt flats. If I could just export this stuff, I'd make a fortune selling it to dirt-tracks.

He glanced over at his companion every time he passed her, just to see if anything had changed. Shar's face was utterly still, without expression of any kind. Once again, she looked like a statue sitting there; if he hadn't seen her chest rising and falling in slow, even rhythm, he'd have thought she was dead, spellbound, or otherwise incapacitated.

And that chest, rising and falling, up and down, slowly—

It looked as good as the rest of her. He prowled a series of full circuits around the Mustang, still without seeing anything. This bit of magic was taking her a lot longer than the last time she'd done something. Of course, the last time, she'd had the Gate right in front of her, and this time they didn't even know if there was a Gate over here.

What would they do if there wasn't a Gate here? A good question. Turn around and go back, I guess. Take our chances with one of the unfriendly settings, or with the place before that. It was cold and not very hospitable, but we wouldn't have to be there all that long. I hate to backtrack, though. We might meet something on our tail. That would be bad.

It shouldn't take them all that long to get on our tail, either. All they have to do is figure out that Shar didn't move the Mach I like she said she did.

By now, Madoc Skean must have figured out they'd slipped through his fingers. He and his cronies were surely on their trail in some form or other. How long would it take him to sort through all of the possibilities? He wasn't stupid; he wouldn't have amassed as many allies as he'd had if he was. He had to be on his way already.

There—something flickered at the edge of his vision again. This time he patrolled a few more soundless steps, then made an abrupt about-face, hoping to catch whatever it was in the act of eluding him.

Nothing. Not even an eddy of mist.

Maybe this place is getting to me, making me see things. Haven't been this jumpy in a long time.

He decided that he might as well prowl in the opposite direction, since he was facing that way anyway.

Madoc's not stupid, and he's got a lot of ears in other domains. So, given how good a spy-network Madoc has, by now he's surely heard about our little visit to the Hall of the Mountain King. From there, there're only five destinations besides the one we came from. Given enough people to check them out . . . yeah, he could be on to us right now.

"Eh, lad?" Tom Cadge called from inside the car, sounding anxious. "How long ye reckon afore the blackguards follow us?"

Even the old man was following his thoughts.

"I don't know, Tom," he answered truthfully, leaning against the car to talk through the window. "Could be they're after us right now. The one thing we've got going for us is that they've got to tread the same maze that we do. With any luck, they'll get as lost as we are."

Tom nodded, his mouth solemn below his bandaged eyes. "Mayhap they'll blunder into a nest 'o their own foes, eh? Like knockin' over a beehive. That'd be a choice jest."

"Oh, that'd be the best thing that could happen," Tannim told him, with a mental image of the Black Bard's surprise on finding his home invaded by his old rival Madoc. That would be a lovely sight to see! If Madoc got out of there with half his followers, he'd be lucky. The Black Bard was without mercy when it came to his few friends—and when given a chance at a foe . . .

Tom cocked his head to one side for a moment, then grimaced. "This place is mortal strange, lad. I keep thinkin' I'm hearin' summat off i' the distance, an' then when nothin' comes of it, thinkin' it's nobbut m' addled wits."

"Well you're not alone. I keep seeing things, but when I turn to look at them, there's nothing there." He pushed away from the car as Shar stirred. "Well, it looks like the lady may have found us something. Keep your ears open, all right? They're probably keener than mine."

"Aye, I will," Tom promised solemnly.

Tannim reached the front of the Mustang just as Shar opened her eyes. "There is a Gate here, but it's a long way off," she said, stretching her arms and blinking to clear her sight. "I wouldn't have believed this pocket was so big—that Gate must be six or eight miles from here. I can't think of too many places Underhill that are this size, and all of them have huge populations."

Tannim raised an eyebrow at that. "I wouldn't have thought it could be that big either; I would have thought that a pocket this large would have been claimed by now."

"Maybe it has," she replied ominously. "I caught distinct traces of Unseleighe magics out there. Only traces, so this isn't truly a domain of theirs, but they use this place for something."

"Grand." He sighed, and hefted the crowbar just for the reminder of its comforting weight. "Well, let's get on the road, shall we? If we're moving, we're a harder target to hit."

She slid off the hood without a comment, and landed lightly on the sand. He turned around and headed for the driver's side. He reached his seat a fraction of a second before she took hers, but this time they both fastened their safety belts.

She pointed directly ahead when he looked to her for directions. "Straight on, the way we were already going," she said.

He nodded, with a quick glance at the gas gauge. He'd started this trek with darn near a full tank of gas, and he'd tried to be careful—

And we're still a hair above the three-quarter margin, he noted with a bit of relief. Hard to find a gas station out here, and neither of us are Sidhe, to be able to ken and replicate whatever we want.

He started the Mustang and drove on, slowly, in the direction she indicated. Visibility still wasn't good enough to warrant going faster than fifteen or twenty. Another towering rock-sample emerged out of the mist right in front of them, this one a huge nugget of pure copper, constructed like a branching coral formation.

Weird. Just too weird. He shook his head, and drove on.

\* \* \*

A half an hour later by his watch, the mist had thinned to no more than a veil, upping visibility to about half a mile. The landscape had been changing for about the past fifteen minutes. The rock formations grew smaller, replaced by groves of dead and leafless trees, stretching blackened limbs against the white haze in the distance. Overhead was exactly the same as the nonexistent horizon: white haze. Lighting was a constant semidusk, nondirectional. All the place needed was a vulture or two for atmosphere.

The terrain itself had changed in that time; getting rougher, with increasingly steep hills and deep valleys, and nothing like a road in sight. The Mustang wasn't built for territory like this; heck, the Mustang wasn't built for anything but a real road. The only way to handle this kind of situation was to work his way up and down the hills in a zig-zag pattern, or travel along the ridge until a better crossing place showed up. The ground was still made of that strange sand; why it didn't slide and behave like dune-sand he had no idea. The top layer would slide down a little as the Mustang's wheels touched it, making the going a bit treacherous and tricky to drive, but beneath the top layer, the ground was firm.

That didn't help much, not when his jaw ached from clenching it and his knuckles were white from clutching the steering wheel.

Finally, they topped a rise only to find themselves looking down into a valley with a fifty-degree slope. Tanim stopped the car altogether.

"We can't take this in the Mach I," Shar said abruptly, before he could say a word. "Nothing short of a Land Rover could negotiate a slope like that. Tanim, I'm amazed you got this far—I'd have given up a mile ago. I almost asked you to quit when we passed that hematite boulder."

Tanim stared down the smooth slope, unbroken except for an occasional boulder of some highly polished stone or by a trio or quartet of spindly black trees, and nodded. Finally, after a long silence, he coughed.

"I'm pretty much stuck here without you," he admitted. "I don't know how to work those Gate things without already knowing the setting I want. I guess it's going to be up to you. Do we ditch the Mach I and try for this new Gate on foot?"

He was hoping she would think that was a bad idea. I'll argue with her if I have to, but we're partners in this. I'm not going to make an arbitrary decision for both of us.

Shar shook her head immediately. "No," she replied decisively. "Not a chance. This is one we're going to have to do without. It'd take us hours to get there on foot, Tom couldn't do it, and we'd be without our protection, our ability to move quickly, and our power source. That wouldn't be stupid, it would be suicide."

He ground his teeth to relieve his frustration, then gave voice to the only other solution, the one he'd already contemplated. "We go back. And try the other Gate."

She nodded, her own face displaying her distaste for the obvious. "And unless we're willing to take the chance on running into the people following us by going back to the frozen plain—the only other setting we stand a chance with is Charcoal's holding."

"We'll decide that when we get there," he replied. "One problem at a time."

At least he had a good idea how to get back. The soft sand didn't hold tracks forever, but he could still make out a clear trail behind them. While the tire-tracks in the sand were still visible, he could follow them. And after that—he'd kept track of the various rock-samples they'd passed. Unless the unknown collector (if there was one) had a habit of swapping them around on a regular basis—or they moved on their own—he'd get back to the point where the mist got so thick he could use his talent to find the gap in the walls again.

It didn't feel right, though, turning back like this. Besides being frustrating, it felt as if he had missed a point somewhere. Granted, this wasn't a video game, where you always got the next level if you did things in the right order, but still—turning back felt like a mistake. There ought to have been a way, but if there was, he hadn't seen it, and neither had Shar.

One thing was oddly comforting, though, and that was Shar's behavior. Not only had she refused to give up the Mustang—she'd refused to dump Tom Cadge.

That was automatic, too. She didn't lean over and whisper to me that we ought to abandon him with the car. She didn't suggest we leave him and come back for him with help. It wasn't, "we could leave the passenger behind, but that wouldn't be right." Instead, it was, "it would take us hours on foot, and Tom couldn't do it." As if there was no question of keeping him with us—it's a given.

He could trust her. He could. That single sentence had told him that much. She had nothing to gain and everything to lose by continuing to help the old man, and she hadn't even given it a second thought. It had been a completely natural response; that she accepted him as a responsibility along with her "debt" to Tannim.

His mood now much lighter, he surprised her by smiling at her once they got the Mach I turned around and headed back the way they had come. The furrows cut by the tires pointed the way, and he followed, retracing their path exactly. And hoping that he was doing the right thing.

Now as long as there isn't someone laying false tire-tracks for us to follow, we'll be all right.

"I suppose it could be worse," she said after a moment. "There might not be anyone following us yet. We do have options still, and there's—"

Her head and Tom's came up at the same moment in identical startled movements, like a pair of deer alerted by a danger signal. "Oh, no—" she whispered.

"Tell me I didn't hear a huntin' horn, milady," Tom begged, his wrinkled face white beneath the bandage. "Please tell me it was just th' wind, or summat like that. There's only one kind o' pack a-huntin' Underhill—"

He was interrupted by the sounding, faint but clear over the Mustang's rumble, of a hunting horn. At least, Tannim assumed it was a hunting horn, since they both shivered when they heard it.

"The Wild Hunt," Shar whispered, her eyes wide. "Oh no—we don't need that kind of trouble!"

"Whoa, whoa, what Wild Hunt?" Tannim asked, responding to the fear on both their faces by speeding up just a little. "What hunt? What's it mean to us? Who're the hunters?"

"The lost gods," Shar said fearfully, looking back over her shoulder as if she expected to see them at any moment, topping the hill behind them. "The spirits that once were gods of death and darkness in your world, who lost their worshippers and were banished Underhill. They hunt the living, led by their pack and their terrible Master. Even the Unseleighe fear them and hide when they hear that horn. It's said that there's no escape from them. Once they have the scent of you, they never give up!"

"Won't all this Cold Iron stop them?" he asked, as the horn sounded again, and sent a chill running up his spine. "I mean, we're talking pre-Christian, Bronze-Age guys here, aren't we? Shouldn't the rules that hold for the Sidhe hold for them?"

"The Master of the Hunt bears a spear tipped with the Death Metal from a fallen star," Shar replied, dashing his hopes. "That is why the Unseleighe fear him. They are no more bothered by iron and steel than a kitsune. They can cross running water with impunity, and holy things do not bar their way. Only sunlight stops them, and I doubt we're going to get any of that piped in to us on request!"

Tom Cadge had hunched down into his blankets, shivering, his head completely covered, like a child trying to hide from the monsters in the dark. It didn't look as though he had anything coherent to add.

"Great," Tannim muttered. "So what do we have going for us? Anything at all we can use against them?"

"We're not predictable." She stared through the back window; the horn-call sounded again, and it was definitely nearer. "They are more powerful than you, I, and all the Seleighe in Fairgrove put together—they used to be gods, for heaven's sake! Their horses never tire, nor do their hounds. But they will never have seen anything like this car, and they won't know what it, and we, can do. For that matter, they may not realize that the Mach I isn't alive—remember how the elves in the Mountain King's Hall reacted? If we can get out of this, it'll be by our wits."

"If I can get us into the heavy mist, can we lose them?" he asked. "Do you think that the turbulent area where the two pockets join is going to be confusing enough that they might lose the scent?"

"I don't know—but that just might work." She bit her lip and closed her eyes for a moment, thinking furiously. "Come to think of it, I know more than a few tricks along those lines. If you can get us some



lead, I can kill the trail so cold they'll never find it, once we get into that mist!" Shar said at last, with determination replacing the fear in her eyes. "There wasn't a clever fox worthy of his tail yet that couldn't baffle any pack, on this side of the Hill or on the other, and haven't I nine tails?"

"That's the spirit, milady," Tom quavered from beneath his blankets. Tannim was surprised that he could respond at all, as obviously terrified as he was.

"All right then," Tannim said firmly. "Just let me get down where I can do some real driving, and I'll buy you that time."

In answer to that, the horn sounded a new set of notes entirely, and faintly beneath it came the deep and baleful baying of hounds.

Not the excited belling of foxhounds, however. These howls had a strange and doleful sound to them, as if the dogs themselves were in pain and wanted nothing more than to inflict that same pain on their quarry. This was a howl of bloodthirsty despair, a cry of doom approaching on four sore paws, whipped on by something even more terrible behind it. The deep cries called on the fear in the soul, the terror of the thing behind, the monster in the darkest shadows of childhood.

"They don't have hawks or anything, do they?" Tannim asked, suddenly struck by a horrible thought. If he had to contend with attacks from above as well as the hunters on the ground—granted, a hawk wouldn't be able to do a lot against the Mustang, but if this Master had complete control of them, there were things he could do with them. Having them drop rocks on the windshield—or hurl themselves against the windshield in kamikaze attacks.

"Not that I ever heard," Shar assured him. "Hawks can't be forced to course the way that hounds can. Turn a bird loose, however you have coerced it, and it can and will fly away."

One less thing to worry about. "Good."

As the ground gradually leveled, it became easier to drive. The sounds of the Hunt behind them grew ever nearer, as if the Hunters realized that they had the advantage here, and were determined to catch up while they still had that advantage. "What kind of rules are they limited by?" he asked, negotiating the downslope of a hill studded with gemlike boulders. "Can they go faster than a normal horse would?"

"I don't think so," Shar replied after another moment of thought. "The whole point is that the Hunt is their sport, and it wouldn't be sporting if they could just run anything down, would it? The quarry has to have some chance."

"Well, how would they react if the quarry fought back?" he asked. "If we took some of them out before they caught up with us?"

"I don't know. I'm willing to find out, though." He glanced quickly at her, to see that she looked determined and stubborn. "I'll throw everything at them I can think of."

"Take everything you can from the Mach I," he told her. "Try not to erode the shields too much, if you can help it, but drain whatever you need."

But she shook her head. "We need the shields too much, if what I've heard is true. No, I'll be throwing everything I can back there, and most of it won't be offensive." Another glance at her showed she was smiling thinly. "My training is primarily from mother's side; the kitsune way is trickery and illusion. That's

what I'll try first."

The horn-call behind them sounded as if the Hunters were close, very close; perhaps no more than three or four hills away. He made out the calls of individual dogs within the general belling of the pack.

Not good.

"I see them," Shar said, as they topped another hill. Her voice was strained and tight. He glanced into the rearview mirror and caught a glimpse of a darkness, a swiftly moving shadow in the distance, a mob of something that poured over the top of the hill like a dark flood. Something about that shadow sent a chill across his heart, and a touch of frost into his soul.

But beside them were the last of the dead trees, and ahead of them the first of the really large rock formations. This hill was the last bad one; after this, he could take them straight on, and since he knew what they were going into, he could accelerate down the hills to get momentum for the climb.

Shar was twisted around in her seat in a position that couldn't possibly have been comfortable, but she didn't release her safety-belts. Probably a good idea, he decided. I don't know what kind of evasive driving I'm going to have to do.

Tannim dropped the accelerator another half-inch and the Mustang's velocity increased. The white sand went up in a rooster-tail behind them as they put some serious distance between them and their pursuers. The sparkling shapes of the stones blurred past, while the speedometer needle swept toward three digits.

"Tannim, driving like crazy will buy us some time, but it won't stop them. Ten-second quarter-miles won't stop the Wild Hunt."

Tannim grinned. "Here. Hold the wheel. I'll slow 'em down." He rolled down the window on his side, and Shar leaned as far sideways as she could manage with her seat-harness still buckled to grasp the wheel. Tannim let off the throttle, and the Hunt closed on them.

The wind whipped his curly hair around his face as he hung his left arm, still somewhat tattered, out the window. He chewed on his upper lip a moment and sighted along the rearview mirror before turning his head to face the bad-dreams-on-hooves behind them. The Hounds, canine sacks of sharp bone, were solid black with glittering eyes, loping along as fast as greyhounds on a track. The Hunters were all in black—barbarian types in fur and flying capes, crude tunics, but all of it in dead black. They all wore helmets that hid their faces completely, which was fine by Tannim. The horses they rode were also black, but they had fangs instead of horse's teeth. What disturbed Tannim the most right now was that they were close enough he could see such details through the white sand the Mustang was clouding up behind itself!

It was that rooster-tail of sand that had given him this idea, though, so maybe it wasn't all bad. Tannim conjured up one of his planes of force, the same kind he had been using as ramps for the Mach I. He laid it down behind the speeding Mustang, a few feet behind the rear chrome, and dragged it along. The plume of sand grew even taller while Tannim adjusted the angle of it to make it a scoop. He then called another plane into existence. This time it was vertical, and caught the majority of the sand the other one was kicking up.

Then he snapped his fingers and the vertical one dropped back behind them, braced between a monolith of beryllium and a bus-sized lump of coal. He snapped his head around to face forward, grinning like a fool. What are you doing, you idiot? Are you actually showing off? You are! You are! You're showing off for Shar!

"That's one!" he said as he dropped the accelerator pedal again and the engine's rumble went up in pitch. "Now for the clincher—take the wheel again—"

Tannim changed the angle of the trailing plane of force, simultaneously making it both wider and taller. In a few moments more, they had a perfect square of white sand following them as they shot between rows of semiprecious stones the size of student apartments. Tannim laminated a second thin wall of force over the sand, let off the throttle again, and to Shar's obvious amazement, stopped the car.

"What are you doing?" Shar demanded.

"Hang on. You'll see," Tannim said tersely. He unbuckled and stepped out of the car. With a few hand gestures, he slid the upright square of compacted sand to one side, and then split it in half horizontally. He shuffled that half down to ground level and pushed it off to the other side, then placed one slab of white sand on either side of the tire-tracks.

"What are you doing?" Shar asked again, a note of frantic worry in her voice this time.

The sand they had left in the air behind had settled enough that he could see, with disconcerting clarity, that their pursuers had split around the wall he had put up a minute ago. Some had simply punched through it with impunity. It had, after all, just been compacted sand, held together by the vestiges of a walling spell.

The hellish horses were lathered. They had no eyes, only dark holes where the eyes should be. The Master of the Hunt was the only Hunter whose face was visible; he wore an open-faced helm crowned with stag's antlers, and his horse was practically a skeleton. The Master looked like the ultimate predator; there was obviously only one thing for him, and that was the hunt and the kill.

And they were all gaining.

Tannim kept his hand gestures to a minimum, so he wouldn't telegraph to the closing horde what he was up to—by now they must be thinking their prey was exhausted, stopped to make a hopeless last stand.

Well—if that's what they're thinking, I sure hope they're wrong.

Tannim called up three more planes of force, dropped them into place, and dropped back into the driver's seat as fast as he could. His foot was on the accelerator before his door was even closed, and an eyeblink later, the Mustang was moving again. The thickness of the ever-present mist was increasing. Behind them, the Hunters' horn sounded again, audible over the growling engine—

—and was abruptly cut short. Tannim looked in the rearview mirror.

Behind them, the Wild Hunt's dogs and horses were being cut down by the planes of force he had left at knee-height on either side of the upright, double layered, and very rigid walls of force. Horrors of ages past, spectres of ancient armies and spirits of death were being clotheslined at the kneecaps and vaulted, deathless faces first, into the white sand. By a kid from Oklahoma in a fast car.

And beside him, a half-dragon, half-kitsune lady was feverishly concentrating on—something—glowing in her hands.

"This is it!" Shar shouted over the howl of the engine. "This is my trump card! If this one doesn't

work—"

She didn't finish the statement. She didn't have to. They both knew what the outcome would be if the Hunt caught up with them.

The mist was so thick now that Tannim's effectiveness as a driver was cut in half. The rocks weren't spaced apart at predictable intervals in this section, and there was always the chance he might run into one if he wasn't careful. That would bring a swift end to the Hunt, but not the one they wanted.

So now it was up to Shar to shake their followers off the trail.

There were no fireworks this time; Shar simply held something small in her hand, visibly pouring every erg of energy left to her into it. She finally tapped into the resources of the Mach I as well; Tannim sensed more power draining from it into whatever it was she held, as if she had suddenly opened a spigot at full force.

Then she dropped it—whatever it was—out the window. And collapsed into the seat, her face drained and white, her eyes closed.

A flash in his rearview mirror startled him into glancing up, taking his attention off her for a moment. To his amazement, there was another Mustang behind them, with two occupants in the front seats, speeding away at right angles from their own path!

She's built a decoy! But how—

"A hair from me, a hair from you, and a loose screw from the dashboard," she said faintly. "Wrapped up in a swatch of silk. It won't create tire-tracks, but it's made to leave a strong scent, magical and physical. I hope it'll hold them until we pass the wall into the other pocket. The decoy will incinerate in about twelve minutes . . . but by then, our trail should be cold enough that they'll give up."

However she'd done it, it had taken everything she had in her, and then some. It was obvious that she had held nothing in reserve. She lay back in the seat, pale and drained, so tired that only the seatbelt was holding her erect.

So now it was up to him again; he'd bought her the time to create the decoy, now her creation was buying them the time to escape.

Time to find the gap in the wall, and get the heck out of there.

\* \* \*

Tannim waited until the last of the color and turbulence was gone from the mist around them before bringing the Mach I to a halt and turning the engine off. Shar had not moved in all that time; she was as spent as a channel-swimmer or a marathon-runner at the end of the race. She hadn't even noticed that they'd left the realm of the Hunters.

"Are you all right?" he asked, wanting to touch her, but not certain that he dared. As a sort of awkward compromise, he took both of her cold, limp hands in his to warm them.

"Are we there yet?" she replied, without moving or opening her eyes. "Are we on the other side?"

"Yes—and I can't hear the Hunt anymore." That had been a relief; the moment he'd crossed the barrier of turbulence, he'd lost the last sounds of horns and hounds, and they hadn't returned. It looked as if Shar was right; the Hunt couldn't track anything past all that magical confusion. They might not even be able to find their way in it.

"Nor can I, lad," Tom put in from the rear seat. "An' I think I got sharper ears nor ye."

Shar heaved an enormous sigh of relief, and finally opened eyes that mirrored her own complete exhaustion. "I think we've lost them. I didn't dare believe it, but I think we managed to lose them."

"You mean you managed to lose them, clever fox," he said, squeezing her hands. She smiled faintly and squeezed back. "If you hadn't created that decoy, we'd never have gotten away from them."

"There ain't many as escaped the Wild Hunt," Tom Cadge said, with awe and delight. "I didn' think e'en the two o' ye coulda done it!"

"I couldn't have done it," Tannim said flatly. "Not alone. All the fancy driving in the world wasn't going to shake that bunch." He shook his head at her shrug. "No, I know what I'm talking about and—look, Shar, I want you to know something. I know we aren't out of this yet, but—you're free of your debt to me. You've put in more than enough to get us both out of this mess."

At that, a little life and color crept back into her face. "But I haven't gotten you back yet—" she protested. "You were right. I got you into this, and the only way to balance the scales is to get you home again."

"I know," he replied, "but you've done more than you had to. It's not your fault we couldn't go back the same way I came in. So, no matter what else happens, the scales are balanced so far as I'm concerned, all right?"

"If that's the way you want it," she said slowly, "all right. But I'm still going to get you home, and I'm going to get Tom somewhere that will be safe for him."

"I know," he said, letting her hands go, with a smile. "I know. Now, help me find that Gate again, all right?"

\* \* \*

Finding the Gate was a great deal easier than he'd thought it would be; Shar didn't even need to stir herself to help. On this side of the wall, with no wind to disturb the sand and no hills for it to slide down, the tire-tracks were still as plain and as clear as if they'd just driven by a few seconds ago. He simply followed his own trail back to where it ended at the alabaster arch in the midst of the shifting mists.

Now there was only one decision left to make.

"Back to the tundra?" he asked out loud, staring at the translucent rock of the Gate. "Or somewhere else?"

"The only 'else' we have available is that little domain of my father's," Shar replied, sitting up and running her hands through her hair in an obvious effort to revive. "It has to be the tundra. We'll just have to go there and hope that we don't meet up with Madoc."

"And if we do?" he countered. "Shar, if we have a plan in place, we'll be one up on him. If we can move while he's still staring, we have a chance to get away."

She nodded slowly. "You're right. The worst that can happen is that we don't use that plan. Do you have any ideas?"

"Actually, I do." He stretched and popped a couple of vertebrae in his neck. "I think we ought to keep the Gate live behind us. And if we run into Madoc on the tundra, we duck back through to here before he can react. He won't know where we went, so we'll have a little lead time. Then, from here—we go straight to Charcoal's pocket holding."

She stared at him, eyes wide. "You have got to be kidding. That's crazy! Why don't we just stand off in the mist and let them search around, wait until they give up on this destination and then go back to the tundra?"

But he shook his head. "Because Madoc's going to leave someone to guard that Gate on the frozen plain. If we stand off and wait, they can still follow the tire-tracks and find us. But if we go to Charcoal's domain, when they come through here, they just might see the tire-tracks on this side and follow them out across to the other side of the wall. If they do that—they'll run right into the Hunt."

He waited while she absorbed all that and gave it some serious thought—particularly the part about leading Madoc to the Hunters.

"At the worst," he continued, "they'll figure out which setting we used and follow us there. By then, if we haven't gotten into trouble, we'll be following Gates that you know, and we won't be flying blind anymore."

"Those are all good points," she admitted. "And I can't think of a better plan." She ran a hand across her eyes and rubbed her temple wearily. "I hope we don't have to make too many fancy maneuvers, though. I don't have too much left in me."

He knew then exactly how much had been taken out of her by that last heroic effort. She would never have admitted her weakness if she hadn't known there was no energy, no strength in her to call on anymore.

And now he was in the uncomfortable position of trying to decide what was the most risky proposition. Should they stay where they were until Shar recovered a little, taking the chance that the Wild Hunt might find them, or some other, equally nasty inhabitant of this pocket jumped them—or Madoc found them?

Time is running out, either way. We're getting hemmed in.

Or should they go on, and take the chance of running into Madoc with Shar in a dangerously weakened state?

"I wish I knew where Madoc was right now," he muttered, running his finger nervously across his chin.

"If I had my old air elementals, I could tell you," she replied, her eyes growing suspiciously bright and wet. "They used to scout things for me, until Madoc murdered one of them, and the rest of them ran off in terror." She rubbed her hand across her eyes. "My favorite . . ."

He sat down beside her and offered his shoulder. He half expected her to refuse it.

But she didn't. She put her head down on his shoulder and wept silently, tears soaking into his shirt, her whole body shaking with quiet sobs. He held her, sensing that the tears were long overdue.

For the moment, decisions would have to wait.

\* \* \*

Joe tapped quietly on the door of the black-lacquered room, after intercepting FX just before he yanked the doors open with no warning to the occupants.

The door slid aside after a moment's pause. Lady Ako was the one who opened it, but Joe thought that Chinthliss looked a little less out-of-sorts. He still looked worried, but not as annoyed as before.

There was no change in Lady Ako's expression, at least not that Joe could read, but then she surely had a doctorate in inscrutability. He hoped that the two of them had gotten some of their differences ironed out while he and FX had left them alone.

He'd never have admitted it out loud, but he was kind of a romantic, and he had heard the pain in Chinthliss' voice when the dragon had told the story of how he had lost Ako. Maybe if Ako knew that, it might make some difference to her. Maybe if Chinthliss got over some of his attitude problems, she'd be willing to give him another chance.

But Lady Ako's first words had nothing to do with the relationship between herself and Chinthliss. "The computer has a tentative match with some of the things Chinthliss and I have seen while you were gone," she said. "If the match is a true one, it is most imperative that they make some move to get out of there before very long. It is a most dangerous pocket of the Unformed."

"Aren't they all?" Fox asked, as he took his place behind the table.

"Not all pockets are accessible to the Wild Hunt," Lady Ako said shortly.

"What?" Fox yelped, every hair standing on end. Joe blinked in surprise at Fox's reaction. He'd never actually seen anyone or anything but a cat bristle with fear before. It was a very interesting effect; Fox became twice his normal size for a moment, before Lady Ako's soothing hand motions calmed him.

"Tell me we aren't going there," FX begged. "Please, Lady, tell me we aren't going there after them! I'm only a three-tail, I can't take on the Wild Hunt!"

"Not unless we have more than just a 'tentative match' from a collection of silicon chips to go on," Chinthliss replied. "The lady has graciously put one of her best sorcerers at our disposal; when we know where they are, he will give us a Gate that will take us directly to them. But we are not going to waste that advantage until we have no doubts."

"Indeed," Ako added with a decisive nod. "I wish that we could work your Tannim's trick with the chrome circle a second time, but while we are all Underhill, the mere presence of even this much steel—" she tapped the ring with one claw "—changes the effect of our magic. We have not practiced in the presence of Cold Iron as Tannim and Shar have; we do not know how to use the effect."

Joe stared at her as something hit him. Oh, surely the lady had thought of this already! It was so obvious—

Oh, what the heck. "Then why not go up?" he blurted, face and ears reddening as he thought about how stupid he must look. "Why not go to our side of the Hill, where your magic won't be affected as much?"

"Oh, it will still be affected," Ako said with a sigh. "The problem is the magic itself, and not entirely the place where it is cast. Your Tannim knows those effects, we do not. He could compensate for them, but we have never had the need to learn to do so."

"A mistake, and one that I have pointed out to others," Chinthliss rumbled. "No point in rehashing old debates. I—" He broke off, suddenly, and his expression changed. "Ako, the boy is right! I had forgotten that Tannim used the ring to build his Gate! We cannot use the trim-ring to do more than scry here, for a number of reasons—but we can make a Gate out of it on the other side of the Hill because we will make the Gate from it exactly as Tannim did! You've been assuming we would create a new Gate, not that we would use the chrome circle! And it won't matter if the Mustang warps magics where it is, because the trim ring is part of the Mach I! It would matter if we were trying for Tannim himself, say, or Shar, but not if we're linking into the Mustang directly! Magical resonance should . . ."

He went on at some length about "Laws of Magic" and spouting some kind of mathematical equations—Ako replied in the same vein, with great enthusiasm and growing excitement. Within seconds, Joe was hopelessly lost. Fox's gaze went back and forth between the two of them, like a spectator at a tennis match, but Joe couldn't tell if he was actually following the increasingly esoteric conversation or not.

Well, it hardly mattered. Chinthliss thought his idea was going to work, that was the point, and it looked as if he was convincing Lady Ako. Finally she nodded.

"I believe you are right," she said. "And what is more, I believe your logic is absolutely sound, magically and mathematically. There is no need for us to sit here in idleness any longer."

She slid the door to the tiny room open, and the three of them followed her out into the larger room. "Come," she said with an imperious gesture, showing no sign of stiffness after all that sitting in cramped quarters.

Chinthliss winked broadly at Joe and FX behind Lady Ako's back, but followed her with no other comment.

She paused only to shed her fancy outer kimono and collect a belt hung all over with a variety of implements. Beneath the elaborate robe she wore a much more utilitarian outfit, something like the jackets and loose pants that karate students wore, only in a scarlet silk as red as blazing maple leaves in autumn, bound at the waist with a scarlet scarf. She slung the belt over the jacket and pulled it snug.

"So where is this sorcerer you promised us?" Chinthliss asked mildly, as she gestured again that they should follow and headed down a corridor that ended in a door. She waited while Chinthliss got the door, nodded gracefully, and preceded Joe and FX through it. It let out onto a perfectly ordinary sidewalk bordering a paved street in the middle of a well-manicured park of the kind that would surround an English manor-house. Grass as perfect as a carpet of AstroTurf undulated beneath huge oak trees and immaculately groomed bushes, and made plush paths between beds of flowers in full and riotous bloom. Behind them, the building, which Joe knew was huge, was nothing more than a single-storied one-room cottage surrounded by more beds of flowers, picturesque as anything in a fairy tale.

Lady Ako advanced to the street without a single backward glance. "Taxi!" she called, waving her



paw-hand in the air, although Joe hadn't seen a single sign of anything like a cab. But within a few seconds, one appeared—this time it wasn't a cartoonish taxi like the last one, but a perfectly normal London cab.

"Where to, mum?" the driver asked in what was definitely an English accent.

"Grand Central Station," she replied, getting into the front, next to the driver, leaving the rest of them to pile into the rear. It was a bit of a squeeze, with Joe stuck in the middle, but they all made it. The cab smelled pleasantly of leather and metal polish; it made a U-turn and proceeded down the tree-lined avenue at a modest pace. There wasn't any other traffic, and no one on foot, either.

Fortunately, the ride wasn't long. "That's it, up there," Chinthliss said, waving at a building rising above the trees ahead of them. Joe had no clue what the real Grand Central Station looked like, but it probably wasn't anything like this. . . .

Carved of white marble, the place rose several stories tall, covered in arches and staircases—and it made Joe dizzy just to look at it, because it was all so completely wrong. Staircases were at right angles to one another, even running upside-down, arches gave out onto platforms that were at the tops of staircases that nevertheless went up from the platform, even though the platform was already higher than the staircase. . . .

Worse yet, there were people walking all over this thing, upside-down, sideways—though always at the correct angle to the surface they were walking on.

"Don't think about it," FX advised him in a kindly voice. "It's all right, it just isn't operating by the rules you're used to."

If that wasn't the understatement of the century! At least the bottom story looked normal enough as the taxi pulled up to the single entrance. Joe decided that the best thing he could do would be to fix his gaze firmly on the ground in front of him and not look anyplace else.

Lady Ako paid and tipped the driver, and they all piled out of the cab onto the white marble sidewalk. Joe refused to look any higher than the first floor, but that was impressive enough. The whole thing was white marble, and every inch of it was carved with patterns of flying birds that became fish that became birds again, or lizards, or rather bewildered-looking gryphons.

"The sorcerer?" Chinthliss prompted. Lady Ako just smiled.

"I've always said that if you want something done right, you should do it yourself," she replied. "Why should I delegate something this important to someone else?"

"Ah." Chinthliss only nodded. "Hence Grand Central Station."

She shrugged. "It will save me some effort," she replied, as if that answered everything. "The price of four tickets is far, far less than the cost of the safety of my daughter."

Chinthliss only bowed, and gestured to her to lead them on again. She did so, taking them under an archway upheld by two pillars carved with sinuous, intertwined lizards.

Once inside, Joe forgot his resolution to only look down at his feet. He stared upward, gawking. They were inside a single enormous room of white marble that reached into the misty distance. Around the

edge of the room was a ramp spiraling upward until it dwindled far above them into a mere thread. Giving out onto the archway were doors with names carved over them and inlaid with black marble. Joe simply couldn't read most of those names; they weren't lettered with anything he recognized. The words were as foreign as Arabic or Chinese.

People were coming and going from those doors; not many, and not at any regular intervals, but there did appear to be a certain amount of steady traffic.

"Don't worry about those," FX told him, nudging him to get him moving again. "What we want is over there—"

The kitsune pointed to another arch, this one quite plain, but with a ticket booth at one side. Lady Ako was already there, buying tickets, while Chinthliss waited beside her. There was a single word carved above this archway as well: Home.

Home?

"Come on," Fox urged, as the lady turned away from the booth with tickets in her hand.

"What the heck does that mean, `Home'?" Joe asked. "What's going on here?"

"All those doors you see up there are Gates," Fox explained as the two of them hurried to catch up. "You can get here from just about any domain Underhill—this is the other side of the park from the gazebo where we came in. If you don't want to use up your own magic in building a Gate to somewhere, you can always come here and use the public Gates. Underhill couldn't exist without this place, actually, it's sort of the center for everything. This is the most neutral spot in the universe. You could meet your deadliest blood-enemy here, and no matter how much you hated each other, you'd both better smile, nod, and ignore each other. The guardians of this place don't interfere with much, but break the peace, and they'll squash you flat."

FX giggled. "We call 'em Sysops."

"What's that got to do with `Home'?" Joe persisted, as they came up to where Chinthliss and Lady Ako were standing just beneath the archway.

"This is a unique Gate in all of the domains," Ako supplied, handing him a ticket. "It requires an enormous amount of magic to operate—and it will take you home. Wherever your home is. It responds to your desire, to the place you feel is truly home to you—anywhere Underhill, or anywhere on your side of the Hill, from Warsaw, Poland, to Warsaw, Indiana; from Athens, Greece, to Athens, Georgia. For that reason, although the other public Gates here in Grand Central Station are free or of nominal cost to use, use of this Gate is very expensive—but I do not grudge the expense. I will need all my powers once we reach your side of the Hill to build the Gate to reach Shar and Tannim; this will help me save them for that."

"So Joe, it's up to you," Chinthliss said quietly. "We need to get back to the barn, or somewhere near it, so we can use the trim-ring as a Gate." He handed Joe a different ticket from the other three: metallic gold, it felt very much like a very thin sheet of metal, embossed with odd characters. "You're the one with the Master Ticket for this trip; the Home Gate will take its setting from you. Take us home."

Home? For a moment, his mind was a complete blank. He'd never had a home, not really, so how could he take the others there? Not the succession of low-rent apartments that he and his parents had lived in

while his father was working out his Grand Plan. Certainly not the old mansion outside Atlanta. Definitely not the bunkers of the Chosen Ones in Oklahoma. Not even the military school, which was the only place until now where he'd ever felt comfortable. . . .

Until now. Suddenly his thoughts settled. What was wrong with him? Of course he had a home now! Tannim's parents had made that clear, that he was welcome and wanted there. Needed, too, when it came to it; he could pull his own weight there and know he was useful, and be sure of getting thanks afterwards.

No, there was no question of where home was. Not anymore.

"Ready?" Chinthliss asked, looking searchingly into his eyes.

He nodded, confident now, and led the way under the vast, white arch of stone, knowing what he would find at the other end of it.

Home, he thought with a longing, and yet a deep contentment, as he felt that now-familiar disorientation take hold of him.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There was the usual moment when he was blind, deaf, and directionless; this time Joe flexed his knees automatically and stepped forward confidently, walking out of blindness into—

Darkness. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the dark after the dazzling whiteness of Grand Central Station.

Don't panic; we left at night, it should still be night, shouldn't it? How much time had passed while he was Underhill? Several hours, certainly. Should it be dark, then? Shouldn't it be dawn by now? Were they even where they were supposed to be? What if they were in Atlanta, or even the military academy?

Then, to his immense satisfaction, the bulk to his right resolved itself into the Drake house at the end of the driveway, and the flat to the left became the road.

"Good job," came a whisper to his right; Chinthliss, he thought. "Right on target."

"When are we?" FX whispered urgently.

Joe swiveled and reached out involuntarily, only to find that his hand passed right through FX. So they were definitely home, the world he knew, where Fox was nothing but a spirit. When? What does he mean by that?

Chinthliss raised a shadowy arm and a bit of blue light flashed up from his wrist. "Good," he said with satisfaction. "Very good! Only four in the morning, same night that we left."

Another shadow-shape touched his arm, this one slim and graceful. Lady Ako. "The time between Underhill and your world runs at different paces," she offered in low-voiced explanation. "Your sense of place is very strong, and includes a solid feeling for the exact time you came Underhill. Because Underhill

has not been precisely real to you, your sense of place was not influenced by the apparent time you spent there."

If that's supposed to be a simple explanation, I don't want to hear a complicated one! he thought, bewildered. Nevertheless, he bowed his thanks to the Lady without revealing that her explanation left him as baffled as before.

"I'd like to get back to the barn," Chinthliss said, scanning the house and the road quickly. "The shields on it are good ones, and I don't want to leave a live Gate open behind us without shields. The only way we're going to get them out will be if we leave the Gate open at our backs."

"A good point," Ako murmured. "This is your place of expertise, Chinthliss, and I will follow your instructions. I have only visited here on this side of the Hill, and none of those visits was very recent."

"Which way is the barn from here?" Chinthliss asked Joe in an undertone. "I don't remember."

"Not a problem." Joe took the lead with confidence, even in the thick darkness of the last hour before dawn. The others followed, accepting him as the temporary leader.

The Junior Guard had followed him and his orders once—but it had been out of habit to obedience, and not because they were particularly confident in his ability.

But this was different. At this moment, despite anxiety for Tannim and worry about what lay ahead, he was as content as he had ever been. He was trusted for himself, now, and not because he was Brother Joseph's son, or the duly authorized leader of the Junior Guard, or even an officer in the ranks of the Chosen Ones.

It felt good.

He owed this, all of it, to Bob, Al, Tannim, and the other Fairgrove people he hadn't even met yet—a family of his own choosing, if it came right down to it. They'd given him a place where he belonged, where he could find out what he was all about. He owed them for something beyond price, something not too many people ever got, really.

Well, he thought, lengthening his strides when he sensed that the others would be able to keep up with him, in that case, it's time for some payback.

\* \* \*

"I'm sorry," Shar said, wiping her nose on the tissue Tannim offered. Her eyes were sore; her throat and lungs ached. She felt vaguely as if she should have been embarrassed; she'd never broken down like that before in front of anybody, not even her mother. Charcoal, Lady Ako, some of the Unseleighe had seen her anger, her rage, but never her tears. Grief until now had been a private thing.

But she wasn't embarrassed. It had felt so good to lean on someone else, even for just a little—so good to let loose all that grief, all the frustration. So good to be held by someone who wasn't going to expect the very next moment to be a passionless roll in the sack.

"Hey," Tannim said, patting her hand awkwardly, "you were just tired, that's all. You still are. Just wait until we're somewhere safer, and you get a chance to rest; you'll be all right then."

She sniffed and blew her nose, then looked up at him to meet his peculiar, weary, lopsided smile.

He handed her another tissue. "I wish all I did was cry when I get tired. When I'm beat, you can't trust my aim with anything. That's one reason why I don't carry a gun around."

"Really?" she said, seizing the chance to change the subject gratefully. "I can't imagine you being unskilled at anything."

He nodded solemnly. "Honest truth. Scorched one of my own friends with a mage-bolt once during a firefight with the Unseleighe; gave him a reverse Mohawk."

"No!" She giggled as he nodded with a touch of chagrin as well as amusement.

"'Fraid so." He sighed and looked around at the eddying mist outside of the Mustang. "Look, I hate to try and push you, but we really need to make some decisions here. What are you going to set the Gate for? The frozen plain first? Or do we jump right into the fire and try Charcoal—"

Without warning, the Gate flared into life.

Tannim's reactions were faster than she would have believed possible for a mere human. He had the Mustang in reverse and skidding away from the Gate in a flash.

It just was not quite soon enough.

The sand came to life with a roar and rose up in a barrier behind them. It acted as if it was alive, or something was alive and burrowing beneath it, heaving upward in a towering mound with sides too steep for the Mustang to climb. He slammed on the brakes, and spun the wheel to the side, throwing the Mach I into first and accelerating into the mist at right angles away from the brand-new mound, only to find the way barred by something entirely unexpected.

A wall of shadow and dulled silver. A living wall.

A wall with ten talons, each as long as an arm.

He slammed on the brakes, just short of it. Shar stared through the windshield at the two enormous foreclaws, each half as large as the Mustang.

A dragon. . . .

There was only one dragon in all of Underhill that peculiar metallic gray, like polished ash, or matte-finished hematite.

Charcoal.

Father.

She bit back a gasp of fear, and felt a wave of chill wash over her.

Her hands were on the door handle. She tried to take them off and couldn't. They would not obey her.

She found herself opening the door of the passenger's side, entirely against her will; found herself getting

out, standing beside the Mustang, mist eddying around her ankles. Her hands shut the passenger's door as she strove to regain control of them, to no avail. She should have been angry, but all she could feel was rising panic.

Charcoal shares my blood; he must have—the ability to control my body—

More shapes moved in on them, out of the mist: bipedal shapes in black armor, with surcoats and cloaks of midnight black, a dozen or more altogether. They paused in a group for a moment, in complete silence. One of them strode out of the midst of them with his sword drawn and his faceplate up.

Madoc Skean. He looked rather pleased with himself. Bastard. He got Father to track us down!

"Ah, Charcoal," Madoc said with false good humor. "I see you've found them. Now, just hand them over to me, and—"

The dragon coughed, and warm air laden with the scent of aged stone washed over her. He bent his neck down to stare at Madoc, his sulfur-colored eyes wide with amusement. "Hand them over to you? Aren't you getting above yourself, Madoc Skean? It was you who came to me for help, as I recall, and not the opposite." Charcoal's voice boomed overhead, kettledrums and distant thunder, a vibration in the breastbone. "If it had not been for me, you would never have found them, would you? If it had not been for me, you would not have known the Gate into this domain, nor would you have been able to hold it."

Shar found herself free to move again, as Charcoal's attention was momentarily on Madoc, and she backed up, one slow step at a time. So he doesn't control me unless he's concentrating on it! Maybe if she could get a little out of reach, where the mist was thicker, she could make a run for it. And if she broke and ran, that would give Tannim an opening to try something. Her magic was exhausted, but there was still his, and he was no amateur. Tension corded every muscle in her body as she edged past the rear of the Mustang. A little more. A little more. . . .

Madoc's expression changed from genial and self-satisfied to petulant and angry. "I thought we had a bargain, Charcoal," Madoc replied harshly. "You would find them, I would—"

"You would what?" Charcoal laughed so loudly that Shar winced involuntarily. She knew that laugh. Charcoal was sure he held the situation completely under his own control. "Dispose of the human? Punish my daughter? You would presume? I claimed this human as my prey a long time ago, elven fool—and such as you are not fit to polish the talons of one of my kind! However she has offended you, she has previously offended me, and she is mine to deal with, not yours!"

Charcoal's tail lashed, scattering Madoc and his followers, and the barrier of sand collapsed as Madoc took his attention from it. But the overall effect, when Madoc's Faceless Ones gathered around him again, was to put Shar and the Mustang directly between Madoc and Charcoal, with the Faceless Ones between her and freedom. This was not an improvement.

"I will challenge you for them if I must, impertinent lizard!" Madoc shouted, gesturing with his sword. "The human has slain my kin, wrought havoc among my kind! She broke faith with me! She violated the terms of our agreement! I have first claim on her and on him as well!"

"My claim takes precedence over yours, oh cream-faced loon," the dragon retorted, raising his head again. "She broke faith with me long before she broke it with you. In fact, I would say that you owe me for making a separate peace and an alliance with her when you knew that she and I were at odds."

The Faceless Ones were creeping up on Charcoal from behind, working their way across the sand silently, using the mist as cover. Shar wondered if he noticed—

Then his tail lashed again with sudden, deadly purpose. Most of them evaded it, but one did not; the creature was caught across the midsection by twenty feet of scale-covered muscle as big around as the trunk of a tree and sent hurtling, broken-bodied, out into the mist. It did not return. Not surprising; most created creatures disintegrated when damaged beyond repair.

And what will happen to me when I am damaged beyond repair?

"And as for the other, the human, my prey," Charcoal continued, as if nothing had happened, "I will deal with him as I see fit. His very existence is offensive to me, and has been since my rival chose to make a protégé of him."

Tanim opened the driver's-side door and slowly emerged from the Mustang to stand beside it. But Shar got the distinct impression that he had not been forced, as she had been, that he was getting out under his own control.

Tanim, no—don't do anything, don't say anything—

The young mage ran a hand through his tangled mop of hair and looked up at Charcoal with no sign of fear. "Don't you think it's a little early to start calling me 'prey'? I mean, we just met," Tanim said mildly.

Shar stiffened at his casual tone, now more afraid for him than she was for herself. Oh no—no, Tanim, don't provoke him!

Charcoal bent his gaze on the human below him, his eyes glowing with pent-up hatred. "Oh really? Perhaps you need to be reminded of how tiny you are."

Tanim folded his arms across his chest, and casually leaned against the car. "If you're trying to intimidate me, it's not working. I know all the tricks. And size doesn't impress me in the least."

What was he trying to do? Did he have some clever plan to get them both out of this? Shar clenched her fists until her nails cut into the palms of her hands, desperately trying to muster up even the tiniest amount of energy. The sparks of her magic sputtered and died as she tried to fan them into life. Surely he couldn't be counting on her to back him up—he knew she was exhausted!

This was a hazardous gambit Tanim was playing, if what he was doing was trying for time by bluffing—and she didn't think it had a snowball's chance of working.

Charcoal's eyes narrowed. "You are an arrogant fool," he rumbled, his talons flexing in the soft sand as if he longed to sink them into Tanim's body. "As big a fool as that Unseleighe idiot who was hunting you."

But Tanim simply shrugged and leaned a little more against the car, dropping his left hand down behind the open door, paying no attention whatsoever to Shar. "Really? You think so? Then you haven't been paying attention."

His left hand flickered once, quickly, out of Charcoal's line of sight; the keys to the Mustang fell at Shar's feet, the sound of their impact muffled in the soft sand. Charcoal was so busy concentrating on Tanim that he didn't notice.

The dragon's eyes narrowed to mere slits. "You tire me," he hissed. "I believe it is time to squash you, and—"

A whiplash of mage-energy crackled across the distance between Madoc and Charcoal. Shar ducked involuntarily as it arced over her head, and Charcoal's head snapped back from the impact on his muzzle, precisely as if Madoc had slapped him.

"First there are my claims, worm!" Madoc cried, his voice high and tight with anger, his hands glowing with the residual energy of the mage-bolt. "This mortal is mine!"

"Don't you think both your claims are a little premature?"

Shar turned, for the voice had clearly come from behind her. Another figure loomed out of the mist.

Tannim oohed. "The gang's all here."

Loomed was precisely the word; the shape moving through the mist towards them was just a little shorter than Charcoal—although in this mist it was difficult to judge. In the next moment, a blast of wind from a pair of huge, fanning wings blew all the mist away from the immediate area.

It all began to drift back immediately, of course, but not before Chinthliss made an impressive entrance in the wake of the wind.

Shar had never seen Chinthliss in his full draconic splendor before, and she felt her eyes widening with surprise. He stalked onto the sand, bronze scales shimmering subtly as the muscles beneath them moved, head held high on his long, flexible neck, wings half-spread behind him like a golden-bronze cloak. Beside him, the rest of his party looked like dolls—

Dolls? Perhaps that was not the best comparison. Perhaps they were no match for him in size, but that did not mean they were not formidable in their own right.

On Chinthliss' left, and nearest Shar, was the young blond human Tannim had been partnering before Shar kidnapped the Mustang; he had a drawn weapon in his hands, and Shar might have been the only creature present other than Tannim who knew just how deadly that tiny piece of metal really was. Beside him, in full battle arousal, was a three-tailed kitsune, his fox-mask convulsed in a snarl of rage, every hair on end, his paws crackling with mage-energy.

And on Chinthliss' right—

Mother!

Lady Ako was as serene and outwardly unmoved as a statue of a Buddhist nun; only someone who really knew her well would see the anger in her eyes and sense how close she was to the boiling point. And Shar knew that scarlet outfit she wore so regally, that belt with all of its many surprises. Lady Ako had come prepared in her own way for battle.

Tannim hadn't moved a muscle, although both Charcoal and Madoc Skean had backed up and shifted a few involuntary feet. Shar allowed herself to hope, just a little. Charcoal stared at the newcomers with the first signs of surprise Shar had ever seen him display. Shar took advantage of the distractions to bend down and snatch up the keys to the Mustang, knowing what that had cost Tannim—and what it meant to her.



He had sent her a message, as clearly as if he had spoken it to her. If I buy it—it's yours, the car and all the power in it. Everything.

Her heart ached. It wasn't the Mustang that she wanted. . . .

Shar, Tannim, and the Mustang were now the exact middle of a triangle, the points of which were Madoc and his Faceless Ones, Chinthliss and his allies, and Charcoal. Shar was already several feet behind the tail of the Mustang. With the change of position, Madoc was nearest Tannim, Shar nearest Chinthliss, the Mustang between Tannim and Charcoal.

"Chinthlissssss." Charcoal's hiss of recognition was so full of hatred that Shar could taste it. "I might have known you would show up."

The bronze dragon shrugged; an oddly human gesture. "I am not as careless of my protégés as you, it seems. Nor am I inclined to abandon my allies as my whim suits me."

Charcoal ignored the sally and dropped his gaze to Chinthliss' feet. "Ako," he said in a tone that Shar could have sworn was one of reproach—if she hadn't already known that Charcoal was a master of manipulation. He assumed an expression of noble hurt. "Ako, I am surprised to find you with—this brat. I thought you had more dignity and pride than to be taken in by a manipulating charlatan."

Lady Ako looked Charcoal up and down, her face so full of open scorn that even Tom Cadge must sense it. "I do," she replied shortly. "That is why I left you."

Charcoal reared up as if he had been struck. The three-tailed kitsune openly snickered. Chinthliss' mouth widened slightly in a draconic smile.

"I believe," he said genially, "that we have a stalemate, Chinthliss."

"Foolish worms!" Madoc Skean shouted furiously, startling them all. "You are forgetting me!"

He rushed Tannim, sword held high over his head, the blue-black blade alive with crawling actinic-white tendrils of mage-power. But Tannim was not as unready as he had looked—nor as relaxed.

Tannim reached down into the Mustang's front window, and turned with one smooth motion to face Madoc's charge. As Madoc's blade slashed downward toward his head, Tannim brought up both hands with something between them. Madoc's sword met Tannim's red crowbar instead of Tannim's head.

However tempered the elven blade was, it was no match for a solid bar of Cold Iron, doubly-tempered with spells. With a scream that sounded almost human, the blade snapped in half, leaving a charred stump in the hilt in Madoc Skean's hands.

The Unseleighe lord stared at the remains of his weapon for a single stunned second. That was long enough for Tannim to make his countermove.

Showing all the expertise of any battle-honed elven warrior Shar had ever seen, Tannim swung the crowbar in a two-handed slash toward Madoc's head. The elven lord ducked aside at the last moment, and the crowbar only caught his upraised arm.

Sparks flew from Madoc's spell-strengthened armor, and Madoc staggered back a few steps.

But now the fight was no longer one-on-one. The Faceless Ones closed in to come to the aid of their master. Tannim whirled to parry their blades, but there were many of them and only one of him.

Tannim! He could never fend them all off—not without help!

Shar managed to summon up the power for a mage-bolt. Her hands blazed with magical energy; she screamed at the top of her lungs with the pain it cost her, but she blasted the nearest of the Faceless Ones full in the unprotected back, just as Tannim connected with a second, a raking blow straight across the chest with the pointed end of the crowbar.

Both disintegrated in a shower of sparks, empty armor dropping to the sand with a clatter.

Tannim dove through the opening presented by the loss of a faceless warrior, turning the dive into a somersault that brought him up onto his feet much nearer Shar, and outside the circle of Faceless Ones. Out of the corner of her eye, Shar saw that the young human with Chinthliss was trying desperately to find a target, but was clearly afraid of hitting Tannim. Tannim swung on another Faceless One, catching it in the back. Another shower of sparks and tumble of empty armor marked the loss of another of Madoc's creations.

Now it was Madoc's turn again; he charged Tannim with a wild war cry, his hands full of a much cruder weapon than his prized mage-sword. This was an ancient Celtic war-club, a massive piece of lead-weighted wood, previously strapped across his back. Tannim's crowbar was no match for it—and Madoc was a warrior trained since his birth hundreds of years ago in the art of wielding such weapons.

The club came down; Tannim deflected it rather than blocking it, but Madoc recovered swiftly and used the momentum of the deflected swing to come in from the side. Tannim deflected it again, but only partially; he got a glancing blow in the ribs that made him gasp and go double for a moment.

Madoc brought the club around again—

No, you bastard!

Shar's mage-bolt to the side of Madoc's head was weak, but enough to distract him for a moment. She crumpled to her knees, gasping with pain that brought tears to her eyes, but Tannim took advantage of Madoc's distraction to recover, and landed another blow against Madoc, this one a solid hit to the knee with the full weight of the crowbar behind it.

Madoc's leg crumpled and he went down on the other knee, as Tannim shuffled backward, getting out of range of the vicious club.

That gave the young human enough room to begin shooting.

Yes! Shar exulted.

Faceless ones dropped like puppets with cut strings as the human's bullets connected. Joe emptied one clip, and slapped in a second without pausing. He wasn't just a good shot; he was an expert. For every crack of gunfire, another Faceless One fell, until the only set of black armor still moving was the one containing the Unseleighe Lord.

Madoc was in full battle-rage, oblivious to the decimation of his followers. In this state, only his own

chosen target had any place in his maddened mind. In a condition of berserker mindlessness, he felt no pain, and would not notice injuries or even broken bones. He regained his feet and charged again, limping slightly, heading straight for Tannim.

But the young human beside Chinthliss wasn't finished either.

In a flurry of rapid fire, the young man emptied three well-placed torso-shots into Madoc Skean's breastplate.

Madoc's body jerked backward with each of the three shots. Three fist-sized metallic dimples appeared in the carapace of Madoc's armor, where the spent bullets hit metal after passing through breastplate and flesh.

Silence. Shar's ears rang from the noise of the shots.

Madoc dropped down to one knee with a clatter of armor, leaning on the war-club.

Blood poured from every seam, every hole in Madoc's armor, yet the Unseleighe lord somehow remained erect.

The young human ejected the second clip and slapped in a third, leveling the sights on Madoc, although he did not resume firing.

Madoc's helm came up, the eye-slit pointing at Tannim. There was a gurgling sound as Madoc tried to speak, but nothing coherent emerged. Then, like a tree falling in slow motion, he dropped over sideways to land sprawled in an ungainly heap, blood still oozing from his armor.

The young man swiveled instantly to train his sights on Charcoal, but the dragon's attention was not on him, nor on Chinthliss, nor even on Tannim.

Shar met her father's eyes and could not look away from the burning yellow gaze. His eyes grew until they filled her entire field of vision, until she was lost in them, drowning in them, helpless to look elsewhere.

Once again, fear overwhelmed her, chilling her very soul.

She felt her body moving forward, one slow step at a time.

"This is no stalemate," Charcoal thundered, his voice vibrating her bones and shivering along the surface of her skin. "If you try to stop me, you will all suffer. Chinthliss, you are no match for me, and never were. Ako, your powers lie in cunning and in Healing; the lowly three-tail beside you cannot even muster the latter, much less courage. No human born could ever harm me. Even if you should conquer me against all odds, some of you will die, and all of you will suffer. You cannot risk that."

Shar fought Charcoal with every atom of her will, to no avail. Her feet continued to move, dragging reluctantly through the sand, taking her ever nearer to him. She sensed the Mustang within reach; it might as well have been on the other side of the Hill for all the good it did her. She could not even feel her hands clutching the keys: they were completely numb.

"Nevertheless," Charcoal continued maliciously, "I shall grant you this much. You may go; even the human called Tannim. I will permit you to escape this time. But I will have my daughter."

"No!" Ako cried, and Shar bled inside to hear the pain in her voice.

"Yes." Charcoal's icy tone sent a frost of fear down Shar's spine. "She is of my blood; see for yourself how I control her body. As I created her, she is mine, and I will have her."

"You couldn't hold her the last time, Charcoal," Tannim said defiantly. "She isn't yours, she isn't property. She'll slip your leash and run."

But Charcoal laughed, and the sound froze the blood in Shar's veins.

"Not when I am through with her, she will not." The dragon chuckled maliciously. "I shall see to it that there is nothing left in her mind that I have not placed there, no image that I have not approved. This time my dear Shar will be everything a doting and dutiful daughter should be—body, mind, and soul. And the body, mind, and soul will be mine."

She knew he could do it. He had the power to erase everything that she was, and replace it with whatever he wanted.

To unmake her.

No! she cried out in horror, but only in her mind. No!

And her feet stopped moving.

Fear gave her strength she didn't even know she had. Encouraged, she continued to fight: she stared into Charcoal's eyes and forced them away from her, fought against the control of her body until she shook as if she were fevered. Feeling came back to her hands, her arms—

Charcoal's eyes narrowed in anger; his breath escaped in a hiss, and he snapped his jaws together with impatience.

"Do not fight me, girl," he snarled. "Do not fight me, or I shall make your friends suffer."

She ignored his threats, knowing that while she fought his control, he would not be free to turn his attention elsewhere. With a snarl like cloth tearing, he changed his tactics.

She screamed as pain struck her with a thousand fire-tipped lashes, convulsed and dropped to the sand, holding her head in her fisted hands as agony lanced her in both temples.

"Stop it!" cried Ako, in shared agony. Shar saw through eyes blurred with tears of pain that her mother stood as rigid as a stone, her face a mask of anguish. In answer, Charcoal only sent another assault of pain through his daughter.

"I can continue this as long as her mind resists," he said with a laugh that filled her ears and mind, and echoed in her heart. "And you can do nothing to prevent it."

"I'm—not your property!" Shar managed through teeth gritted against the pain.  
"I—will—not—surrender!"

"Then you will suffer," Charcoal replied, and suited his actions to his words. "And when I am finished

with you, if the rest of these fools have not taken advantage of the opportunity to escape, I shall turn my attention to one of them."

A different kind of pain grated on her nerves, racing up her arm from her left palm. She realized that she still held the keys to the Mustang.

And she still held the key to the power in the Mustang.

In the brief interval between waves of excruciating pain, she reached for that power. Held it.

Used it.

She threw up a shield between herself and her father; a crude thing, but strong, and she panted with relief as the next wave of pain broke on it and failed to reach her.

She used the moment of respite to refine it and reinforce it, before he realized what she had done, and that his punishment no longer reached her. Slowly, she got her balance back; slowly she raised her head, defiant once again. She got to her knees, then to her feet, and stood staring at him, daring him to try something new.

Charcoal was clearly taken aback by this development and stared back at her with open astonishment.

"I am not your property, Charcoal," she said in a voice hoarse from screaming. "I am not anyone's property. Anything I owed you before, you lost all right to when you tried to control me."

Charcoal's eyes widened in speculation, and she sensed that he was thinking furiously. "Shar—" he said then, his voice sweetly persuasive and hypnotic, "I don't know what this human has been telling you to turn you against me, but humans are by nature deceitful creatures. Whatever he has promised you, there is no way that he intends to make good on his promise. It is easy for humans to promise more than they can deliver—they never live long enough to be forced to account for those promises! You have not seen as much of the worlds as I have; I have only been trying to protect you from all the lies and trickery that—"

"That you are the master of," Shar snapped, holding her head high. "That always has been your way, hasn't it? When you can't force someone, you hurt them, and when you can't hurt them, you try to manipulate them. It isn't going to work with me."

Charcoal reared up to his full height, and only then was it apparent that he was much larger than Chinthliss. But his voice remained smooth and calm, even though malice underlay it.

"In that case, daughter," he said silkily, "I shall simply have to destroy you, as I destroy any flawed creation."

The fear returned, fourfold, holding her helplessly hostage. Shar sensed him gathering his power, and winced back behind shields she knew were inadequate, waiting helplessly for the blow that would be the last thing she ever felt. She closed her eyes, trying not to show that she was paralyzed with terror.

Any moment.

Her skin crawled as she threw the last of her power into her poor shields.

Now . . . now. . . .

"Stop it!"

The blow did not fall. Shar opened her eyes.

"Stop it, Charcoal," Tannim said wearily, stepping away from the car. "That's enough. Leave them all alone. Leave her alone."

Charcoal turned his burning gaze on the battered young human.

"And why, pray, should I?" he asked.

What is he doing? Shar stared, trying to fathom what new trick he was going to pull. Did he have anything left?

Surely he must—

"Because you don't want her. If you want revenge on Chinthliss, you want me. So take me." He held his arms wide, and her breathing stopped as she realized what he was saying.

"Take me instead. I surrender."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Take me. I surrender," Tannim repeated, dropping the crowbar to the sand with a dull thud as if to emphasize his words. A dispassionate part of his mind noted the shock in Charcoal's eyes with grim amusement. This was the last thing the old lizard had expected.

"An interesting offer," Charcoal replied slowly. "I fail to see what prompts you to assume that I will take it."

"Oh, please, I'm not that dense." He allowed a weary sarcasm to color his words. "Don't you think Shar's already told me why you spent all that time training her? You wanted her to be my opposite, right? The counter-weapon to Chinthliss' little 'Son of Dragons.' That's all you ever wanted her for. Well, here I am; all yours. You won't need her anymore, you make Chinthliss unhappy, you get rid of me, you've got the whole enchilada."

He had known the moment Charcoal started in on Shar that the gray dragon was right; they couldn't fight him. If they did, they'd all get hurt. Probably at least three of them would be killed—Shar definitely, Joe the most likely after her, Fox and himself as a tie for third victim. Joe would die because he had no idea what he was up against, and a fight with Charcoal was no time to learn. Like the new recruits in the trenches, he wouldn't have time to gain the experience he needed to survive.

They couldn't abandon Shar, leave her to be murdered or mind-wiped by her father. He couldn't abandon her. And even if they did abandon Shar to her father like a bunch of cowards, the moment Charcoal finished with her, he'd start on the rest of them anyway.

No matter what happened, Shar would die, physically or mentally, and she didn't deserve any kind of death, much less the kind that Charcoal would give her.

Unless he gave Charcoal what he really wanted.

And if I'm going to die, I'd like it to be keeping my friends safe. Keeping Shar safe.

Right, Tanim. Very brave. Very noble. Very stupid.

What the hell. When we played soldiers, I was always the one who fell on the grenade and got the terrific funeral. Too bad I won't be around to see this one. Damn. Life's been good.

He took a slow step forward, feeling every bruise, and savoring the pain as the last thing he was likely to feel. He was acutely aware of the soft, shifting sand under his shoes, the oddly clean taste to the air, the faint ache where that mist-thing had bitten him. "Here I am," he repeated. "I won't fight you. It won't cost you a thing. Take me."

\* \* \*

Shar could not believe her eyes and ears, as her throat closed, choking back her cry of horror. What was he doing?

He was sacrificing himself, that was what he was doing.

She tried to grab him, to stop him, to counter his offer with one of her own, but she was held frozen, paralyzed. And what could she offer? She had just defied her father—should she make Tanim's offer worthless by surrendering herself now? Charcoal would never take her surrender and let Tanim go. Tanim was right. Charcoal didn't want her and never had; he wanted the human. She had never been more than the means to get Tanim.

Tanim stepped forward again, arms still wide. "Think about it, Charcoal," he said, as calmly as if he was not writing out his own death warrant with every word he spoke. "Think about how much you gain. You make Chinthliss miserable. Since you let Shar loose, you don't make Ako unhappy; in fact, you might even stand a chance of getting her back. Ako doesn't give a damn about me, she only wants her daughter safe, and she knows you won't want her once I'm gone. You get rid of me. As an added bonus to that, there's a bunch of Unseleighe who'll be so happy with you for getting rid of me for them, you'll be able to write your own ticket with them. Madoc Skean wasn't the only Unseleighe lord who wants me dead."

Everyone's attention was on Tanim, so only Shar saw that Thomas Cadge had crept out of the rear seat and was stealing out of the Mustang on all fours. He had taken the bandage off his head, and although she could not see his face from where she stood, he did not appear to be acting in the least blind.

He waited for a moment, crouched behind the shelter of the driver's-side door, then twirled his fingers in a peculiar gesture.

A thick eddy of mist twined up to the door, and he slipped off out of sight under its protective cover.

Shar nearly choked on bitterness, and fury shook her along with her grief. He must have been Charcoal's confederate—he was the one leading Charcoal to us, and here we thought we were trying to save him! I should have thrown him to the Wild Hunt.

If she ever saw his cowardly face again, she would throw him to the Wild Hunt.

"Well, Charcoal?" Tannim waited, now just within Charcoal's reach, the droop of his head and his slumping shoulders reflecting weary resignation. "How about it? Is the offer good enough?"

No— Shar wailed silently. No, Tannim, please—

—don't leave me alone—

Charcoal looked down with smoldering eyes for a long moment at the small human at his feet. Silent tears cut their way down Shar's cheeks, and her heart spasmed with agony.

"Yes," he said at last. "I believe that I shall take advantage of this situation."

He stared down at Tannim for a moment longer; then, before anyone could move or speak, he struck.

He lashed out at Tannim with a foreclaw, all talons extended, striking sideways, like a cat.

Shar reached out—uselessly, with agonizing slowness. Every second became an eternity, enabling her to see the tiniest of details. Charcoal's talons hit Tannim in the chest and bent against his armor, tearing at the remains of his shirt. Only one of the five three-foot-long talons caught and penetrated the armor, but it was enough. It pierced his chest completely, going through the armor, the entire torso, and emerging from the back, a needle-shaft of blood glistening in the light.

Charcoal flexed his talons open, then closed his fist around the body for a moment, as it convulsed in his foreclaw, and he screamed in triumph. Then he flung it contemptuously at Chinthliss' feet.

"Tannim!"

Shar screamed.

Her heart caught fire in mingled pain and anguish, despair and rage, and something broke within her, unleashing a fury she had never known was inside.

She reached for power, found it in her rage and hate.

Charcoal was going to pay in blood. No matter what it cost her.

\* \* \*

Right up until the last moment, Joe was sure that Tannim was going to pull some rabbit out of the hat. Even as the gray dragon lashed out, he was positive Tannim was going to do something clever.

It wasn't until Tannim's broken and bleeding body flew through the air to land at Chinthliss' feet that he understood the truth of the situation.

There had been no way out. Tannim's offer had been genuine. And Charcoal had taken it.

He didn't realize that he was screaming until he ran out of breath; didn't realize he was shooting until the hammer clicked on an empty chamber. He ejected the clip and slapped in another, emptied it, and slapped in the last, tears running down his face and into his open mouth.



Then he paused for a moment, for now Fox was a streak of red lightning, launched into the air, then slashing at Charcoal's muzzle and eyes until Charcoal roared and slapped him down into the sand, where he lay stunned and unmoving.

Lady Ako was on her knees beside Tannim's body; Joe didn't bother to wonder why. Once Fox was out of the line of fire again, he emptied the last round into Charcoal, trying for the eyes.

Just as he dropped the last bullet into the dragon, Shar opened up on him.

She stood in the center of a pillar of white-hot flame, her two hands aimed for the gray dragon, and from those hands she poured the fires of the inferno itself down onto Charcoal. She looked like a living flame-thrower.

That, Charcoal felt.

He screamed and tried to fend the fire off with his foreclaws; the webs of his wings withered in the yellow-green flames and started to crisp around the edges—

Then the fires died, and Shar stood wavering for a moment, then collapsed bonelessly onto the sand.

Charcoal was still standing.

All the damage seemed to be superficial. Joe stared at him, frozen in place, unable to breathe or move, tears still scorching his face.

What does it take to kill this bastard?

Charcoal turned toward Chinthliss, and shook himself once. Flakes of ash fell away from him as he glared at the bronze dragon.

"Now," he snarled. "You die with the human."

Chinthliss gathered himself, preparing to spring at Charcoal's throat. Joe looked frantically for a weapon and saw nothing even remotely useful.

We're all going to die—

A huge shadow uncoiled itself out of the mist behind Charcoal. A dark bronze, fisted foreclaw lashed out of the shadow and slammed into Charcoal's head in a fearsome backhand smack.

The gray dragon rocked back on his heels, as a second bronze dragon, darker and larger than Chinthliss, and faintly striped with deep gold, strode past him across the sand to stand beside them all, facing Charcoal.

"I don't think so," said the newcomer.

"Thomas?" Chinthliss gasped, his fanged mouth gaping open in blank astonishment.

The new dragon grinned toothily. "You haven't been home in ages, Chinthliss. Just keeping up the tradition of bailing you out of trouble, little brother." Thomas turned his attention back to Charcoal.

"You," he said, contempt dripping from his voice. "You may take your miserable carcass out of here and slink back to whatever hole you call home. You may do so only because we have other concerns at the moment, more important than dealing with you."

"And if I don't?" Charcoal hissed.

Chinthliss drew himself up to his full height. "We, my brother and I, will kill you. This I pledge."

Charcoal looked from one to the other and back again, and evidently believed them, for he snarled and limped off into the mist.

Now Joe unfroze; his knees turned to jelly and he sank down on the ground, closing his eyes in despair. Oh, Lord God, what do I tell Tanim's mom and dad? He must have had some kind of premonition this was going to happen—he asked me to take care of them if anything ever happened to him. Now he's gone—oh, God, what do I do now? His shoulders shook with sobs, his throat was tight, and his chest ached as he hugged himself in his grief.

"Boy—" Someone was shaking his shoulder. He looked up, to find an old man—well, older than Chinthliss, anyway—shaking him. "Boy, go help your kitsune friend. Lady Ako needs me to aid her."

He nodded dully, responding to an authority automatically, and stumbled to his feet. He shuffled across the sand to Fox, who was stirring and moaning faintly. Just as he reached the kitsune, Fox opened his eyes and looked up at him, clearly still in a daze. He'd reverted to the semi-human form, the one with James Dean's face.

"Dial nine-one-one, would you?" FX asked weakly.

"Yeah, sure," Joe replied. "Is anything broken? Can you sit up?"

"No. Yes." With Joe's help, Fox managed to get into a sitting position, holding his head with one hand. "Ah, hell. Being physical is not all it's cracked up to be. For every kiss I get when I do this, seems like I catch ten punches."

"Right." Joe had no idea what he meant, and right now, he didn't much give a damn. He hurt too much inside to care about much of anything. All he could think of was the last time he'd seen Tanim, standing beside the Mustang, trading jokes with Chinthliss. . . .

Never again. Never again.

Chinthliss was a few feet away, back in his human form, helping Shar to her feet. The old man and the other dragon were nowhere in sight.

Or was the old man the other dragon?

The young woman leaned heavily on Chinthliss' shoulder, and Joe thought she might be crying, for she hid her face behind the curtain of her hair and her shoulders shook. He was saying something to her that Joe couldn't hear.

Chinthliss led her over to Lady Ako; lacking any other orders, Joe got Fox up and helped him stagger in that direction as well. He averted his eyes as they neared; he just couldn't bear to look at—

"I believe I have him stabilized, with Thomas' help," he heard Ako say in a voice so faint with weariness that it was hardly more than a whisper. "If we can get him to further help quickly, I believe we can pull him through, but he shouldn't be moved without more Healing than we can give him. We are at the end of our strength."

For a moment, the words made no sense to him. Stabilized? Healing? What?

Could she mean Tannim?

He let go of Fox's arm, and stumbled the remaining few steps to where Thomas and Lady Ako knelt on either side of Tannim's body. A body which was breathing, shallowly. There was an awful lot of blood soaking into the sand around him. Although the green, hexagonal-scale armor he must have worn under his shirt gaped open over the chest, there was no huge wound, only a raw red line, the kind you saw on a wound that had just been sutured.

"The talon missed the heart," the old man was saying. "Just. It would seem your protégé's luck is holding."

"How long can you hold him?" Chinthliss asked, as Shar picked up one of Tannim's hands and held it as if she was willing her remaining strength into his body.

"With Thomas' help, an hour, perhaps more." Ako smoothed the hair over Tannim's pale forehead. "I am not sure that anyone will ever be able to heal the damage completely. I fear he will always bear the marks of this encounter. And he may well still be lost to us."

Chinthliss looked straight at Joe. "The Gate to the barn is still open," he said. "If I send you through it with the Mustang, can you get to a phone, call Keighvin Silverhair, and get him to us within an hour?"

Joe had no hesitation. "Yes, sir!" he replied.

"I'll stand watch for trouble," Fox offered. "I've got enough left in me for that."

"I'll hold the temporary Gate for you and Keighvin. It'll be faster if he Gates to the barn, then takes my Gate here. He'll waste time trying to find us otherwise," Chinthliss said. Then he looked at Thomas. "I'm going to want to know everything later," he said firmly. "But now—let's move. Tannim is still near death, and slipping away."

Joe did not need any urging. Shar pressed the keys into his hand, though how she came to have them, he had no idea. He ran for the Mach I, and with Chinthliss leading through the mist, took it to the Gate they'd made of the chrome circle.

This time he drove out of the barn under a dawn sky—and headed straight for the nearest Quik Trip. There was a quarter burning a hole in his pocket.

There were some tense days ahead.

\* \* \*

Reality seemed to float like a feather.

Even now.

Concentration returned to him easier now, despite the fact that his mother was on the phone.

"No, it's all right, Mom, really. Mr. Silver has taken care of everything. Don't worry. Really." Tannim hung up, sighing—carefully, since any movement of his lungs hurt like hell—and Shar took it from him, putting it out of the way in the headboard of The Bed. She handed him a Gatorade and made a little face of apology.

Fox—insubstantial, Tannim assumed, since he was in the real world—perched on the top of Tannim's TV set on the bureau at the foot of The Bed. He shrugged sympathetically, and twitched four tails.

"How are they taking it?" Shar asked. "I hated to make you talk to them, but they've been calling here three times a day, and this was the first time you've been awake enough to deal with them. I've been passing myself off as a private-duty nurse, telling them you've been taking pain-pills and you're sleeping."

He coughed, and a sharp stick stabbed him under the ribs again. "About as well as you'd expect. They hate it when I get hurt."

Shar nodded, her face full of sympathy, and sat crosslegged on the foot of his side of The Bed. He slowly tucked up his feet to make room for her.

At least his legs weren't broken this time.

"Hey," Fox said, "look at it this way. If they'd actually seen you, they'd have been having fits, followed by lots of really expensive therapy."

"He's right. It could be worse," Shar told him. "Joe was very quick to think of a plausible accident, to account for—" She nodded at his chest. "I certainly would never have thought of a runaway glass-truck."

"At least you can tell your mother the truth," he said, just a little bitterly. Then he shook his head and grimaced. "I'm sorry. It's just post-injury depression. I'm a rotten patient." He managed to drag up a little smile for her. "Usually, once Keighvin's Healers get done with me, there isn't anyone here who has to put up with me. That's why I bought this monster bed. As long as I'm not full of IVs, I can pretty much take care of myself if I have to until I'm mobile again."

"Wait. You bought a huge bed to be all alone?" she replied, one eyebrow arching. Fox smirked.

"Let's say it works out that way." He shrugged—carefully. "It's got room for my electronics, anyway."

"I found the fridge and the microwave in the headboard, and all the controls to everything else," she said with a fellow gadget-lover's admiration, "but I was afraid to try any of them; I didn't know what they did and I didn't want to turn you into a sandwich."

"Jeez, or worse," FX put in. "I can just see trying to explain to Lady Ako how come Tannim's laminated!"

Glad for the change of subject, Tannim demonstrated his prize for her. The Bed was the only piece of furniture he'd ever really hung onto through all of his many moves, after he found it in a Goodwill. The years of ordeal-after-injury-after-trauma had all been survived with this one item intact. Though he'd modified it for the electronics, someone somewhere had spent a lot of money designing a bed for a market that didn't exist. Or a market of one, depending upon how you looked at it.

He had awakened more than once in The Bed after one of his close encounters with severe pain—but never after quite such a close encounter with death. His last memory—looking down at his chest, his vision filled with seeing Charcoal's talon sticking into it, deep into it, as everything went red and black—played back. He wasn't certain he really wanted to think about that very hard; but he couldn't help it. If he did think about it, he was going to start shaking, and he was afraid he'd never stop, never have the courage to leave this room again. Still, the sequence of events played through his mind, and he felt his control slipping again. Then his mind cleared and the memory mercifully faded away.

His next clear moment had come a couple of hours ago: waking up in The Bed, and finding Fox on the TV and Shar sitting on the edge, pretending to read, but watching him. That had been enough to drive all other thoughts from his mind, at least temporarily. Then his parents had called, frantic with worry, and some story about a wreck—that he'd gotten hit by an out-of-control glass-truck and had gotten a huge shard of glass in the lung. Joe was with his folks, keeping them calm.

Just like I asked him to. Am I getting prescient?

In a few more days Joe would "fly" here, once the Drakes were sufficiently calmed. Actually, Keighvin was going to send Alinor after him. Joe had said, with a laugh, that Al had orders from Keighvin to "outfit him."

God. Al has great taste, but he's gonna turn the kid into a bigger gadget-hog than me. At least Joe no longer had any problem with accepting Fairgrove's generosity.

He thought he'd come to a few times in between that moment Underhill and now; he had vague memories of Chinthliss and Keighvin hovering over him, of a woman with long red hair and oriental features, of Lidam, one of Keighvin's Healers, of Fox and Shar, and of Thomas Cadge. He did think he remembered waking up in terrible pain several times only to be soothed back into sleep by a gentle hand on his forehead, a hand he associated, for some reason, with Shar. He thought he'd dreamed of voices, of Shar and Fox talking together about him.

And he had a particularly vivid memory of awakening in the middle of the night to see Shar asleep in an exhausted tangle of hair and pillows and a blanket, on the other side of The Bed, her face tear-stained and white with weariness. He would have chalked that up to a hallucination if he hadn't come to this morning to find her here.

This was certainly a new experience; the very first time he'd ever awakened in The Bed after an injury to find that he wasn't alone.

"So, you were starting to explain just what Thomas Cadge has to do with all this when the phone rang," he prompted.

"Yeah, I wanted to hear this, too," FX said with interest.

She thought for a moment, then resumed the interrupted explanation. "Thomas is Chinthliss' older half-brother," she said. "Chinthliss says that while they have the same dragon-father, Thomas' mother was a human, one of the Sidhe fosterlings who was a very powerful Healer. Thomas used to feel very strongly against cross-species romance, partly because of all the trouble he had growing up. So when Chinthliss got involved with my mother, Thomas was against it from the very beginning, and did everything he could to break the romance up."

Tannim shook his head, puzzled. "All right, that much I've got. So why did he get involved now? And what the hell was he doing, pretending to be a crazy old blind guy?"

"That was part of his plan—you see, he got involved because he saw how unhappy Chinthliss was after Mother left him. He says he heard from some of his friends that Mother wasn't exactly full of cheer either, and he—reexamined his feelings." She fell silent for a moment. "He told me after we brought you back here that he felt at least partially responsible for their breakup, because of all the things he'd said to Chinthliss. He decided he was wrong, and he wanted to make it up to them. He loves Chinthliss; all he ever intended to do was to try to protect him from getting hurt. And whether or not he'll admit it, Chinthliss adores him, too."

Tannim nodded; he could understand that. Chinthliss had often remarked on how unfortunate it was that Tannim was an only child, how he missed out on a great deal by not having a brother. Tannim had never known, before now, that it was because Chinthliss himself had a big brother who watched out for him.

"So. Thomas decided that he was going to have to find a very subtle, clever way to get Ako and his brother back together." Shar paused. "He is the reason we used to dream about each other."

Tannim blinked. "W—wait. You mean, since he couldn't get the two of them to talk to each other, he forced the issue by getting the two of us—what would you call it? Curious about each other? Involved?"

Shar shook her head, puzzled. "I'm not quite sure. I think his original intention was just to have us get glimpses of each others' lives, so we'd be sufficiently intrigued to see if we couldn't track each other down. He certainly didn't intend for us to have the kind of dreams we've been having since we discovered the opposite sex!" She laughed then, the first time he'd heard her laugh with no sign of strain in her voice. She had a beautiful laugh. "He was very embarrassed when I came right out, described the dreams, and asked him if he was the cause!"

"I guess the only thing we can blame is our own subconsciouses for that." He chuckled—very carefully, more of a wheeze. Laughing hurt too much. "So, he figured that if we went looking for each other, Ako and Chinthliss would have to go along with it. And if we became friends, Ako and Chinthliss would be forced together, is that it?"

"Pretty much. Then things got out of hand." She licked her lips and stared at the wall for a moment in thought. "He wasn't prepared for Charcoal molding me into your opposite number."

Tannim sipped his Gatorade. "So what did he do?"

"He said he worked with it, keeping an eye on me through my air elementals. He figured he could get things back on track when I broke away from my father, but then I made alliances with the Unseleighe, and that was almost as bad. The last thing he wanted me to do was—well, what I did, kidnapping the Mustang. He knew you were going to come after it as well as I did. That was when he decided he'd better get involved directly, disguised as Thomas Cadge." She shrugged. "He freed the real Thomas Cadge, took his clothes and his cart and all, and folded so many disguise-shields on himself I didn't have a clue, and neither did you. He said he didn't know what he was going to do, he just knew that if he didn't come along, we'd probably get caught again, and Ako and Chinthliss would never reconcile and never forgive him."

"Well, that's where I came in," Fox said lightly. "Shar, since you don't need me to talk to to keep you awake, I've got a date with a pretty lady fox." He winked at Tannim. "Glad I'm seeing you on this side of the spirit-world, buddy."

With a pop, FX vanished, leaving his glowing "FX" hanging in the air for a moment, like the grin on the Cheshire Cat.

"Huh. That's Fox all over. Vixen chasing." He finished the Gatorade and put the empty glass down. "So that's what Thomas Cadge was all about. I wish he'd pulled his rescue a little sooner." He tried to say it lightly, to make a joke out of it, but it came out badly. The implications hung heavily in the air, and he flashed on the talon penetrating his chest again. . . .

He shivered, and caught a pain-filled breath. How long before he'd stop seeing that in instant replay?

Shar bit her lip. "I saw him sneaking out of the car. I thought he was the one who had led Charcoal to us in the first place when I saw that. Then, when I realized what he really was, I was almost as mad at him for not showing up sooner, too. For what it's worth—he demonstrated draconic shape-changing to me, and since he's half-human, it takes a lot longer for him to go from human to dragon than it does to do the reverse. Chinthliss told me that if the dragon is interrupted halfway through, it kills him. He feels really awful, Tanim. As badly as you'd like him to feel, I think. The only way he'd feel worse is if—if you weren't all right."

"Oh." Tanim digested this, and to buy himself a little time to think, picked up the audio controls and triggered the CD player. He didn't remember what he'd left in there, but it would probably help lighten the mood a little—

But the first selection hit him between the eyes and left him stunned. "I'll Find My Way Home," by Jon Anderson and Vangelis.

Home. He'd thought he'd lost his home forever; that he didn't fit in the old one, and hadn't found a new one. Shar had never had one. What was it that Thomas had said—something about not being able to go back to your childhood home because you outgrew it? And that part of being an adult was building your own home?

And building it meant finding someone to share it. Home wasn't really more than a place to live if it meant being alone.

So why did this room feel so much like a home?

"Ah—are Chinthliss and your mother—getting along?" he asked carefully.

She smiled, and it was clear that she approved of what was going on. "As a matter of fact, I think they're doing just fine. Mother confessed that she was stalling him to let me get you out of the mess on my own, but by then, Chinthliss was so grateful for the way she'd spent herself for you that if she'd confessed to murdering his parents and sleeping with Madoc Skean, he'd have forgiven her." Her green eyes softened, and her smile softened with them. "He really cares a great deal for you, you know," she said quietly. "He could be your father; he loves you that much."

Another revelation that left him a little stunned. "I think maybe you're exaggerating a little."

But she shook her head. "No. No, I don't think so. I watched him with you here; I listened to him browbeating the Healers, swearing he'd search through every domain Underhill if he had to, in order to find the best for you. He nearly did that, too—he's going to owe a lot of people a lot of favors for a long, long time."

"Oh, hell," Tanim muttered numbly. "He's never going to forgive me for that—he hates owing people—"

But she leaned over and placed both her hands on his. "He doesn't care. Didn't you hear what FX said? You nearly died, not just Underhill, but three more times after we brought you here."

"I did?" Some of those confused memories began to make appalling sense. . . .

"You have no idea how much damage Charcoal did to you," she said soberly, the color draining from her face. "Mother thought that the talon missed your heart—it didn't. Thank the Ancestors there were Healers here when—" She shook her head. "I can't talk about it. I thought Chinthliss was going to go mad, or I would. Fox was the only one who stayed calm. He was always here, the least powerful and the most hopeful, when we were feeling like hope was lost."

He took a slow, careful breath. "So what's the real damage?" he asked. He didn't want to know—and he did. Hell, he had to know; he was going to have to live with it for the rest of his life.

"The permanent damage is in your left lung and your heart," she said bluntly. "You've lost the bottom lobe of that lung. The rest—broken ribs, torn muscles, internal damage—is either healed or is going to heal." She blinked, and her eyes glistened suspiciously. "You're going to have to be careful. It's always going to hurt when you really exert yourself, like a stitch in the side, only worse. That's the best they could do, and Chinthliss would have sold himself into slavery to make you well."

Then she added in a very quiet voice, "So would I."

There it was, out in the open.

"You were here the whole time?" he asked softly.

She nodded. "I never left. I couldn't. When I thought you were—when Charcoal—" Her voice faltered and died. "Fox kept me company. I never saw much of the lesser kitsune before this. He's a lot deeper than he lets on. He couldn't do anything physical on this side of the Hill, but he watched you for me when I just couldn't keep my eyes open anymore."

So the "memories" were real. . . .

He thought very carefully about his next words, picking them with utter precision before he spoke them. "You're probably the most unique lady I've ever known, Shar. It's kind of funny—Charcoal tried to make you into my opposite, and failed. But you wound up becoming my—complement. Or else I became yours."

She licked her lips nervously and nodded, clearly listening very carefully to what he was saying.

"What I'm trying to say is that we went through a pretty wretched experience together and I think we make a good team." He grinned, just a little. "And, dreams aside, even though we haven't known each other very long, I think we know each other pretty well." His grin faded as he turned his hands over and caught both of hers. "What I'm trying to say is that I would really, really like it, Shar, if you would decide to stay here. With me. Maybe we can make this place into a home together. If you'd do that—every bit of this will have been worth it to me."

She stared at him, and her hands trembled in his. He bit his lip. "The three best words on this earth are 'I



love you.' Would you believe me if I used them now?"

She blinked rapidly, and nodded.

"I love you, Shar," he said softly. "I really do. I gotta be crazy, lady, but I do."

"I—I guess we both are." She smiled tremulously. "What a pair we are! A half-kitsune, half-dragon, and a human racer-mage! If Thomas hadn't changed his mind, he'd be having a litter of kittens. I—" Her voice broke. "Tanim, I love you."

He looked into her eyes for a long time, then gently lifted one hand and kissed the back of it. "I'm afraid that's the best I can manage at the moment—" he said with a rueful chuckle. "You're not getting much of a lover right now."

"You'll just have to make it up to me later," she replied, regaining some of the mischievous sparkle he remembered from dreams. "And you'll have to remember, I am a kitsune—half, anyway. I won't be tied down. I won't be Suzie Homemaker."

"I never thought you would," he replied, with growing content. "There's a lot more to life than picking out drapes."

She looked at him for a long time, a penetrating stare that weighed and measured the truth of everything he had said and done. He just smiled, knowing that she would find he meant exactly what he had said.

Finally, she returned his smile and moved forward, arranging herself very carefully against—not on—his shoulder. He managed to get an arm around her without hurting himself.

He closed his eyes, savoring the moment, and realized that it was this that he had been looking for, without knowing what it was he had been in search of. Somehow, through pain and fear and long loneliness, they had found their way home.

Together.

Tanim held her, lovingly, as they drifted off to sleep. They had a lot of new dreams to catch up on.

**-- Wheels of Fire --**



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Dedicated, with love and gratitude to:  
Mothers—ours and others—  
Who believe, nurture, and forgive just about anything

## CHAPTER ONE

Streamlined shapes of bright metal hurtled across -asphalt, machines that roared, whined and howled, leaving hot air and deafness in their wake. They were without a doubt louder than any dragon Alinor had ever encountered. But instead of scales, these monsters were covered with flashy, bright endorsement decals for Good-year, Pennzoil—

And, since the sport of automotive racing was more expensive with every passing year, such other odd sponsors as pizza and soft drinks.

The cars were no longer just racing machines; now they were, in effect, lightning-fast billboards. While these -machines used many of the products they hawked, Alinor could only marvel at some of the strange connections made between the sport of auto racing and the things humans consumed.

The decals flashing under the sun only emphasized the vehicles' speed; they moved too fast to be *seen*, much less read. As car after car flashed by Alinor's vantage point, he was left with a vague impression of shapes and vivid colors. Presumably commercials had imprinted those shapes and colors in the minds of humans vividly enough that there would be instant recognition.

Alinor marveled at the sheer *power* of these metal beasts. The only other creature that could approach those speeds was an elvensteed, and then only if one wore a car's metallic seeming.

Sun beat down upon the track, numbing the brain, and Alinor yawned, pulling a red SERRA cap tighter over his head. Last night's final preps had taken more out of him than he had anticipated. Even for one of the Folk, two hours of sleep wasn't quite enough. He stretched a little and glanced at his watch; the team had been out here in the pits since just after dawn, and even the workaholics would be wanting to pull the car in and break before too long.

*I hope, anyway,* he thought, combating the sleepglue that formed on the inside of his eyelids. *That break better happen soon, or I'll fall on my nose.*

In spite of his fatigue, he had to grin a little as he looked around, contrasting himself with his surroundings. *Hallet Motor Speedway is not where you'd expect to find one of the Sidhe hanging out. Not even one who's a founding member of the South Eastern Road Racing Association. Strange days, indeed.*

Not that there weren't more elves and mages in the pits and driver's seats back in SERRA territory than anyone could ever have dreamed. Roughly a third had some connection with magic, and there were a few, like young Tanim, who were known for wandering feet. But for the most part, the elven drivers and mechanics of SERRA never left their home states and tracks, much less traveled to the wilds of Oklahoma.

*Quaint little state,* he had thought during the trip in, though "little" referred more to the size of the cities, not the square mileage of this new land. In many ways this was refreshing to one of the Sidhe, seeing so much wilderness with so few humans around to destroy it.

He hadn't had any trouble adjusting; so far as the -natives and pit-crew were concerned, Alinor was just

another mechanic. No weirder than most, since mechs were a breed unto themselves.

*If for some reason I had to hide, this would be the place to come. There's no sign of Unseleighe Sidhe, and I haven't encountered anything hostile. I could set up a woodshop . . . maybe become a raving Baptist out here in God's country; that would really throw any pursuers off.* He shook his head, pushing the dismal mental picture away. *Eck. What a truly frightening thought.*

Some of the Folk, the Low Court elves, *couldn't* go too far outside the influence of their chosen power-nexus, and most of the rest were content with the many challenges on their home ground. But Alinor prided himself on the fact that he was not ordinary in any sense, even by SERRA standards; the only other elven mechanic that could match his skill was Dierdre Brighthair, and she couldn't challenge his mastery of metal-magics. Even Sam Kelly had been impressed by what he could do.

*Of course, I am a few centuries her senior, give or take a few decades. And I've been a mage-smith for a long, long time.*

He wished, though, that he could work some other kinds of magery; a little magic that would loosen Bob's tongue, for instance. Excessive conversation had never been one of the man's character defects, not for as long as Al had known him. *Heknew* Bob was no idiot, that quite a bit must be going on in the young human's mind. The problem was that what actually came out appeared to be carefully edited or just doled out unwillingly and uttered with extreme caution. If Bob had said five words since dawn, Al would be surprised.

Their car banked around a corner and screamed past them, kicking up a brief bow-wave of hot, dry, exhaust-tinged wind, motor howling like a Bane-Sidhe. Then the beast of metal and gasoline dopplered away, swinging around for another lap.

"Hot," said Alinor, strolling the few paces away from the edge of the track to where Bob sat on an oil-drum, his red coverall immaculate, despite the hundreds of adjustments made on "their" engine since it first went out this morning. He leaned up against a tire-barrier and pulled his cap a little lower over his eyes, so that the brim met the top of his Ray-Bans.

"Eyah. It's that," Bob Ferrel replied, without taking his gray eyes off the track or the frown off his lean, weathered face.

Al sighed. Bob was in full laconic Maine-mode. *Like talking to a rock. Actually, I might get better conversation out of a rock.* "Nice track, though."

"Eyah."

Considering that this out-of-the-way track was a lush little gem, that was hardly an adequate reply. *When I know people who would kill to work here. . . .* "Guys back at Fayetteville would be green," he offered.

"Eyah."

*All right, new tactic. See if he's at least listening to me.* Alinor tried the path of absurdity to get something like conversation out of his human partner. "I heard they're going to bring in topless camel races next Saturday."

Now Bob finally turned his head, just barely enough to give Al a hairy eyeball, despite the glasses.

“There’s a ping in number three cylinder I don’t like,” he said sourly. “I want you to look at it when they bring it back in.”

*Blessed Danaa, you might have said something.*

Alinor stiffened and instantly became all business. When Bob said he heard something, a SERRA mech listened to him. Bob, like young Maclyn’s mother Dierdre, could tune an engine by ear. “I can look at it now,” he offered.

“Do that,” Bob said, tersely. “We’ve got a reputation riding on this.”

Bob took that reputation a little more seriously than Al did; after all, a High Court elven-mage like Alinor could conjure anything he wished to out of the molecules of the air and earth around him, just by studying it long enough to “ken” it. Bob, when he wasn’t partaking of elven hospitality, had a living to make. *The old-fashioned way*, he once joked, in a rare instance of humor. And Bob Ferrel had every intention of dying a wealthy man.

*Not that I blame him, Al thought absently. He’s the kind that hates charity.*

The elven mechanic lounged back again, but this time every bit of his concentration was bent on the car careening its way back towards them. Or rather, his attention was bent on what was under the hood; a cast-aluminum engine block of elven make from the “shops” at Fayetteville, another one of the Fairgrove facilities. Al knew this particular block so well he could have duplicated it in an hour. He should; he had kened it himself.

Not that he wanted anyone outside of a select company of SERRA members to know *that*.

He set his mind ranging inside the inferno of the howling motor, wincing away just a little from the few parts of iron (not so dangerous now, but still uncomfortable), winding his probe into cylinder three. He gave brief mental thanks to Tannim for teaching him those human mageries that made it possible for him to probe through and around Cold Iron at all.

In a moment, he had identified the problem. As the bright red car rounded the far turn, he corrected it with a brief surge of magical energies. He pulled his mind out of the engine and looked up as the car roared by the pits.

Bob was smiling as he pushed his own cap onto the back of his head.

“What was it?” the scrawny mechanic asked, running a hand over his sandy hair before replacing the cap.

“Not the cylinder at all,” Al replied. “Piston arm.”

“Ah.” Bob relaxed still further. It hadn’t been a failure of the block, and so he was content. Bob’s design had been the one used as a prototype for this block, and he took design flaws personally.

*Now I’ll get some conversation out of him. . . .* Al waited, and Bob remained happily silent, contemplating the track with a smile instead of a frown.

Al burst out laughing, and Bob favored him with a puzzled stare. “You’re incredible!” he chuckled. “Anyone else would have been throttling me to find out *what* the problem was and *how* I fixed it, when

you know damn good and well the arm's steel and you know we don't handle Cold Iron happily or well. But you, you just *stand* there, and say 'ah.' ”

“You'd tell me when you got ready to,” Bob replied, unbending just enough to give Al a “man, you're crazy” look.

Al shook his head. He was far too used to the volatile temperaments of his hot-blooded Southern compatriots. *Any mech from the Carolinas would have been foaming at the mouth by now and describing my parentage in terms my mother would take extreme exception to.* Not Bob. Not even close. This cold fish from the rocky coast of Maine was just as icy as the elven Nordic-derived “cousins” who'd settled there. About the only thing that got Bob's goat around here was the area itself: landscape and the climate. Al thought the rolling hills were marvelous—and the heat was a nice change from the mountainous country of home. Occasionally the residual magic left over from the times when the Indians flourished here came in handy. Though—in fairness, he wouldn't want to *live* here for very long, even if it was a nice change.

Not Bob. He couldn't wait to get back to “where I don't bake and I don't have to look at so much damned sky.”

“ ‘E's pinin' for the fjords, ’ ” he muttered.

“Eh?” said Bob.

“Never mind. I was just thinking you're a lot like the *liosalfar* that fostered you.”

“Ah,” said Bob, his icy gray eyes softening a great deal. “Good people, your cousins.”

Al sighed. *Another typical understatement.* At the tender age of eight, “Bobby” had been rescued by one of the *alfar* from freezing to death in a blizzard. He had been running away from a father who had nearly beaten him black for failing to come *immediately* when called. It wasn't the first time a beating had occurred, but it was the last.

Acting on a tip from a human, Gundar, Bobby's foster father to be, had put the house under snowy owl surveillance for several weeks, waiting, at times in agony, for the right moment to intervene. The beatings had become more severe with time, coinciding with an increased consumption of straight bourbon whiskey, chased with cheap grocery store beer. Even at that age, little Bobby could see the correlation between Daddy's “joy juice” and being beaten; when Father was on a roaring drunk, Bobby made himself scarce, which further angered the old man.

Granted, the father had been under a severe strain; the fish cannery, which was the town's sole employer, had just closed. Daddy must have suspected something going wrong with the company long before that, for the start of the layoffs had been when the drinking started as well.

Ultimately, though, Bobby neither knew the reasons nor cared about them. All he knew was that Dad was drinking, became a frightening, crazy man when he drank, and Mother was just as afraid of him as Bobby was.

In the end she stopped trying to protect him, instead fleeing for the shelter of her mother's house when Bobby's father became “turned on.” That meant leaving Bobby alone with him, but perhaps she had trusted in the frail hope her husband wouldn't hurt his own child.

The end came on a bitter December night, when Joe Ferrel was at the end of his unemployment benefits, the cannery closed for good, and at the end of the month they'd be out of a home as well when the bank foreclosed on the mortgage—

*But that's no excuse to half-kill your son, Al thought angrily, his blood still running hot at the memory, as would the blood of any of the Fair Folk at the idea of mistreating a child. Good thing we got him out of there when we did. After the foreclosure, there was no telling what would have happened. . . . "Bobby" probably wouldn't have lived through it. How can they act like that? Treating their own offspring like possessions to be used and discarded at their pleasure—*

He forced himself to calm down; most humans loved their children, treated them as any elven parent would. And for those that didn't—well, there were other possibilities, not all within human society.

Like what had happened to Bob. Bob was grown up now, and safe—*had* been safe the moment Gundar found him. The situation had been perfect for a changeling-swap: take the boy and leave a lifeless, frozen simulacrum in his place. Easily done, and the exchange left no traces in the human world, for why run a tissue analysis on a frozen corpse when it was *obvious* why the "boy" had died?

And Bob found a new home with those who loved and cherished children, even those not of their species. A home where the rules were strict, but never arbitrary, and punishment was never meted out in anger. A place where intelligence was encouraged to flower, and where his childish delight in mechanical things was fostered, nurtured and educated, even if the *liosalfar* were sometimes baffled by the direction it took. Clockwork and fine metal-work they understood—but *cars* ?

Still, he was given free rein, though he had been asked to keep his engines of Cold Iron somewhere where they wouldn't cause disruption to fields of magic, and physical pain to his foster relatives.

So things had continued, until as a young man, he eventually got a real job in the human world—for no human could live forever in the elven enclaves. Even Tam Lin had known that. The job had been at a human-owned garage whose proprietor knew about the *liosalfar* and approved of them, an American Indian of full Mohawk blood that considered them just another kind of forest spirit. Soon, thanks to native ability and understanding of physics and mechanics gained from his foster-kin, Bob became the resident automotive wizard.

Things might have rested there, but for Henry Winter-hawk. He *could* have kept Bob ignorant of the existence of SERRA and reaped the benefits of having that kind of genius at his disposal. Instead, he asked Bob to bring his foster father in for a conference about his -future.

Gundar knew all about SERRA, of course, but he had simply never thought of it as a place where Bob could fully realize his abilities. Winterhawk had been a little surprised that the elves knew about the organization, though—he'd thought the magic being practiced down there was entirely human in origin.

*I wish I'd seen both their faces, Al thought with amusement. The Great Stone Face meets Glacier-Cliff, and both of them crack with surprise. Must have been a sight.*

So now Bob was with the Fayetteville shop, and was helping Al baby-sit the first aluminum-block mage-built engine to go into entirely human hands, hands ignorant of its true origin. Keeping the secret under wraps had been a job in itself; more than once Bob had showed ingenuity in the area of creative deception.

Even if you had to pry conversation out of him with a forklift.

“Don’t you ever ask questions?” the Sidhe asked, perplexed. “Not about cars, I mean, about us—*my* foster kids have been eaten up with questions every time they’ve run into a different group of the Folk.”

Bob thawed a little more, and some of his true age of twenty showed through. “You don’t mind? Gundar said not to be a pain in the ass, but you people are *alot* different from the *alfar* .”

Al laughed aloud. “Hell, no, I don’t mind. Not even close. In Outremer we’re Scottish Celts, for the most part, both the human fosterlings and us, and you should know the Scots—if you won’t tell us something on your own, we’ll find it out. That’s why Scots make such good engineers. I’m used to it. Ask away.”

“How did you people ever get involved with racing?” Bob asked. “I know about the Flight; Gundar told me about that—but it seems damned weird to me for you people to leave Europe because of Cold Iron everywhere, then turn around and start racing and building cars.”

Alinor chuckled. “Two reasons, really. First, we’ve *always* measured ourselves against you. I—don’t suppose you’ve studied old ballads and stories, have you?”

Bob shook his head.

“Well if you had, you’d find a lot of them with the same theme—the elf-knight challenges a human to a duel, -either of wits or of swords, the fight goes on for quite some time, the human wins and carries off some sort of prize. Usually gold, sometimes a lover.” *Lost and won a few of those myself, before I got tired of the Game* . “We did that quite a bit, although needless to say, the times when the human *lost* were never recorded in ballads.” Al eased the bill of his cap up with his thumb and gave Bob an ironic look over the rim of his sunglasses.

Bob smiled wryly. “What happened when the human lost?”

“Depends on what he—or she, believe it or not—looked like, what skills they had. Usually they had to serve us a year and a day, human-time. Some of the knightly types with big egos and small brains we taught a little humility to, making them act as servants. Generally we had them get us things we needed, news, new fashions—or we had them find the kids that were being mistreated and tell us who they were.”

Bob’s eyes brightened. “Then what?”

Al shrugged. “Depended on the circumstance. Worst case I ever heard of was a little German town with a real high birthrate. They’d had a witch-scare and killed off all the cats, so the rats had gotten so bad they started biting the kids in the cradles. We stepped in, then, and we got rid of the vermin. But that meant the Black Death missed them entirely.”

“So?” Bob said. “Sounds like a good thing to me—”

“It would have been, except that they exported dyed and woven wool, worked silver and other metals, wine—luxury goods. But after the Death, there weren’t as many people around to buy their exports. Prices dropped. Food was more expensive, without serfs to till the land. Things got bad. Half the youngsters in the place went around with welts and bruises.”

“That sounds familiar—” Bob ventured.



Al snorted. *It should. It's even survived into this day and age.* “Place called Hammerlein. Hamlin, to the -English.”

Bob shot him a glance that said quite clearly that he thought Al was pulling his leg. Al shrugged. “Ask Gundar. His German cousin was the Piper. We ended up with so many fosterlings we had to spread them out over a dozen Underhill kingdoms.”

“Sonuvabitch,” Bob said thoughtfully. “Say, when you Folk went up against humans in combat—wasn’t that a little one-sided?”

“We did have a bit of an edge where armor and practice was concerned,” Al admitted. “But when it came to a duel of swords, humans had an edge too, in that *they* were fighting with Cold Iron.” Al smiled reminiscently. *I can still remember the thrill of evading an edge by the width of a hair.* . . . “Put a kind of savor to it, coming that close to the Death Metal. Well, dueling and challenging people at crossroads went out of fashion for the humans, partially because knights were like Porsches—expensive to maintain.”

Bob laughed. “Eyah. You don’t risk a Porsche in a back-country county-fair drag-race.”

Al nodded. “That was when some of us moved. For a while we played at other things, but the Church was making it hard for us to stay hidden, and it just wasn’t the same—and besides, there was more Cold Iron around with -every passing year. So, in the end, almost all of us moved.”

“The Flight.” Bob cocked his head to one side and wiped a trickle of sweat from his neck. “Then what?”

“We ‘rusticated,’ as my father is fond of saying.” Al sighed. In many ways, those days had been halcyon, if a little boring now and again. “Then the Europeans followed us across the sea, and rather than compete with them, we went into seclusion, at least on the East Coast. Found places we weren’t likely to be bothered. Eventually we set about recreating the Courts in the wilderness.” He looked out over the heat-hazed countryside. “For a long time, this was enough of a challenge. It was like starting over, and for the Indians that lived out here already, well, we fit right into their beliefs. No problem. Before the horses came up from Mexico, our elvensteeds would counterfeit deer, bear, or anything else big enough to carry us; it didn’t matter that deer and bear *wouldn’t* take riders. After all, we were spirits, and our spirit-animal-brothers would do things no ordinary animal would do. For some reason, perhaps that they were closer to natural power than any white man we knew in Europe, picking fights with them just wasn’t any fun. It didn’t feel right. So we cohabitated, in harmony, for a couple centuries.”

Bob gazed at him thoughtfully. Though the human didn’t say anything, Al knew the keen mind was absorbing every-thing he said. The young man was quite interested—probably because he’d only heard the *alfar* side of the story. The Nordic elves never moved from their chosen homes; instead, they had created places where humans passed through without noticing where they were—places that weren’t quite in the “real” world, but weren’t quite Underhill either.

“Then the Europeans caught up with us. At first we sympathized with them, these settlers who were trying to make homes with next to nothing, and certainly *nomagic*, in the wilderness. We had done it ourselves, so we knew it wasn’t easy. But with them came Cold Iron, so we had to keep our distance from them. When their settlements came too close to our groves, we played tricks on them, appearing to them as demons in order to frighten them away.”

Al saw the hint of what might be the edge of a wry grin of amusement. Like a shadow drowned with

sudden light, the hint of a smile faded, replaced with Bob's familiar unreadable expression.

"For a while that kept us entertained. Until they started throwing knives and shooting at us . . . which put an end *to that* silliness. Especially since a lot of their weapons used steel shot as well as lead."

"I can see that," Bob commented. "I'd say Cold Iron in that form would ruin any elf's day—and you people aren't immune to a lead bullet if it's placed right."

Al nodded. "All we could do then was avoid all humans. The Indians were slaughtered, absorbed into the white population, or relocated, so we lost our allies there. As more humans invaded the areas we once inhabited, those Low Court elves unfortunate enough to have located their groves near human cities had serious trouble. The rest of us transported our magic nexuses and Low Court cousins to places even the humans wouldn't want. Isolation, and seclusion, became necessary for us once again. And, once again, we were *bored* silly."

"Bored?" Bob said. "Eyah, I can see that. Live long enough, you do about everything there is to do."

"A hundred times. And get almighty tired of the same faces," Al agreed. "Now the story gets local, though. A few human lifetimes after that, we started seeing those new-fangled horseless carriages around Outremer. And people were *challenging* each other with them." He sighed, remembering his very first look at a moonshiner-turned-race-car, the excitement he'd felt. "Well, what they were doing—races along deserted country roads or on homemade tracks—that was just like the old challenge-at-the-crossroad game, only better, because it was not only involving the skill and wits of the *driver*, it involved the skill and wits of the craftsman. There's only so much you can do to improve armor past a point of refinement, but an *engine*—now, there's another story."

Bob's attention wandered for a moment as their car roared past, then came back to Al. "So your lot began racing? Fairgrove, Outremer, Sunrising, that bunch?"

Al nodded. "I was all for it from the beginning; I was a smith, and I hadn't had anything to do but make pretty toys for, oh, a couple of centuries. Some of the rest wanted to use elvensteeds shape-changed, but the fighters really squashed that idea."

"Wouldn't be fair," Bob said emphatically. "Elvensteed damn near breaks Mach one if it's streamlined enough."

"Exactly. We wanted a challenge, not a diversion. So, we started making copies of cars from materials we *could* handle, learning by trial and error how to strengthen them, and copying *your* technology when it got ahead of ours." Al sent a probe toward the car, but the engine was behaving itself, and he withdrew in satisfaction.

"You wouldn't have dared let people get too close, early on, though," Bob observed. "One look under the hood, and you'd have blown it. So that's why you stuck to club -racing?"

Al nodded, with a little regret. "We still don't dare take too much out of the club." He sighed. "Much as I'd love to pit the Fayetteville crews against the Elliot team, or the Unser or Andretti families, or—well, you've got the picture. Best we can do, Bob, is send you fosterlings out there and take our triumphs vicariously."

"You're here," Bob pointed out.

“I’m one of a few that can be out here,” he said -soberly. “Lots of the Folk can’t even be around the amount of iron that’s at the Fairgrove complex, much less what’s in the real world. I can, though it’s actually easier to handle Cold Iron magically when it’s heated. That’s why I try and do my modifications while the car’s running. Cold Iron poisons us, but like any poison, you can build up a tolerance to it, if you work at it. I worked at it. I still have to wear gloves, and it still gives me feedback through my magic to have to ‘touch’ it, though. And I’d have third-degree burns if I handled it bare-skinned.”

Al held up his gloved hands; the Firestone crew thought he had a petroleum allergy. That was a useful concept, since it would explain away blisters if he accidentally came into contact with the Death Metal.

“We could get only so close to the real cars in the beginning,” he added. “When the manufacturers began using alternative materials—like fiberglass bodies, carbon fiber, aluminum parts—it became that much easier. Some humans despise the concept of the ‘plastic car.’ We’ve been encouraging it for decades!”

“Eyah,” Bob said, laconically. “Never could stand disposable cars myself. I always thought a car should last at least twenty-five years. The next time I see a plastic car I’ll think differently of it.”

Al gloated a little over the “triumph” of getting Bob to speak, with a certain wry irony. *That was actually a stimulating conversation* .

But the respite was brief. The spark of conversation dimmed, and their attentions turned to the track, the team—the unrelenting heat, the hammer of the sun, the fatigue setting over even the best-rested of them. Weariness began to settle in around him again, this time with a vengeance. *How many laps were they going to pull in that car today?* he thought, now with some irritability. *The RV sounds mighty inviting right now* .

He smiled a little at the idea of a Sidhe regarding such a vehicle as *ashelter* . He recalled the time he told Gundar about the RV, the human-made Winnie that was sheathed with the Death Metal. It took some convincing before Gundar finally believed one of the Folk could live in such a thing; Al’s friend had yet to build up a tolerance to Cold Iron and shied away.

Al sat down on a stack of chalkmarked tires, a few feet away from Bob. He needed to keep his distance—not from Bob, but from the rest of the team. The Folk had a high degree of sensitivity to energies not usually discernible by humans. Since Al worked closely with humans, his shields had to be much, much better than any of the Folk who never ventured out of Underhill. He had learned when a youngster that he was unusually sensitive to human emotions. His shields had required some specialized engineering to filter out the more intense or negative feelings generated by many humans in order to be able to work around them. Even Bob had caused him a few problems. He didn’t have to think about the shields much anymore; the whole process of maintaining them was pretty much second-nature. The only time he remembered the network was there was when an intense emotion somehow managed to breach it.

Like—now.

*Now what?* Al thought, becoming aware of a nagging feeling of someone in distress, somewhere outside his shields. He reached inside his overalls and withdrew a small package of Keeblers and starting munching absently, his thoughts drifting beyond his immediate world, seeking the source of emotion. The cookie things helped him concentrate, though he wasn’t sure why. Maybe it was all the sugar.

He bit the head off an annoyingly cheerful vanilla figure and considered: *Something strong enough to*

*leak through my defenses must be hot stuff. Where is it coming from?* He glanced over at Bob, who was apparently studying an interesting oil stain on the track.

*No. It's not him.*

Focusing on a broader area, Alinor reached , touching the members of the immediate crew. Their emotions paralleled the way he was feeling right now: exhaustion and the heartfelt desire to start stacking a few Z's, coupled with a subtle anxiety over their delicate, powerful creation hurtling its human driver around the track. That wasn't what he wanted. Nothing they were feeling would be strong enough to penetrate the shields.

*Too low level. Boy, someone is really hurting out there. Where is he? Or . . . she?*

Now Al felt a definite female flavor to the emotion, though it was overwhelmed by sheer asexual anxiety. *Ah. A clue. That should narrow the field* . He knew it was barely possible this meant there was some danger at the track, perhaps even a serious problem with one of the cars.

*There's always worry, but this is close to hysteria, and we don't need that right now,* he thought, regarding the other racing teams around him. There didn't seem to be anything urgent going on, though some of the teams were noticeably restless, probably from being out here for so long.

*Don't blame them,* Al thought, his search distracted for a moment. *I'm ready to go in, too* .

Although the world of racing remained male-dominated even to this day, a fair number of women were on the teams. But none of them were particularly upset about anything.

Wives? The few who came to the competition at Hallet were not around today. During test lap days there just weren't that many spectators, either local natives or those cheering the teams.

*Odd.* He thought. *Maybe I'm looking in the wrong place. Who said the source had to be on the track?* A barbed wire fence surrounded the entire track, forming a feeble barrier between Hallet and the surrounding Oklahoma territory. Immediately behind them, about a quarter of a mile away, was an ancient homestead, little more refined than a log cabin, that appeared to be as old as the proverbial hills. *There, perhaps?* Intrigued, Al reached toward it, diverting his dwindling supply of -energy towards the house. Immediately his senses were assaulted by—

*A bedroom overflowing with fevered physical activity—brass bedposts pounding like jackhammers against slatted-wood walls pitted and dented by repeated sessions in the warm afternoons and evenings. . . .*

Alinor staggered mentally backward as he recoiled from the emotional violence he had inadvertently witnessed, the steamy interplay in the farmer's bedroom. *Whoops! Lots of intense emotion there, but not quite the kind I was looking for* . He felt as if he had been drenched in a scalding shower, and put up every shield he had to protect himself for a moment.

Bob made no comment.

By degrees his mind gradually recovered from the thorough scorching it had received, and in about fifteen minutes Alinor was able to gather energies around him again, retrieving his scattered pieces of empathy from around the track.

He pulled his act together, took a deep breath and probed again. He sent his thoughts out over a wide area, hoping to pick up the source this way, a method that had proven effective before. The lethargic feelings of the pit crew were again a distraction, especially since they so nearly mirrored his own. *Echo effect*, he thought, shaking his head. *Tends to block what I'm really looking for. Maybe if I got some rest, came after this with a fresh set of eyes . . .*

The moment he considered this, a blast of emotion pierced his reassembled shields once again.

This time he was ready for it; on it as soon as it penetrated. Yes, it was definitely from a female. Now he could sense some other things. The woman was a mother. -Images, riding the current of the high emotion, overwhelmed him with a deep sense of loss. But not a permanent loss—the kind caused by a death or irrevocable separation. *She must be looking for something*, Al decided, wishing his powers would provide him a clearer picture. *Or someone*.

Then as if a warm, stiff breeze had blown over his mind, the final image came into focus. Al leaped to his feet, now in a fully alert, combat-ready stance, even though there was nothing here to fight.

*She's looking for her child. And she thinks he's in danger.*

## CHAPTER TWO

A blistering wind dried the tears burning Cindy Chase's face as she stared at the race cars surging across the black, twisting track. She leaned against a tree in a poor parody of comfort. The oak bark pressed uncomfortably through her blue cotton blouse and into her weary muscles. This tree was the only place she had found that was even -remotely cool. Her forearms, normally not exposed to the sun, were pink, probably burned worse than they looked. This served only to make her more miserable. It had never seemed this hot in Atlanta.

The heat was only one component of her misery. She'd have gladly traded her long, well-worn jeans for a pair of shorts. *Maybe even a miniskirt*, she thought in an attempt to cheer herself. *Then maybe the men would pay a little more attention than they have been*. She had never felt so totally worthless in all her life.

She'd had less than "no" luck since she'd entered the gates of Hallet raceway. Everything she'd tried had come out wrong. It seemed like the people she'd spoken with thought she was asking them for money, not help. Then again, in her rumpled clothing, washed and never ironed, and not her best, she probably looked like a homeless panhandler, or even a drunk. She had never lived out of a suitcase before and had never realized how difficult that could be. For too long she'd taken for granted things like a fully stocked bathroom, an ironing board, walk-in closets filled with clean clothes . . .

. . . and a family.

Cindy hadn't seen her reflection in a few hours, which was just as well. She knew she probably looked like hell. Her makeup had long ago melted in the heat—if she hadn't washed it away with crying.

*Maybe I should go back to the car*, she thought dismally, trying not to look at the little color snapshot

of her son, Jamie, she clutched in her hand. *Nobody here wants to help me. Nobody cares, and they don't even look surprised! It's like little eight-year-old boys disappear all the time in Oklahoma.* She wasn't normally a vengeful person, but she couldn't help wishing some of these snots would get a taste of what it was like to have a child kidnaped by an ex-spouse and dragged halfway across the country.

Reluctantly, her eyes were drawn to the picture. The lower right-hand corner was wearing away where she had been holding it constantly for the past week. The other corners were folded and fraying. For a week a thousand pairs of eyes had stared at this picture, with varying -degrees of interest, or more often, disinterest. A thousand minds had searched memories for a few moments. One by one, they had sadly—or indifferently—shaken their heads: *No, I haven't seen him. Is he your son? Have you tried the police? Are you sure he didn't just wander off?* It was as if they were all thinking: *Daddies don't kidnap their own children. It just doesn't happen. It's just too horrible to imagine .* She wanted to strangle them all.

*Yes, I know. Daddies aren't supposed to kidnap their children, take them across the state line, and hide them from their mothers.*

*But sometimes, they do.*

She had carefully mopped up a tear that had splashed on the picture, leaving behind a barely noticeable spot on the photograph's surface. It was a school portrait taken a year before at Morgan Woods Elementary, when Jamie's hair had been much shorter and their lives were much different; normal, almost. *Before his father joined the cult, anyway. The Chosen Ones. Chosen for what?*

Staring from the picture, Jamie's eyes locked on to hers, pleading, and she knew that she wouldn't be leaving the track just then. She had to keep looking now, on this broiling racetrack, just a little bit longer. As long as there were people to ask on this planet, she'd continue the search.

*Oh, Jamie, damn it, she thought, crying inside. Why did your daddy do this to us?*

A car roared past on the track, jolting her from the quicksand of self-pity she was suffocating herself with. The race reminded her why she had come to this place to look for her son. *In Georgia we used to come to places like these, a racetrack, any racetrack, no matter how small. He loved them all, unknown or famous. It didn't matter if it was paved, or a dirt track where they banged into each other until only one was left running .*

James, senior, had been burdened with many addictions, the one most harmless being race cars. Every weekend, no matter what the weather was like, he would trudge to the races with family in tow; Jamie, too, seemed to have -inherited his father's obsession. Cindy had resented the incessant trips to the races, the constant shouting over the engines, the near incoherent babble of car techese he shared with his son. "Car racing is *ascience* ," he had said, over and over, in the face of her too-obvious disinterest. "And a racer is *ascientist* ."

"So was Dr. Jekyll," Cindy had retorted, failing then to see the eerie foreshadowing of her words. Though at the time she grew weary of the races, she now dreamed of those days and the unity of their family then. *It was a family Donna Reed would have been jealous of. At least that was what I thought. I never looked under the surface of things, never asked questions; just mopped the floors and made the beds and kept everyone fed and happy, she thought miserably. And it was all a lie. I'll be lucky if I ever find my son .*

She'd seen signs of danger, but she was hard-pressed to remember when exactly they had begun. James' drinking, for instance, had increased so gradually that she hadn't even noticed it.

Or, she realized in retrospect, she had chosen *not* to notice.

Then had come the mysterious "bowling tournaments" that took all night, from which James would return with a crazed expression—and a strong odor of Wild Turkey—babbling about bizarre, mystical stuff, a combination of Holy Roller and New Age crystal-crunching. At first she thought the obvious: that he was seeing another woman. Which didn't explain his *increased* sex drive, something he would demonstrate immediately on his return.

That was when she realized something was wrong, but didn't want to admit it. In the beginning she was more afraid of what was going on with him than angry—afraid of the unknown.

The man who James became was not remotely like the man she had married. His behavior just didn't fit into any of her reality scenarios. It was all just too *weird* to understand. The strange books he wouldn't let her see, the things he rattled on about when he came home drunk—it didn't fit any pattern she was familiar with, nothing she'd seen on Sally or Oprah, either.

She gave up on her friends and neighbors when they all carried on about what a good provider James was, and how she should be grateful and turn a blind eye to his "little failings." "Women endure," said her nearest neighbor, who looked like a fifties TV-Mom in apron, pearl earrings and page-boy haircut. "That's what we're put on earth to do."

As things worsened, she lived one day at a time and tried not to think at all. Her son saw that his daddy was not acting normally. She kept thinking it was a phase, like the model-building phase, or the comic-collecting phase. He'd get tired of it and go back to cars, like he always did.

Then came the call from his employer, the owner of an auto parts franchise. James had worked for him as parts counter manager for ten years. That counter had been their version of a wishing well—it was the place where they had met. She had been buying wiper blades, and he'd shown her how to put them on. Fred Hammond, his boss, was calling to see if James had recovered from the surgery, and if so when he would return to work. The place was a shambles; he was sorely missed there.

She had no idea what he was talking about.

Fred explained, in a somewhat mystified tone, that James had taken a leave of absence from his job to go into the hospital for "serious surgery" of an unknown nature. Fred had gone to the hospital the day after the surgery was supposed to take place and, when checking with the information desk, found no record of James' stay, even under every imaginable spelling of "James Chase."

But Cindy knew that James had gotten up at the usual time and, wearing the store's uniform, supposedly went off to work in the pickup. Cindy apologized and said she couldn't imagine what was going on, but she would have him call as soon as possible. She hung up and stared at the telephone for a long, long time.

She remembered that day vividly, and she would always call it "That Day." It was the day her life changed, irrevocably. During a single moment of "That Day" the thin, tenuous walls of denial had crumbled like tissue. It was the day she realized that her husband had gone completely insane. Jamie was

in the backyard when his father returned that night, and for a desperate second she considered sending him to a friend's house in anticipation of a major fight. She decided not to. *I don't know that anything is wrong*, she thought, clinging to the last, disappearing threads of hope. *It could be something like in a movie, could just be a mistake, a misunderstanding. Maybe it was even a crank call. . . .*

He had pulled into the garage, as usual, and he came into the kitchen still wearing the uniform shirt with "James" embroidered over the left pocket. He even complained about what a bad day he'd had at the store, something about an inventory of spark plugs that just didn't jive.

She quickly pulled herself together and gently, like a mother, put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him, once. Her expression must have been strained, she would later think, since a cloud of suspicion darkened his face. He also smelled, no, *stank*, of alcohol, though his motions didn't betray intoxication. He fixed her with a raised eyebrow as Cindy blurted out, "I got a call from your boss today."

"Oh?" he said nonchalantly, as he reached for a beer in the fridge. "What did he want?"

*Damn you, James*, she thought violently. *You're going to make this as difficult as possible, aren't you?* "He wanted to know how the surgery went." She stepped closer, trying to be confrontational, knowing that she was failing. "Actually, I would too. What is he talking about, Jim?"

He said nothing as he started for the dining nook, paused, and retrieved another beer before planting himself firmly in his usual spot at the kitchen table. Timidly, Cindy sat next to him, touching his arm. He pulled away, as if her hand were something distasteful. They sat in silence for several moments, enough time for James to take a few long pulls of beer, as if to bolster his courage.

"I've found the glory of God," he said, and belched at a volume only beer could produce.

"I see," Cindy had replied, though she really didn't. "I thought you were an atheist."

"Not anymore," he said, taking another long drink. "I've seen the light, and the wisdom, of our leader. I haven't been at the store, in, oh, two, three weeks."

"Just like that," she said, starting to get angry. "'I haven't been to the store.'" She couldn't believe it. "So what am I supposed to do now, throw a party? You haven't been to work and that's okay. Am I hearing this right?"

A serene, smug expression creased the intoxicated features. "I didn't say I haven't been going to work. I have been blessed with new work. I work for God now, and we will be provided for."

As if punctuating the sentence, he crumpled the empty can into a little ball, as if it were paper, and expertly tossed it into the kitchen trash, which was overflowing with the crushed cans. Cindy remembered thinking that he crushed his cans like that so that he wouldn't have to empty the trash so often.

Outside, Jamie had climbed into his treehouse, taking potshots at imaginary soldiers with his plastic rifle.

"Come with me tonight," Jim had said suddenly. She jumped at the suddenness and the fierce intensity of his words. He gripped her arm, hard, until it hurt. "Come and meet Brother Joseph at the Praise Meeting tonight. Please. You'll understand everything, then."

Reluctantly, she had nodded. Then she got up and began preparing dinner for that night.



“Jamie is coming, too,” he amended. She had wanted to object then, but saw no way she could get a baby--sitter on such short notice.

“Okay, Jim,” she’d said, pulling a strainer down out of the cabinet. “Whatever you say.”

*For now, she had thought to herself. Until I get a handle on this insanity. Then watch out .*

Now she regretted not paying more attention to the particular brand of psychosis preached that night by Brother Joseph, the leader of the Sacred Heart of the Chosen Ones. Jamie stayed close to her the entire time, apparently sensing something wrong with the situation. They drove for hours, it seemed, far out into the country. James again said little, commenting only on this or that along the road, chewing on his own teeth, biding time. As they came closer to the place of the Praise Meeting, Jim became less talkative. A fog thicker than the alcohol had descended on him, and he stared blankly ahead. Cindy wondered if he wasn’t insane but just *brainwashed*, like in a TV movie. That was something that could be reversed, she hoped, and the more she thought about it, the more the brainwashing theory began to make sense. But it made her even more afraid of what was to come; she wished then that she hadn’t allowed Jamie along.

The little boy had inched closer to his mother in the front seat of the pickup truck. They had turned onto a dirt road and were immediately confronted by two armed men blocking their way. They were wearing berets and camouflage fatigues; their white t-shirts had a heart pierced by two crucifixes, with some slogan in Latin she couldn’t translate. Even with the berets, she could tell they had been shaved bald. They brandished AK-47 machine guns; she knew about the guns from a Clint Eastwood movie she’d seen about the Grenada invasion. The weapon had a distinctive look; banana clips curled from under the stocks. Jim stopped briefly as the men shone blinding flashlights into the truck and quickly inspected the bed, which was empty. With maybe half a dozen words exchanged, the guards had waved them through.

“Those were machine guns, Jim,” she’d observed, -trying to sound casual and not betray the cold fear that had been clenching her stomach. “Are they legal in this state?”

“You’re in God’s state now.”

Jim said nothing more as they drove on.

Cindy had closed her eyes, wondering what the blazes she was getting into.

Finally the truck slowed, and she had opened her eyes. Ahead of them, at the top of a hill, she’d seen a huge mansion, fully lit, with rows of cars and trucks, mostly pickups, parked in front. More men in berets directed them with metal flashlights the size of baseball bats, and one led them to a parking spot. When they got out, Cindy noticed a .45 automatic holstered at his side.

“Brother Jim! Praise the Lord! You’ve brought your family into the blessing of the Heart, God bless,” the soldier had greeted, slapping Jim hard on his back. Jim mumbled something Cindy couldn’t hear, but whatever it was the clownlike grin on the man’s face didn’t waver.

“Momma, I don’t want to go,” Jamie’d said plaintively, pulling back, lagging behind. “They got guns, Momma, ever’where. They’re *real* guns, aren’t they?”

“It’s all right, hon,” Cindy’d said, knowing it was a lie. It felt like she was pulling the words out with pliers, and all the time she had been thinking, *Please God or whatever you are, let us get through this nonsense intact!*

The main sitting room of the huge mansion had been converted into a churchlike sanctuary. Cigarette smoke hung heavily in the air, amid a low rumble of voices. Jim had led them to some empty metal folding chairs on the end of a row, near a wall. There were hundreds of people there; as she glanced around at those nearest, she found an amazing number of them to be normal country folk, many of them elderly couples. Towards the front of the assembly there was an entire section of middle-class yuppies, some drinking designer-bottled spring water. And over to the side she saw what looked like homeless people, dirty, grubby, lugging ragged backpacks. Drinking out of paper bags. Salt of the Earth.

*This guy has all kinds*, Cindy remembered thinking, as they awkwardly made their way to the end of the row. *What is it about him that could make him so appealing to these people? These transients over here, they probably have nowhere else to go. But those guys, up in the front. They look like they just walked off Wall Street. What gives?*

More soldiers stood at attention here, thin, lean men in berets, bald like the guards at the gate. Spaced from each other like stone carvings, about twelve feet apart, they watched those around them with their hands behind their backs. Solemn. Unyielding. At the end of their row was a young man, about eighteen, who still had his short, blond hair. He looked like he had been pumping iron since he was eight. Tattooed clumsily on his forearm was a crooked swastika, the kind of artwork kids did to themselves out of boredom, with needles and ball pen ink. He gazed forward icily, solidly, as if cast in steel, looking like he hadn't blinked in a year.

*I don't like this. I don't like this at all*, Cindy had thought, holding Jamie closer. *And it hasn't even started. This has been one big mistake. I can handle this madness myself, but I should never have brought Jamie into this nest of snakes!*

"James," she'd whispered urgently, tugging at his arm. "I want to leave. Right now! These people are crazy!"

"Just relax," Jim had said, yawning. "It will be so much better if you just relax. You haven't even heard what you came to hear. It really does fall into place. It becomes very clear, once you hear Brother Joseph speak."

At some point during her husband's little rote speech her eyes fell on the stage, and the large emblem on the wall behind it, lit from beneath by candlelight. It was a heart pierced by two crucifixes, the same symbol worn on the shirts of the soldiers around them, and was like no church decoration she had ever seen. It had looked like the kind of "art" that was airbrushed on black velvet and sold at flea markets. Totally tacky.

A hush fell on the crowd and the lights dimmed, ever so subtly. Large, silver collection plates the size of hubcaps were passed around, supervised by the armed men in berets. When one came their way James dropped a crisp, new one hundred dollar bill into the till—one among the dozens there already.

"Jim! What are you *doing*?" she'd gasped, when she saw the money drop. The plate had already passed her, she had realized in frustration, or she would have surreptitiously salvaged it as it went past. Jim said nothing, smiling blandly as the plate continued down the row. People were dropping large bills, multiple bills, watches, jewelry; she watched, stupefied, as the wealth amassed. She sat back in the creaking metal chair and folded her arms, in a mild state of shock. *We don't have that kind of money to give to a bunch of lunatics! Have they drugged him, or is he just suddenly retarded?*

"Only tithing members of the Sacred Heart will be saved. Is this your first meeting?" an elderly woman

-behind her had asked. Cindy made a point of ignoring her, and the woman sniffed loudly in rebuttal.

“Touchy, isn’t she?” the women said behind her.

James laughed in a goofy snort. At what, Cindy had no idea.

Beside her, Jamie whimpered. “Momma, I want to go home,” he said. “This place feels icky.”

“It feels icky to me, too,” she’d whispered in his right ear. “It will be over with soon.”

“Hey, what’s wrong, buckaroo?” the blond kid said, kneeling down next to Jamie. “This your first time here?”

*It’s his first and his last*, she wanted to scream, but as the boy knelt down, she noticed the assault rifle strapped to his back. She didn’t want to argue with firearms. Jamie’s sudden receptiveness to the boy didn’t help either. Her son traced a figure eight over the crude swastika on the boy’s forearm, apparently fascinated by it.

“It doesn’t come off,” Jamie said. “What is it?”

“It’s a tattoo,” the boy said, sounding friendly in spite of the weird trappings. “And it’s our salvation.” He looked up, meeting Cindy’s stare with his soft, blue eyes, a disarming expression that somehow took the edge off the evil she was beginning to feel from him. He smiled at Cindy boyishly, and from his back pocket he pulled out a Tootsie Pop and gave it to Jamie, who attacked and devoured it hungrily. *He’s almost normal—at least on the surface. But he has Nazi crosses tattooed on his arm and calls them “salvation.” A boy Jamie could look like someday*, she thought, in agony. *Why did I have to bring him to this godawful place!*

The lights dimmed further, and from somewhere -appeared the minister of the church. *Brother Joseph, didn’t Jim say?* No less than four armed soldiers escorted him to the podium, knelt, and when Brother Joseph dismissed them, took their places at the four corners of the stage, glaring at the audience. The quiet was absolute. Brother Joseph had peered into the audience, his burning eyes sweeping the crowd like the twin mouths of a double-barreled shotgun. In the utter stillness, his eyes tracked through the different faces and settled on Cindy. He smiled briefly then, and continued his inspection, lord of all he surveyed. Cindy had thought she was going to collapse when their eyes locked.

*Jesus!* Cindy thought in dismay. *Those eyes.*

*He really thinks he’s God’s own Gift. And my crazy husband believes him.*

“Momma,” Jamie whispered. “Can I have a tattoo like his when we get home?”

“Shhhhhh!” the woman behind them admonished. “Quiet. Brother Joseph is about to *speak* .”

What happened for the next three hours was a vague blur of hate images, from which she retained little. It wasn’t a blackout, or even a full lapse of memory. She retained pieces, fragments, of the “sermon,” and she wasn’t certain if there was any coherent flow to begin with. Brother Joseph vomited a vile concoction of religion and white male supremacy that would have made a Klansman blush. That was what she remembered, anyway. The topic wavered from fundamentalist Southern Baptist preachings, to New Age channeling, to an extended foray into Neo-Nazism, sprinkled liberally with passages Cindy remembered from high school history class—*Mein Kampf*. The audience sat, enthralled; it wasn’t the

sermon that scared her so much as the unthinkable acceptance of the congregation. Brother Joseph could have said absolutely anything, she suspected, and they would have bought it all without question.

After the sermon Cindy had made it clear to her husband she wasn't *about* to stay around and socialize, she wanted *out now*, and when she reminded Jim that she had her own set of truck keys he finally relented and, not particularly angry at having to leave, drove them home. In silence.

The next day, a Saturday, Cindy tried to broach the subject of his employment and, specifically, his income. James brushed her aside, saying that she would never understand, and asked her if she had any Jewish ancestors. She did, but didn't think it wise to tell him. He went out and spent the rest of the day playing with his son, and acted as if she didn't exist. On Sunday, he left for somewhere he didn't specify and returned late that night, almost too drunk to walk, and fell into bed.

On Monday James continued to live the lie, getting up at six and dutifully donning his uniform. He mentioned the problem with the spark plugs and other things she knew he would never deal with that day, and after he was gone Cindy didn't answer the phone, for fear it was his boss. She sent Jamie off to school, the only normal thing to happen in her life, the only thing that made *sense*.

The next day was the same, and the day after. She paid the bills out of the dwindling bank account, made sure Jamie did his homework, and watched her husband deteriorate. Cindy also began contemplating divorce, but taking the first tentative step towards breaking up, like calling a lawyer, was too terrifying for words. It was easier to live the lie along with her husband and hope they would live happily ever after.

Weeks passed, and James Chase began coming home later and later in the evening. For a while she kept track of the odometer, and going by the miles stacking up on the pickup, determined he was probably going out to that mansion where the "Praise Meeting" was held. If not that, then God only knew where he'd been. Up and on the job for Brother Joseph, every day, driving all over on errands for the church, the Sacred Part of the Frozen Ones or some such nonsense. She began to withdraw herself, never going out except to buy food, and that the absolutely cheapest she could find. She prayed the checks wouldn't bounce after every trip.

Then finally Jim stayed out overnight, then two, then three nights in a row. Cindy wasn't terribly surprised; what surprised her was that he returned sober once or twice. Sober, yet untalkative. Whatever he was so fervently pursuing during the day, whatever his life had become as a new member of the Sacred Heart of the Chosen Ones, it wasn't his wife's place to know.

She had taken to sleeping in a bit more each day as her frustration built. She got up long enough to send Jamie off to school, then returned to bed. Sleep afforded her one way to escape the craziness the church had conjured.

She went back to answering the phone and talking to the neighbors, trying to hide the pain with makeup and forced smiles. Then one particular morning she answered the phone, after James had left for whatever it was he did during the day. It was Jamie's school; with a start she realized she hadn't seen him off that morning. The principal's secretary wanted to know if everything was all right and reminded Cindy that calling the parents was procedure when a child didn't show up for class. Uncertain why she was covering for him, she explained that he was home ill and that she had simply forgotten to notify the school. She hung up and began running through the house, calling Jamie's name, looking for some clue as to his whereabouts.

Just when she thought she was going to lose her mind she found the note taped on the refrigerator door. It was in James' handwriting and it did ease her mind—for a moment. It simply told her not to worry, that he had taken Jamie with him for the day, though it didn't specify exactly why.

Even though she didn't suspect kidnaping then, the note opened up a Pandora's box of ominous possibilities. But before she could think coherently enough to worry about what might be happening to her son, the phone rang again. The bank was calling to tell her that five checks had bounced, and that both the share and draft accounts had been closed weeks before by James Chase.

She hung up, numb with shock.

She ran for the bedroom. A brief, hysterical inspection showed that no clothes had been taken, at least that she could tell. His shaver, shotgun, a World War II Luger, a Craftsman socket set, were all still in the house, and wouldn't be if James had really left. Not wanting to even think about the notion, she decided that it was too crazy even for James. She spent an anxious day cleaning, releasing nervous energy, venting her frustration. Around noon, she had an anxiety attack, and for ten minutes she couldn't take a breath.

*Jamie is with those lunatics*, she thought, repeatedly. She finally calmed herself enough to breathe, but she knew she could not go on like this, day after day, wondering what twist her husband's insanity would take *this* time.

Late that afternoon the pickup pulled into the garage, its bumper tapping the back wall hard enough to make an audible *crack*. Cindy heard her son crying. She ran to find Jamie in tears, her husband drunk, and a thousand unanswered questions staring her in the face.

"Oh, Jamie, *Jamie*, what's wrong?" She'd held him, getting no sense out of him. "What *happened*? Did your daddy do something to you? Did Daddy hurt you?"

She looked around furtively to see if Daddy was around and within earshot; inside the kitchen, she heard the hiss of a beer tab.

"No. Wasn't Daddy," Jamie blurted, through the tears. "It was Br . . . Brother Joseph." He sniffled, glancing over her shoulder, apparently looking for James. "*Please*, Mommy, don't let him take me back there ever again!"

She held him closer, forcing back some fear and trembling of her own.

James stayed long enough to finish off the last of the beer and left alone with vague promises to return soon. As soon as he was gone she called a women's shelter and briefly explained her situation. Soon a motherly, older woman arrived to pick them up. At the shelter, a young graduate lawyer eager to log some court experience was waiting for them. He took down the essential information and assured her that she had a good case, and would *probably* get full custody. Cindy had a problem with that word, *probably*, but got on with the business of settling in at the shelter and quizzed Jamie on what exactly had happened at the Chosen Ones' church.

On a bed in a common room they shared with several other women and their children, Jamie sat and tried to tell his mother what had taken place in the church, describing an odd ritual on the stage in the meeting hall, in which he was the central figure. Twice her son tried to tell her what happened, getting to a certain point in the explanation, whereupon he would burst into hysterical sobs.

*What happened back there?* she wondered, half sick with fear that they had done something truly evil and harmful, emotionally, to her son. Divorce seemed to be the only answer, if she was going to protect her child.

Her uncertainties hardened into resolve. *Never again. That psycho is never coming near my son again!*

She steeled herself for a fight, for some attempt by James to counter her actions—but nothing happened. The court proceedings went smoothly and without incident. There were twenty or thirty other child abuse cases pending against the cult in question, some of which the police were already investigating. The judge expressed the belief that Cindy had tolerated far more than she should have, and if James Chase had bothered to show up for the hearings he would have no doubt received a severe tongue-lashing. During the week preceding the hearing Cindy returned to the house with two large men from the shelter and retrieved a few missed items, and while there she discovered that her husband had apparently left with his clothes, the shotgun, the Luger and the tools. Though the lawyer had papers served to James at the house, it now appeared he had left for good. Taking no chances, and at the strong urging of her companions, veterans of situations like these, she remained at the shelter until after the hearing. With the help of the shelter, she got a part-time job at Burger King. The judge granted Cindy Chase full custody of her son, ownership of the house, and declared their marriage null and void. Finally.

She had thought it was over, that they were safe. That *Jamie* was safe.

Then, on Friday of the fourth week following the -divorce, Cindy waited on the porch for Jamie's school-bus. Just like always.

The bus squeaked to a halt, disgorged its screaming passengers, and shuddered away. There was no Jamie.

Cindy rushed inside and called the school. The -teachers told her that Jim had taken him out of class an hour before the end of the day.

Hysterical, she notified the police, but the response was underwhelming. After an hour an officer showed up at the school to take a report. If the school's principal and Jamie's teacher hadn't stayed to comfort her, she would have gone over the edge right there. There wasn't a whole lot they could do, the officer said . . . there were so many missing children, so few personnel, so little budget. She -explained that this was *different* , that she *knew* her husband had taken him, there were *witnesses* for crissakes, and the cult was *crazy* , they had to do *something* , right *now* before they . . .

The officer had sadly shaken his head and told her they would do what they could. From his tone, however, it sounded like it wouldn't be much.

From memory Cindy drove to the cult's mansion, where she had been to her first Praise Meeting. She took several wrong turns, but after hours of relentless driving found the huge house. Realty signs in the front lawn declared the property for sale. The house, itself, was empty. Cleaned out.

The police, as she feared, weren't much help. She found herself in the position of thousands of other parents whose ex-spouses had kidnaped their children. Since she couldn't tell them where the cult could have gone, their options were limited. Through the parents of other child abuse victims, she learned that other members of the Chosen Ones had also vanished. Bank accounts and personal property, mostly cars and trucks, went with them. It was clear to Cindy that the cult had staged a mass exodus from

Georgia. To where, she had no idea.

The only thing of value that James had left behind was the house. That, Cindy surmised, was only because it was too heavy to take with him. She needed money, lots of it, to search for her son. She double-mortgaged the house and sold everything out of it she could, all of the appliances and Jim's stereo, which miraculously had been left behind. With a certain wry satisfaction she sold her engagement and wedding rings to a pawnshop and used the money in part to pay for the divorce. Robert Weil, "Private Investigator" suggested they first begin by putting Jamie's -picture on milk cartons. The Missing Children's advocacy group was very helpful.

The rest of her time and energy she spent keeping herself together. There were any number of times that she could have slipped over the edge and gone totally bonkers, and often she wondered if she had. Occasionally she slept, but most nights she did not. Her employers were sympathetic at first, but as the weeks passed, so did the sympathy. She began receiving warning "talks," suggestions by her male boss that she "pull herself -together" and "let the professionals handle it." She sensed an unspoken feeling that her boss felt she was to blame for the entire mess. . . .

Robert Weil, "Private Investigator," turned out to be next to worthless to her search. He just wasn't *doing* anything, so she fired him. Then the leads began to trickle in from the Center for Missing and Exploited Children, information that was the direct result of the milk carton photographs. From Atlanta they began to track him west, from three different sightings a day apart. She stocked up the Celica with what she could from the house, quit her job (just before they were about to fire her, she suspected), and left, taking up the trail herself.

The money disappeared quickly. She checked in periodically with the Missing Children's group, and finally learned that the two had actually been spotted by several witnesses in northeastern Oklahoma. Driving all night, she arrived in Tulsa around daybreak, and after she caught a few hours of sleep she asked the desk clerk if he knew of any race tracks in the area. Not even involvement in the cult had stopped Jim's addiction to racing and cars before the divorce. The only track the clerk was aware of was Hallet; he knew there were others, he just didn't know where. She made plans to search out each one, provided her money held out.

Right now it looked like she needed a miracle. *I guess nobody's handing out miracles today.*

She stifled a sob, put the picture away in her purse, and started looking for a restroom. *If I'm going to get anywhere with this I've got to make myself presentable. A place to freshen up, maybe. I'm not going all the way back to the motel. I don't have money to stay there much longer, anyway .* She trudged towards what looked like facilities and fought back a wave of dizziness. The heat—

Her vision blurred, seeing blue sky, with the kind face of an aging man in the center, like a Victorian picture of a saint. She blinked again.

"Are you all right, miss?" the man said in a rusty voice. "You keeled plumb over."

She was lying on her back in the grass, and there was a sore place on the back of her head. The man helped her to sit up a little; from his blue coveralls she assumed he was connected to the track somehow. He held a cup of lemonade to her lips, which she gulped gratefully.

"Whoa, now, hold on! Not so fast. You'll make yourself sick again," the man said. Around them, an

unwanted audience of gawkers slowly formed in the thick sludge of the heat.

“What happened?” she asked stupidly, feeling vulnerable in her supine position, the words just coming out automatically. She *knew* what had happened. Her brain just wasn’t working properly yet.

“Well, you fainted, little missy! Would you like me to call an ambulance?”

“No!” she exclaimed, not out of fear for doctors, but out of concern for how much it would cost.

“Well, okay then, if you think you’re all right,” he said, still sounding concerned. “You know, we have a first aid tent near the concession stand,” the man said. “If you’re suffering from heatstroke the thing to do would be to get over there.”

“No, I’m fine, really,” she said, and she meant it. With the cooling lemonade her energy returned quickly. “I think I’ll sit here a while and drink this, if that’s okay with you. I guess the heat just got to me.”

“Of course it’s okay. If you want a refill, just holler,” the man said, winking in a friendly way. There wasn’t anything sexual about it, something for which she was glad. *He reminds me of my father, when he was alive*, Cindy thought, looking at the deep wrinkles in the man’s face, which seemed to be made of stone. When he winked, the wrinkles fanned out over his face like cracks in a windshield. He leaned closer, looking like he thought he might have recognized her. “I’ve never seen you at this track before, have I?”

“Well, I’ve been here all day,” she said, trying and failing to keep the frustration out of her voice. “Maybe you can help me,” she added, feeling a slight surge of hope. Cindy pulled the photograph of her child out of her purse and handed it to the man. “I’m here looking for my son. His name is Jamie. . . .”

She hadn’t intended to tell him her life’s story, but he seemed content to sit and listen to her, shaking his head and *tsk* ing at the right moments. *Finally*, she thought, as she prattled on about her husband, the cult, and her missing son, *somebody who’ll listen to me!*

Finally the old man nodded. “Miss, you ain’t had nothin’ but bad luck, that’s for sure. Sounds to me like this fella is a pretty hard-core racing fan. And *hard-core* fans tend to hang out with the pros in the pits. I haven’t seen your son, but maybe someone else has. Would ya like to come have a look see?”

Without hesitation she accepted, and soon found herself waiting for a break in the race, so that they could cross over to the pits. When the break came, another wave of heat came over her, and she thought with a touch of panic that she was going to pass out.

*Not again*, she thought, and willed her strength back.

The moment passed, without her new friend noticing. He escorted her—with an odd touch of gallantry—past a short cinderblock wall where a man waited, watching who came in. One nod from her heaven-sent escort allowed them through.

When she entered the pits her senses were assaulted with the sights and smells of racing. Everywhere she walked, she stepped over oil-marked concrete, bits and pieces of race cars lay strewn everywhere, usually in the form of washers, bolts and brackets—she thought irresistibly of a dinosaur graveyard, strewn with bones.

A blast of something aromatic and potent, which she identified a moment later as high-octane racing fuel,



threatened another fainting spell.

Too overwhelmed by sight and sound, smell and vibration, she stood, trapped like an animal caught in the headlights.

Then the sound, at least, stopped. In the temporary absence of engine roar, she found her ears ringing, and when she turned to see where her friend had gone she saw him rushing off to a race car that had just pulled in. *I guess I'm on my own now* .

The people she saw were either frantically going somewhere in a huge hurry, or doing nothing at all, some even looking bored. It was this latter group that she tried to talk to, praying under her breath that she wouldn't get in the way. She hoped she knew enough from her racing experiences with her husband to tell when a crew was seconds away from swarming over a car, or when they were just trying to kill time.

She approached one team, who seemed more intent on barbecuing ribs than changing tires on a race car. Men stood around a portable grill, holding beer cans in beefy fists, and stepping back when the grease flared. Some of them were apparently drunk, and while this reminded her uncomfortably of her ex-husband, she went up to one anyway.

"Hi, I'm looking for my son, this is a picture," she said, holding the photograph out. "Have you seen him?"

The man's features softened briefly, but when he saw the picture, they hardened. He said curtly, "No, I haven't," and looked at her as if she didn't belong there.

Another, younger man, who might have even been the driver, smiled broadly and shook his head, and then promptly ignored her presence, as if she had faded into invisibility. She asked the next man, and the next, feeling like a scratched record.

*No, we haven't seen your son. Are you sure you're in the right place?*

Then, one large man staggered over to join the group, a hulk with a barrel-chested torso that could have stored a beer keg, and probably had.

"I might have," the big man said, belching loudly. *He's so much like Jim* , she thought, wondering if this man might even know him. "But then again, I might *not* . What's the story, lady?"

"He's my son," she repeated. *Does he know something?* she thought madly, hoping that maybe he did. *Has he seen Jamie or is he just playing with me?* "My husband, his name is James Chase, do you know him? He sort of took Jamie away, we're divorced and I got full custody. James took him out of school, in Atlanta, and they were last seen in Tulsa."

"Maybe you should go look in Tulsa," he said rudely. But then he continued, his eyes narrowing with arrogant belligerence. "And what's this crap you're saying about kidnaping, anyway? And how the hell did you get full custody? Must have cost you a lot to take a man's son away from him."

Cindy became very quiet, shocked into silence. The man moved in closer to her, exhaling beer fumes in her face.

"What kind of a mother *are* you, anyway? Jesus Christ, lady, if you were a decent mother maybe your

son wouldn't have gone away with your old man. *Would he?*"

His unfairness and hostility conspired with the heat to glue her to the spot, unable to move, like a frightened kitten cowering away from a pit bull. The man continued the tirade, with angry enthusiasm—really getting into shouting at a woman half his size—but she didn't hear any of it. The heat was catching up with her again, and a race car started up and was revving loudly nearby, drowning out all the senseless noises the man was attempting to make.

But in the nightmare the day had become, she could read his lips. *Let it go. Just let it go, lady, the boy's probably happier with his father anyway. Go find another hubby and raise some more brats.*

The cars roared away.

"And no real woman would—"

That was the last straw. Unable to take it anymore, without even the noise of the nearby car to completely take away the man's unpleasantness, she turned violently and stumbled away. She didn't want him to have the pleasure of watching her cry.

She walked slowly, so that her blurring eyes wouldn't betray her into a fall, vaguely aware of the man shouting behind her, unaware of where exactly she was. The tears surged forth now, breaking through a wall she didn't even know was there. She leaned on an oil barrel, faint again from the heat, and let the tears come freely. There weren't many witnesses here, and what few there were didn't care, didn't matter. . . .

"Al, what is it?" Bob asked, moderately concerned. "Anything important?"

Alinor shrugged, feeling the source of the emotional overload coming closer. *She must be in the pit area by now. Perhaps I shouldn't involve Bob yet . . . until I know a little more about what's going on here .*

"Oh, I don't think so," Alinor said, forcing a yawn, but Bob didn't look like he believed him. *He knows me too well , Al thought. He doesn't look it from the outside, but for a young human he's darned sharp .*

"I'm sure you won't mind if I tag along. The car's -going in anyway," Bob said slyly, as more of a statement instead of a question.

"Yeah, sure," Al said, too casually. To say "no" would certainly tip him off. *Perhaps the gods intend for him to be involved in this one after all.*

"I've got a—feeling. Not sure if it's anything," Al said conversationally, as they walked toward the core of the paddock, the pit area where most of the cars came in to refuel. "Might be nothing, but then it might be—"

Al stopped in mid-sentence as he watched Bob's eyes tracking like an alert scout's, first to the racetrack, then to a group of men clustered around a grill.

Then came the emotion again, piercing his mage-shields like nothing he'd felt in a long time, and he put

one hand up to his temple, reflexively.

“Is this what got your attention?” Bob asked calmly, pointing at a large man who was yelling at a small woman holding a photograph. From the emotion and thought-energies he was picking up now, Al knew that the picture was of the child she had lost. He had seen the man -before, and knew he was a first-class misogynist, a male chauvinist pig, an egotist, a jerk. A general pain in the rear.

In short, Al didn't like him. And he would be perfectly pleased to have a chance to show the bastard up.

Saying nothing to Bob, he approached the pair. He privately hoped Bob would stay back and remain out of the situation long enough for him to find out precisely what was going on.

The woman paled and turned away from the bully, obviously fighting back tears. When the man took one step after her, Al intervened, wishing he dared land the punch he longed to take, but knowing he had to be far more surreptitious than that.

*You don't need to follow her*, Al sent, winding the -impulse past the man's beer-fogged conscious. *Go back to the party. Leave her alone* .

The man paused, shook his head, and crushed the beer can in his right hand.

He hadn't noticed Al's little thought-probe as coming from outside himself. Now Al was confident enough about keeping his powers a secret that he sent one final nudge: *She doesn't matter. Besides, there's more beer at the -barbecue* .

This last item seemed to get his attention away from his victim. He turned and walked uncertainly back to the barbecue, directly for the ice chest, ignoring the ribs being served. No doubt of where *his* priorities lay.

Alinor waited a moment before approaching the woman, who had obviously taken more than she could bear this afternoon. For a moment he thought she was going to pass right out and fall into the barrel she was leaning against.

*She is in such pain over her child*, Al anguished with her, waiting for the right moment before going to her. *I must help her. There is more about this than is apparent on the surface*.

“Excuse me,” Al said softly, coming up behind her. “Are you . . . all right?”

She sniffled, as if trying to get herself under control, then turned slowly around. Their eyes met briefly before she looked away, and he sensed she was embarrassed about her appearance. Her eyes were puffy and red; obviously, she'd cried more than once today. “Yeah, I'm fine,” she said, between sniffles.

Al calmly watched her, waiting for her to respond to the fact that he was not buying her story for even a minute.

Her jaw clenched, and she choked on a sob. “No. I'm *not* all right,” she said, contradicting herself, but finally admitting the obvious. “Please. I don't know who you are, but I need help. This guy helped me get in here, but I don't know how to get out. The rules. Whatever.”

And then she burst into sobs again, turning away from him.

Saying nothing, knowing that there was nothing he could say for the human that could possibly help her at that moment, he took her hand to lead her to a little grassy area near the track that was reasonably quiet and shaded. He sent Bob for cold drinks and told him where they'd be. Bob rolled his eyes, but cooperated nonetheless. Al ignored him.

*He'll remember soon enough what it means to help a human in distress, Al thought. It will all come back clearly to him when he sees what's wrong. He was on the receiving end once. I don't know what it is involved in this yet, but I can tell this isn't going to be light.*

He saw to it that she was seated in a way that would keep her back to most of the track-denizens, and handed her a fistful of napkins to dry her tears.

Then he waited. The revelation was not long in coming. When she had composed herself sufficiently she showed him her son's picture and began her plea, her words tumbling over each other as if she feared he would not give her a chance to speak them. "That's Jamie, my son. My husband . . . I mean, my ex-husband kidnaped him from his school in Atlanta, and—"

"Now wait, slow down," Al said softly. "Start from the beginning. Please."

Cindy nodded, took a deep breath, then explained to him what had *really* happened, telling him about the cult and the eerie change that had come over her husband. The parts about her ex-husband's alcoholism reminded him of Bob's past history, and Al was grateful the young mechanic returned with the drinks in time to hear it. He saw Bob's eyes narrow and his lips compress into a thin, hard line, and knew that the human had been won over within three sentences.

The story aroused many deep reactions in him, from the near-instinctive protective urges shared by all elves, to the feeling that this was only the surface of a larger problem. There was more here than just one little boy being -kidnaped.

*There is death here, he thought, with a shudder he concealed. None of the Folk cared to think about death, that grim enemy who stole the lives of their human friends and occasionally touched even the elven ranks. But he knew it, with the certainty that told him his flash of intuition was truth. There is death involved, and pain. And not just this woman's pain, or her son's. He was not one of the Folk gifted with Fore-Seeing, with the ability to sense or see the future—but he had a premonition now. This wasn't just about one small boy.*

As she finished the story, Al studied the photograph, engraving the image permanently in his mind. *Now I must help*, he thought with determination. *I could never turn away from something like this.* And, with ironic self-knowledge, *It was time for another adventure, anyway.*

"And that's it," Cindy concluded, as if she felt a little more heartened by his willingness to listen. "I'm just about at the end of the line. And I think I'm going crazy sometimes. Can you, I don't know, ask around? I don't know what else to do."

"I'll do anything I can to help you," Al said firmly, looking to Bob for support. The human shrugged—both at Al and at his own willingness to get involved—sighed and rolled his eyes again ever so slightly.

"I'll take that as a yes," Al told him, then turned to Cindy. "When you feel a little better, we can start asking around the track. I know the people here who would be sharp enough to notice something odd about your ex-husband and your son." He laughed a little, hoping to cheer her a bit. "Most folks here, if it

doesn't have four wheels, it doesn't exist."

She looked from him to Bob and back again, grateful—and bewildered. "Th-th-thank you, Al. And Bob," she said at last, looking as if she didn't quite believe in her luck. "What can I do to, you know, pay you back?"

She sounded apprehensive, and Al did not have to pry to know what she *thought* might be demanded in return for this "friendly" help. "Not a thing," Al quickly supplied. "But I do need a little more information about your son and your ex. We know he likes races. What about some other things he enjoys? What might attract him here in particular, and where else might he go around here?"

No, he had not been mistaken; the relief she felt at his reply was so evident it might as well have been written on her forehead. *Thank God, I won't have to—he isn't going to—*

Al sighed. Why was it that sex could never come simply, joyfully, for these people? Along with the curse of their mortality came the curse of their own inhibitions.

*Ah, what fools these mortals be,* he thought, not for the first time—and turned his attention back to the far more important matter of a child in danger.

## CHAPTER THREE

Jamie winced. Jim Chase ignored him and banged on the pickup truck's balky air-conditioner, which was threatening to break down for the third time that week. The once-cold air was turning into a warm, fetid blast, and anybody with sense would just roll down the windows. Jamie perched on the sticky plastic seat beside his father, staring glumly at the Oklahoma countryside. He counted cows as they passed a pasture, something Jim had taught him to better pass the time. Meanwhile, the hot air coming from the truck's dash made sweat run down his neck, and he was trying his best to ignore it.

Jim's large fist pounded the air-conditioning controls, which had no effect on the temperature; the interior of the truck was quickly turning into a sauna. Jamie calmly reached over and turned off the blower, then cranked down his own window. The air outside was just as hot, but was drier, and at least it didn't smell of mildew.

His father muttered something about a compressor, a word Jamie barely recognized. It sounded expensive, which meant it would stay unfixed. Jim was still a genius when it came to technical stuff. But when he was angry, or when he drank joy juice, the genius went away. Like now.

Jamie decided to see if at least he could get his father to stop doing something stupid. "Daddy, isn't the compressor in the motor? Under the hood?"

Jim's calm words seemed to come with great effort. "Yes, son. The compressor is in the motor."

"Then why are you bangin' on the *dash* like that?"

Jim laughed, a little, at that. "Good question," he said, leaving the dash alone and unbuttoning his shirt in the heat. Jamie wished he had brought more of *his* clothes on this trip; he'd managed to scrounge around for a used tank top at the vacation place, and it was the only clothing he had that was cool enough to

wear on these excursions. Even though it came down to his knees, and felt more like an apron, it was more comfortable than the one shirt he still had.

Overall, this had been the longest and *weirdest* vacation he'd ever been on, especially since Mom wasn't with them. At the vacation place, however, he had been to a kind of school, which didn't make any sense at all. *You don't go to school on vacation*, he tried to tell his dad, but his father had insisted. Jamie attended class in a single room with one strange old lady named Miss Agatha who hated blacks and Jews and had a big gap between her front teeth. She taught them her hate along with readin' and 'rithmetic, or at least tried. Hate was wrong, he knew, but since he was surrounded by adults who seemed to think differently, he didn't question them.

Much.

The classroom was filled with other children who were just as confused as he was. Most of them were there -because they weren't old enough to be in the Junior Guard. The kids in the Junior Guard didn't have to go to school, so it was something Jamie wanted to join, if for no other reason than to get away from Miss Agatha. He even lied and told them his age was ten and not eight; you had to be at least ten to join the Guard and use an AK-47. But they hadn't believed him.

Jamie had thought of this vacation as one big adventure, in the beginning. But in the past couple of days, he had begun to sense something wrong. He started asking his father questions—about the whereabouts of his mother, and why he was gone from *his* school for so long. And why he didn't have any spare clothes.

He'd kept up an incessant barrage of questions, couching the questions in innocence so that he would stay out of trouble. He might only be eight, but one thing he knew was his dad. James had bought it at face value, looking pained, not annoyed, whenever his son brought up the subject of his mother.

Finally today his dad had told him that they would be seeing Mom on this trip to Tulsa. Why, Jamie had asked, didn't Mom come to the vacation place? It was a surprise, James had replied, and that seemed to be the end of that.

They had made several trips to Tulsa since they arrived here, each time loading up the truck with big bundles of food and supplies. Sometimes they had to stop at a bank and cash a CD, but Jamie had never heard of money coming out of music before. Besides, they didn't have a CD player; more mystery. James purchased canned goods, mostly; things they wouldn't use right away, food that was put away where no one could see it. This category of grocery was called "in the event of an emergency," according to Miss Agatha. The rest of the food, the "perishables," was for the other people, he knew that much, since he got very little of it himself.

Now they were going to the store again, and like the last time, the air-conditioner quit. No big deal for Jamie, he didn't mind the heat as much as his father did. It didn't matter, as long as he was outside the vacation place. It was a stifling place, especially when Brother Joseph was around. All day Jamie had looked forward to the trip, knowing that Mom would be waiting for him in town. He didn't mention her to Daddy during the trip, since he already felt like a nuisance bringing it up before.

"Miss Agatha tells me you're a bright student," James said conversationally, over the wind pouring in through the window.

Jamie shrugged. "It's not like school at home. It's too *easy* ." He wanted to add that it was also pretty weird, some of the things Miss Agatha taught them. And that he was the only one in his class who wasn't

afraid of Miss Agatha. He had asked her why it was okay now to hate when it wasn't before. After all, Mommy had always said that it was wrong to hate black people because of the color of their skin, or Jews because they went to a temple instead of a church.

Miss Agatha had not been amused and told him that the Commandments said he had to obey his elders and she was his elder.

Then she went on with the same stupid stuff. Only today she had also mentioned another group, the homos, but he had no idea what made them different. Miss Agatha had simply said to stay away from them, that even saying "homo" was wrong, that it was *abad word*.

"When am I going back to *thereal* school, Daddy?"

Jamie knew he had said something wrong then, by the way his father's face turned dark and his lips pressed -together. But it was a valid question, after all. Wasn't it?

"Maybe it's time for you to learn what the big boys know. The truths they don't teach you at that other school, the one in Atlanta."

The boy felt a shiver of excitement. *What the big boys know. Like Joe. The things they haven't been telling me, that big secret the grownups are all excited about but don't tell us. Is it time for me to know that big secret now?*

"Listen up. This is a Bible story, but not like any Bible story you've ever heard before. Those other ministers, they don't have it right, never have, never will. We're one of the few groups of people in the world who know it straight, son, and by the grace of God we'll spread the word -further."

James paused a moment, apparently gathering his strength, as if summoning vast intellectual reserves. Daddy was having trouble thinking, Jamie knew, because he had run out of beer the day before and hadn't had any since.

"Do you remember Miss Agatha telling you about the beginning of the world? About how God created the world and all the people on it?"

Jamie nodded, uncertainly. *The big secret has to do with thaticky stuff?* he thought, suddenly disappointed.

"And the story of Genesis, in the Bible. Most Bibles don't tell you that before Adam, God had created several other species of mankind, the black man, the red man, the yellow. Some had civilizations and some had nothing. Some could live in peace because they were too lazy to do anything else, but most of the inferior races could only make war. God made all these people before Adam, long before he had it down right, you see." James sounded earnest, but he was frowning. "But most ministers, preachers, they don't know all this 'cause their churches didn't want them to know the truth."

Jamie nodded, as if he understood, but he didn't. This wasn't like any Bible story *he* had ever heard, or even read.

"Now remember, and this is important. This is before the white man. God saw that his work could be better, that all these monkey races were turning back into animals. He needed a perfect creature, and that's when he made Adam out of the river mud. Right away he knew he had something there. This one was different. This one was *white*. The color of purity, the same color as God."

Already Jamie was getting uncomfortable. This *was not* what he expected to hear. *All that hate stuff again*, Jamie groaned inwardly. *With big words to make it sound important. Brother*.

“God could see that what he made was perfect, with an intelligence higher than any creature’s he had yet created. And that included the black man. The Lord God also saw that his new creation would bring peace to a world filled with war, since it was an inherently peaceful creature he had made. He was a higher being, in every way. He had to be, since the Lord God was creating a race of people to inherit the earth, to be God’s direct descendants, to be his children.”

“Yeah, Dad,” Jamie said, forcing politeness. He didn’t like what he was hearing, and he wished his dad would finish. *You made more sense when you were drinking joy juice*, he thought rebelliously.

“Then the Lord God saw that Adam was lonely, and he created Eve. She was of the same race as Adam, and it was God’s intention that she bear Adam’s babies, to make a perfect race. But Satan, who was an angel rebelling against God, he got involved somehow and mated with Eve instead, and gave her his serpent seed.”

“Is this the same Satan the Church Lady talks about on Saturday Night Live?” Jamie asked, figuring this to be on safe ground. Mommy had let him stay up one Saturday, when his father was away, and watch the show with her. Since then, he had always associated Satan and women like Agatha with humor. But now, Daddy didn’t look like he was trying to be funny.

“Don’t know what you’re talking about there, son,” James said, puzzled for a moment. “If that’s some kind of late-night religious show, it’s probably only half right. I’m telling you what’s really right, all true. Pay attention now—this made God really angry, since this wasn’t what he had in mind at all. Eve wasn’t as perfect as Adam, because she had let Satan do this to her—which proved to God that women were going to be naturally inferior to men. Now God’s purest race was polluted. Now Satan, since he was part of one of the first races, is black.”

Jamie stifled a snicker. *Boy, is that stupid! First he says Satan’s an angel, then he says he’s a snake, and now he says he’s black.*

“Eve gave birth to two sons, but that was how God knew they must have had different fathers, because one was black, Cain, and the other was white, Abel. Cain was lazy and wanted to live off the sweat of other people, through stealth and cunning, which is typical of the way the Jew serpent race thinks. Cain took off to Babylonia and started his own kingdom, and this is where the Jews came from.”

Now Jamie *knew* that was wrong; he knew where the Jews came from. The little bitty squiggly place, the one littler than Oklahoma. Israel. And he’d never heard of Babby-whatever. Unless it was that icky lunch-meat they gave the kids here. But James was really enjoying his captive audience, so Jamie sighed and pretended to listen.

“Before long everyone was mating with everyone else, mixing the races, committing sodomy—I’ll explain that one when you’re a little older—and God didn’t like that. So he flooded the Earth with water, and God started a new kingdom, but as it happened some of the Jew serpent seed got onboard the boat anyway. Before long the Jews gained control again. The Jews and blacks are doing that to this day.”

*Then how come so many poor people are black?* Jamie asked silently. *And how come there are people putting bombs in Israel?* He’d learned *that* in his real school. Esther had brought in some scary pictures. . . .



“When Jesus came, it was too late. The Jews were -already in control, and they crucified Jesus. The battle between good and evil rages to this day, and now the Communists are pawns of the Jews, and they’re just as bad. Any day now hordes of Jew Communists are going to invade the United States, and only a select few are going to be ready for it. That’s why we are called the Chosen Ones, and we abide by no laws except *divine* law.”

Daddy had completely lost Jamie at this point. Was that why James drove over 70 in the 55 mph zone, because there was no “divine” speed limit? And was that why he wouldn’t wear a seat belt?

James was still babbling, like a tape player that wouldn’t stop. “The white race will reclaim its lost status, but it will take time, and work, lots of work. The ministers and churches today, they don’t want to tell the truth, they don’t want to work, understand, but it’s all there for anyone to see. The other churches have been diverting energy away from the real work, and that’s why we’re here. This is what Brother Joseph is teaching us. This is why you’re in Brother Joseph’s school, instead of that unholy place in Atlanta.”

“You mean, we’re not on vacation?” Now Jamie was really confused.

James glanced at him sharply. “Of course we’re on vacation, but it’s the Lord’s vacation.”

“Are we really going to see Mommy when we get to Tulsa?”

Jim became silent then. It was the first time Jamie had mentioned Mommy that day, and having finally asked the question, he was suddenly nervous.

“Who told you we were going to see Mommy in Tulsa?”

The boy shrank, sensing that familiar anger which -often led to his father’s backhanding him. “You did,” he said, meekly.

James considered this a moment, then said, “That all depends on Mommy. If she wants to see us, she’ll be there. If she doesn’t want to see us, she’ll stay home.”

*But we didn’t tell Mommy where we were going, and we didn’t call her or anything to tell her we’d be in Tulsa today.*

“What if she’s *not* in Tulsa?” Jamie said, holding back the tears at this betrayal of a promise. “What if she’s still at home? What if she doesn’t know we’re going to be in Tulsa today?”

“Then that’ll be her fault,” James said. “She’s a Jew woman or something.”

When they pulled into the parking lot of Tom’s Wholesale Discount Market, Jamie searched for his mother among the several faces he found there. Boys in jeans, shirts and vests pushed giant trains of shopping carts back to the front of the huge building, where even longer lines of carts, stuck together by some magical glue, awaited shoppers. While they were waiting to enter the store, Jamie continued the search, afraid to ask his father about his mom. James had looked ready to hit him back there, Jamie knew, and figured it was time to be quiet. Through trial and error, he had learned to gauge his father’s temper.

James showed the girl their membership card and -entered the store, selecting a flatbed cart. Still, no Mom. He followed his father silently, knowing that to lag behind would mean to be lost, and to be lost would eventually mean a backhand to the side of his head. And with Mommy nowhere around, there was nothing to stop James, nothing to restrain him. Jamie doubted these strangers would do anything to stop his father from hurting him; they never had before.

Tom's Discount was the only place Jamie had been to that sold stuff by the case. The store was a big warehouse. To reach some of the stuff, a forklift was necessary.

Cases of canned food began to stack up on the cart, and after a man helped them forklift some stuff down from a high shelf, they proceeded to the freezer section. Daddy had mentioned buying milk and cheese last, because it was a perishable. He hoped, also, the sample lady would be there so he could get some free cheese or barbecue sauce or wieners, he was so hungry. But she wasn't there, and he was starting to get unhappy about that when something else attracted his attention.

The freezer section was a catacomb of glass doors and frozen goods. Blasts of cold, biting air nibbled at his skin whenever someone opened a door. Over here, though, was a row of refrigerators, with milk and milk products stacked up inside the door.

His own face stared back at him.

He opened the door while his father, loading boxes of cheese, wasn't looking. The milk cartons were connected by plastic tape, so he couldn't take that one out. But he read it anyway, recognizing his school picture from the year before. It was his name, all right, and his date of birth. According to the carton, he was last seen with James Chase in Atlanta, Georgia. Jamie stared at the picture for a long time, trying to figure out how he could be on there, and why. According to the carton, he was a "Missing Child." *But I'm not a missing child. I'm right here, with Daddy. Daddy knows I'm here, so there must be a mistake. Is this what he meant about seeing Mom in Tulsa? Or does Mommy have something to do with this picture being on here ?*

As he was puzzling over this, he became aware of a large presence behind him, and with a start he looked up at his father. He pointed at the carton, tried to say something, but only a squeak came out.

"What are you looking at there, son?"

James knelt down and studied the carton, taking it out of the refrigerator. He looked at the picture, then at Jamie. Then he looked up and down the aisle; nobody was around just then. The boy noticed that he had the look of someone doing something he shouldn't. He began to feel all funny in his stomach.

"That isn't you," he said, simply. "That's another boy. He's got the same name as you, but it's another boy. Got that?"

Fearful of what would happen to him if he did otherwise, Jamie nodded.

"That's good," he said, quickly going through the remaining cartons, checking the photographs on each one. -Apparently, he was holding the only one with his son's picture; he found no others. "Start putting more milk on the cart. This size, here," he said, indicating a stack of milk cartons larger than the first. "I'll be right back."

Jamie tried not to look, but out of the corner of his eye he watched his father look around quickly before dumping the milk in a large, plastic-lined waste can.

When he returned, his expression was somber. “It was bad,” he informed his son. “The milk was bad, so I threw it out for them.”

Jamie nodded, meekly, and continued loading the milk.

“Here. Let me give you a hand with that,” James said, as he helped his son load the flatbed cart.

For Jamie, the situation was becoming more frightening than he wanted to admit. His first impulse was to trust his father, without questioning him about why Mommy wasn’t around, why they were far from home, why his picture was on a milk carton. It was easier to just listen to Daddy and do what he said; this gave some order to his world. It was also the best way to avoid being hit. He loved his mother, but he had to admit that during the divorce he felt very much afraid without his father. When James returned to his school to pick him up for the vacation, Jamie was thrilled, though he didn’t understand why Mommy wasn’t with him. The divorce was weird; Daddy explained it as temporary, and it didn’t really mean they weren’t married, even though that’s what Mommy said it meant. She was confused, he explained. He would explain it all when she got to Tulsa, whenever that would be.

They drove away from the discount store with the loaded truck, and Jamie stared out the window at the other cars. Ahead was an Arby’s, and the boy remembered his -hunger.

“Daddy, I’m really hungry. Can we stop at Arby’s?”

James frowned, as if the request was too much to be handled. But Jamie saw him stuff the wad of bills and change in his pocket when they’d finished buying things. Money, he knew, wasn’t a problem.

“I don’t know, Jamie. Brother Joseph wouldn’t like it.”

“Why?” he wanted to know, flinching. He expected a blow, not only for questioning Daddy, but questioning Brother Joseph, which was an even more heinous crime.

“Brother Joseph knows what he’s doing,” James explained carefully. “He has tapped the Divine Fire before, and through you he will do it again.”

Hunger was gone, immediately, as his stomach cramped with fear. *No, not that again—*

“But Daddy,” he protested feebly, “I don’t want to.”

James shook his head dismissively. “That’s because you’re just a child. When you get older, you’ll understand. It’s all in Brother Joseph’s hands. Fasting is crucial in achieving the purity to talk to God. Something else the clergy in general doesn’t know about. Consider yourself fortunate.”

The Arby’s came and went. Jamie could smell the odors of roast beef and french fries, and his stomach growled loudly. “Perhaps he’ll let you eat something tonight. -After the ritual. It will be special tonight,” James said, as if savoring the prospect. “Just you wait.”

They drove on in silence for several moments, while Jamie tried to concentrate on something other than his complaining stomach. *I’m so hungry*, he thought, and when he saw them pull onto the highway to get back to the vacation place, he realized he wasn’t going to be seeing Mommy in Tulsa after all.

*So I guess she isn't there*, he thought, starting to feel a little cranky instead of being unhappy, and beginning to think he ought to push the issue. After all, Daddy had promised. He was reaching a point where he didn't care if he was hit or not. In a way, he felt like he deserved it. *I must have done something bad, or Mommy would be here by now*.

"There's something I got to tell you," James began, and Jamie sighed.

*He's lying again*, he thought, somehow knowing that what would follow wouldn't be the truth. He didn't know how he had acquired the talent for spotting lies, but he did know that Daddy had been lying a lot lately.

It seemed like James was waiting to get on the highway before telling him what, exactly, was going on. James gunned the motor, bringing their speed up to seventy before turning to his son.

"I haven't been telling you everything, because I wanted to protect you. You probably think it was a little weird the way we left Atlanta. Took you from your school and every-thing. There is really a good reason for all of that. Before I explain, I want to be certain that you understand that I do love you, and I wouldn't do anything that would harm you."

Jamie was feeling uncomfortable again, but he nodded anyway. Whatever lie was coming, it was going to be a big one.

"Good. I trust Brother Joseph without question, and *he* wouldn't hurt you either."

Jamie wasn't sure about *that*, but he was too afraid to question it. *Brother Joseph is really weird, and he's why you're so weird, isn't it, Daddy?* He remembered the last odd ritual, the fourth of a series, in which Brother Joseph made him see and feel things he still didn't understand. Scary things. It was like a big monster on the other side of a wall, like the creepy thing he felt under his bed while sleeping or lurking in his closet. The thing that came to life in his room when Daddy turned the light out. *That* thing; a dark something that made wet sounds when it moved, the thing that watched him when Brother Joseph shoved him through the wall during the rituals. He forced Jamie to see it, sometimes even to touch it. The wall wasn't solid, he knew, but it was still a barrier. *Walls were made for reasons*, he thought, and the reason for this one was *good*. He pushed the memory away, at the same time dreading the coming ritual, where he knew it would just happen all over again.

"I don't mean for you to worry about your mother, but something has happened in Atlanta that's put us all in danger. We were going to see your mom in Tulsa, but I guess she just hasn't made it yet."

Jamie stared glumly forward. "What's happened?" he asked, resigned that whatever James would tell him would be a lie, but hoping for some truth anyway. "What's happened to Mommy?"

"Nothing," James supplied. "Not that I know of, anyway. Back in Atlanta, the police, they came and said that I did something that I didn't. They think that I'm involved in drugs; they accused me of dealing drugs in your school in Atlanta. You know what I'm talking about when I say drugs, don't you?"

Jamie nodded, remembering the cop who had spoken to their class about the bad boys who were smoking cigarettes and other things behind the school during lunch, kids who were only a few years older than him. The cop showed them the green stuff that looked like something Mommy had in bottles to cook with, and another baggie of little white rocks called "crack." That was bad stuff, the cop told them, and they had caught the man who had sold it outside their school. When the cop told them about what drugs

did, Jamie was scared and decided that if he was ever offered any, he would refuse. But his dad had nothing to do with it; he knew that much for certain.

“Well, son, it’s all a terrible misunderstanding. If it weren’t for blessed Brother Joseph and the Chosen Ones, I’d be in jail right now. See, we’ve got to hide out with the Chosen Ones for a little while, until things kind of level out. I have a lawyer out there working on the case. Your mother didn’t know much about this at first, but when I called her and told her what was going on, she got all nervous about me and said I’d better take you with me; she wasn’t sure if she could handle you all by herself. The police were wondering about her, too. With the drugs, and all. But don’t you worry none. Momma will be here soon.”

The stink of *lie* was thick. Jamie wondered why his father couldn’t tell how obvious it was. The boy frowned a little, looked up at his dad, and wondered when he was going to stop lying to him.

“You know I don’t sell dope, son.”

“I know that, Daddy. They caught who was doin’ it. I’m never gonna touch drugs. The police said they make your head puff up and your skin turn green and purple. They make you crazy and do awful things to people.”

“Good, son. That’s just what I wanted to hear,” James replied, absently, as if he hadn’t heard a word Jamie had said, once he got the initial answer. “Brother Joseph, he’s going to help us through this. He’s done a lot for us, and these little errands we run, getting the food for them and all, are a way of helping him back. It’ll all work out, you just wait and see.”

*It can’t ever work out, Jamie thought, getting angry at his daddy for making up stories. Momma doesn’t know a thing about this, I just know it. This is all real wrong, I shouldn’t even be here, I should be in Atlanta going to my school and not this icky place with these icky people Daddy likes. Sarah would know what’s right. She always knows what’s right. I’ll ask her when I get back. She might even know where I could get some food, without Brother -Joseph knowing about it .*

Jamie knew they were getting close to the “vacation place” when Tulsa dissolved behind them, and the terrain became barren of civilization. There were a few cattle in this part of Oklahoma, sprinkled among the scrawny groves of native oak. The sun continued to beat mercilessly against the earth, but now that it was late afternoon, the temperatures inside the truck were more bearable. They turned off to a lesser, two-laned highway, then to a gravel road. After some time across the bumpy route they came to the front gate, a large steel barrier set in a bed of concrete. James unlocked it, and they proceeded into what the soldiers called “the Holy Land of the Chosen Ones.”

Soon they reached a second gate, this one connected to a tall chain-link fence topped by barbed wire. At the gate was a sentry box, where two young men in t-shirts, camo pants and combat boots intercepted the truck. There was a brief inspection before continuing into the main compound. Above them two dozen electricity-generating windmills *stwhapped* . Joe had told Jamie they were connected to powerlines leading to the vacation place.

The truck rumbled past a series of drab Quonset-style shacks. They seemed deserted; once his father had -remarked that this was where food and supplies were kept, ready for the “invasion” the grownups were always talking about. Other soldiers, more numerous now than when they first arrived, were patrolling the grounds. At the northwest corner of the compound was an old log cabin that was now a

sort of museum. *This was what the freedom fighters first lived in*, he remembered Miss Agatha saying on a field trip. *It stands as a monument to their holy independent spirit and is an inspiration to us all.*

Next was a cluster of plain, cinderblock buildings, and more Quonset huts that reminded Jamie of *Gomer Pyle* episodes. Beyond was the entrance to the underground shelters, the vacation place, where Jamie now lived, along with the rest of the Chosen Ones. Miss Agatha said there were almost one thousand of the “enlightened” living in the vacation place; since he was the new kid, he felt like he was treated with a little more suspicion than the rest.

*After all Daddy does for them, they still don't like me.*

He figured this was from jealousy, because he was -allowed outside, a privilege usually reserved for the trusted few. His father's unique function in fetching supplies had its advantages. Nobody else had a membership in Tom's, and Brother Joseph didn't want anyone else to get one. He said it was a “security risk.” But since Jim had gotten the membership a long time ago, there was no reason not to use it.

Jim drove the supply-laden pickup to yet another checkpoint. This was at the mouth of the underground, a gaping, dark hole at the base of a concrete ramp. Jamie knew there would be dim lighting down there that would never compete with the searing summer sun outside; his eyes would have to adjust, first. Going in always frightened him. It was like going down the gullet of some prehistoric creature.

There was some consolation, though; Joe was one of the guards working the gate today. He was just coming on duty when they had left for Tulsa, and Jamie figured by now it might be time for his shift to end. The boy had met Joe at his very first Praise Meeting, and Joe had been nice to him—he'd given him a Tootsie Pop and showed off his *tattoo*. There was something so—affable, genial about Joe; they had become instant friends. His father approved warmly, and since Joe was the only one besides Brother Joseph who would have anything to do with him, they spent a lot of time together hiding out in the nooks and crannies of the uncompleted sections of the underground.

At first Jamie thought it was a little weird that Joe could sometimes guess what he was thinking, and sometimes answered his questions before he could actually ask them. And only yesterday, Joe had predicted that they would be going out; in fact, said he would be seeing him because he was working guard duty. When Jamie quizzed him about his ability to read minds and see into the future, Joe got real scared, and said for him to never mention that again. He wasn't reading minds and he wasn't seeing into the future, said it was something called -“deduction,” like Sherlock Holmes did. He also said that if anyone thought he did read minds they'd both be in big trouble. It was the work of the devil, such things, and no Chosen One could *ever* have powers like that. Jamie let the matter rest.

Sure enough, Joe was standing there, at attention, looking the same as he did when they left. The boy looked up to Joe, admiring him in his uniform. He was every bit a man in Jamie's eyes even though he was barely old enough to be in the Chosen Ones' regular Guard. He was eighteen, one of the few guards who still had hair. Jamie hadn't asked why, because it seemed to be a delicate subject. The rest of the Guard were shaven bald, and it seemed to be some kind of special thing, but he didn't know what it meant.

There were a zillion other questions he wanted to ask Joe today as well, and the top of the list was: why would his picture be on a milk carton?

And besides that, why hadn't his mother shown up yet? He knew he was treading dangerously just to ask Joe, since his father had already provided an answer. If Joe squealed on him, he would be in hot

water, and he'd get beaten. Jamie decided to ask anyway, as Joe's overall trustworthiness had never been in doubt, and they shared mutual secrets anyway. And if Joe's answer didn't sound right, there was always Sarah. She knew things most people didn't, and her word was golden. Sarah had never, ever lied to him, or acted as if he was bad or stupid.

James turned off the motor. This was the last and most thorough check in the land of the Chosen Ones, and was used to detect the smuggling of undesirables, spy devices or Communists into the underground bunkers. Jamie had the impression the guards trusted his father but had to do this thing anyway. They went through the truck thoroughly, examining the supplies, looking under the vehicle. His father stood by quietly; this was a sacred ritual, as was any procedure that protected the Chosen Ones from the Jew Communist enemy, who was due to invade any day now. Everything these weird people did seemed to be in preparation for a war, and Jamie didn't understand why anyone outside the compound didn't share this sense of urgency. It must be one of those "truths" that Daddy mentioned, which only the Chosen Ones knew about.

After the inspection Joe spoke briefly with Jamie's -father. "You go with Joe," Jim said, getting into the truck. "I have to go unload these supplies. I'll see you at supper, after I speak with Brother Joseph."

*Go with Joe!* That was exactly what he'd wanted to do. He looked over at the young man, who was grinning as he slung his AK-47 over his shoulder. Jamie had never seen him without it, not even at the big communal dinner hall, and while at first it was a little scary, now he didn't think anything of it. At the vacation place, guns were everywhere. This was not like normal life. *Things are different here* .

Before Jamie could react to the good news, his father was in the truck and starting it up, the conversation appar-ently finished. Joe's relief had arrived, a scowling man who looked like Daddy did a day after drinking too much joy juice.

"Hey, buckaroo," the big boy said jovially, squatting down to talk to him, "I've got something to show you."

Usually Jamie didn't like it when he knelt down like that; it made him feel like a little boy, even though he was. But this time was different, he didn't care much; there was a surprise involved this time.

Instead of a surprise, Joe pulled out another Tootsie Pop. Jamie appreciated it, as any eight-year-old would—especially with his stomach growling—but he tried to not let the disappointment show.

"That's not what I wanted to show you," Joe said, trying to conceal a snicker. "Come with me."

Joe led him through a series of tunnels and passageways, some nominally lit, which had been carved into the earth by the Chosen Ones. Some of the digging equipment was still here, Jamie noticed; he had never been down this way before, had in fact been told to stay away from this area of the tunnels, this being forbidden to those under ten. But now the restrictions seemed to have been lifted by his hero.

"You've never been down here before," Joe said, "and it would probably be a good idea if you didn't tell anyone we were here. It'll be our secret. Okay?"

"Awright!" Jamie said, with awe in his voice. "What're we doing down here, anyway?"

"Nothing we shouldn't," he replied. It was hard to keep up with him, he was walking so fast. His legs, too, were that much longer. "I talked to your daddy about this, first, so it's all right with him."

“What is this place?”

They came across a sign, with a drawing of a young soldier holding an AK-47 over his head in triumph, with the caption:

sacred heart of the chosen ones

junior guard

first battalion

It took a moment for it to register; then surprise spread through Jamie. “Am I joining the Junior Guard already?” It was like a rite of passage here. It had only been a few weeks since Jamie had arrived, but he had come to recognize the importance of some of the ritual elements of the vacation place. The Junior Guard was one of them. “First Battalion? How many battalions *are* there?” He wasn’t sure what a battalion was, but from the sign he gathered they were important, and that there must be more of them.

“There’s only one right now,” Joe admitted, as they entered another large, damp room, filled to overflowing with every type of firearm he could imagine. Jim had taken him to a sporting goods store once, with what had to be a million guns on the wall, but it was nothing compared *to this*. The rifles and assault shotguns were lined up in several racks. Beyond that were thousands of wooden boxes, some of them open, filled with bullets. Along another wall, behind a huge sheet of glass, were small handguns, each with a name affixed to a tag. The room smelled like gun oil and rubberized canvas; the odor gave him goosebumps on the back of his neck. *This is for real.*

“I’m going to show you how to fire a weapon,” Joe announced proudly. “Do you want to learn a handgun or a rifle?”

Jamie was struck speechless. *Learn how to use—a gun?* Even the Junior Guard didn’t start right away with guns, he knew that much. Joe was providing something special here, and he knew it.

“I want to learn *that* one,” Jamie said, pointing at the assault rifle slung over Joe’s shoulder, so common it seemed to be a part of him. “*Your* gun.”

Joe laughed, but not in a way that humiliated him, the way the other grownups did. Joe was his friend, and his laugh didn’t betray that. “Sorry, bucko, you’re gonna have to work up to this one. Come over here.” He led him to a rack of rifles, smaller and lighter than most of the others. “These are all the right size to start with. Hey, Jamie, I had to start with an *air* rifle when I was your age. You get to use real bullets. *You’re* lucky.”

Jamie studied the weapons. One stuck out, grabbed his attention. It wasn’t quite a machine gun, but it looked a little more grownup than the others. It had a block-letter J carved in its stock. “That one.”

“Hmmmmm,” Joe said. “Good choice. It used to be my gun, when I was little. Imagine that.”

Joe unlocked the gun rack and handed him the weapon. “Never point it at anyone you don’t want to kill. Don’t point it up, either, when you’re down in the bunkers. Always point it down. Roof’s usually metal here, and if it goes off acci-dentally the dirt or wooden floors will absorb the bullet, but it would bounce off metal and hurt someone.”



He reached for it eagerly. “All right, Joe. Is it loaded?”

“Always assume it is, even when you know it isn’t. *NO—don’t point it at me!* There you go, down at the ground. Good boy.” Joe’s voice took on a singsong quality. “What you have here is a Charter Explorer Rifle, model 9220. Takes eight .22 long cartridges. It’s *notfully* automatic like mine, but it’ll do for starters.” Joe picked up a box of bullets, and his voice returned to normal. “Let’s go to the firing range.”

They walked in silence to the next room. The long, narrow area was floored thickly with sand, and the roof tapered down at the opposite end. This was, Joe told him, to deflect weapons fire into the ground. Standing in the firing area were several crude dummies, which he thought were real people, at first. They were wearing military uniforms, and some were holding staffs with flags on them. One he recognized as Russia’s flag, and another held a flag with a six-pointed star. There were other items to shoot at in the sandy area, but the primary targets seemed to be the make-believe people. Jamie didn’t like that very much. He hadn’t associated the weapons with killing people until then, though he knew deep down that’s what they were for.

Guns were something he was used to; sometimes they were used to hunt animals, but not people. His daddy had never mentioned killing when he was cleaning his Luger. And on the rare instances he had taken Jamie along for shooting practice out in the woods, he always shot at bottles and cans. Never people. And he couldn’t imagine Joe shooting and killing someone else. The sight of the dummies standing there, waiting to be shot at, made him feel a little sick inside.

But he didn’t say anything to Joe, for fear of being a sissy. *I’m going to do this, no matter what, so nobody will treat me like a sissy no more.*

Joe showed him three different sniper positions before he even let him handle the loaded weapon; as he lay there, belly down in the dirt, Jamie wondered what this had to do with learning how to shoot. Finally the older boy loaded the weapon with eight little bullets and carefully handed it to him.

“This is the safety,” Joe informed him, lying prone beside him in the sand. “This keeps it from firing accidentally. Until you’re ready to shoot, leave it on.”

The lessons progressed from there, and after learning to *squeeze*, not pull, the trigger, Jamie fired his first round. It wasn’t nearly as loud as he expected, but then his gun wasn’t as large as Joe’s. At Joe’s urging he selected a target and fired a few more rounds, remembering to *squeeze* the trigger, and promptly picked off one of the objects in the sand. His first kill was a Hill’s Brother’s coffee can, which went *piiiing* as it flew backwards into the sand.

“Goodshot, buckaroo!” Joe applauded. Jamie was triumphant. “That’s better than I did my first time!”

Jamie was getting ready to draw on another target when he became aware of someone standing behind them. Another weapon went *snik, snik*. Jamie’s arms turned to putty, and the barrel of his rifle dropped.

“If I were a Jew-Communist-pig you’d both be dead now, Private!” an ominous, and familiar, voice boomed. Following Joe’s example, he scrambled to his feet, leaving the weapon on the ground.

It was Brother Joseph, standing there with Joe’s AK-47 pointed directly at them. As if to make a point, he turned and fired a few rounds into a dummy.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Joe stammered in the echo of the gunfire. Jamie could see he was really scared; his face had become whiter than usual, which probably wasn’t so bad, since these people seemed to value that color. “I was just showing—”

“*Silence!*” Brother Joseph demanded, and received. The man was wearing a strange military uniform similar to the Guard, but it had a preacher’s white collar incorporated into it. Jamie had never seen this particular article of finery and assumed it was new. “On your stomach. Fifty—no, *one hundred* push-ups. Now!” the man barked, and the boy responded instantly.

Joe dropped to the ground, making his lean, muscular body rigid as he began the push-ups, using his knuckles for support. It was how the Guard always did push-ups, Jamie observed, and it looked quite painful.

While Joe was doing this, Jamie could see a thin wisp of smoke trailing out of the AK-47 and remembered his own gun, lying on the sand. He thought it best to go ahead and leave it there, to give himself time to figure out what was wrong, and what Joe had done that was so terrible. Brother Joseph was angry about something, and although the anger seemed to be directed at Joe, he did not feel at all comfortable standing in the man’s shadow. Even when he *wasn’t* angry.

Joe counted out the push-ups, pumping them off with ease; a slight sweat broke out down the small of his back and beaded across his forehead. The beret had been left on, as Brother Joseph had given him no permission to remove it. Slowly but surely, Jamie was beginning to understand the nuances of discipline within the Guard, though he had never envisioned Brother Joseph as the direct leader of them. The Guard leadership seemed to be comprised of middlemen subservient to Brother Joseph; now the boy knew the weird preacher was probably in command of them as well. His new item of clothing supported this.

It was in moments like these, when the cruelty shone through like a spotlight, that Jamie had second thoughts about joining the Junior Guard. Then he would look at Joe and see him endure the abuse and begin to wonder if this really was the natural order of things everywhere. It certainly was the natural order of things *here*.

Joe completed the punishment and leaped to his feet, standing sharply at attention. His breathing was hardly labored, and only the slightest gleam of sweat had appeared on his forehead. What would have been brutal punishment for most didn’t seem to bother him in the least; Jamie was in awe. *Someday, I’m gonna be able to do that.*

“Very well,” Brother Joseph said, sounding a little calmer. “Perhaps that will teach you never to leave your weapon where the common enemy can take it and use it against you. I know, son, it probably seems like there’s no chance for a Jew-pig to infiltrate, but you never know. They’re a cunning bunch, the spawn of Satan.”

“Yes, Father,” Joe said, looking down at the ground.

*Son? Father? Is he Joe’s daddy? Or do they just talk like that because of who he is?*

“So tell me, young guardsman, what were you doing down here with this *child*?”

The question carried strange, accusatory undertones that Jamie couldn’t fathom. Leaving the firearm in the sand didn’t seem a good idea, and he wondered if now was a good time to bring that up.

“I was showing this youngster how to use a weapon, Father,” Joe said, pride slowly returning to his voice. “He has a fine talent for marksmanship, if I do say so,” he added.

“Glad to hear it,” Brother Joseph said, and handed Joe his weapon. “Strip and clean your weapon, son,” he said. “Your mother will be expecting you at our dinner table tonight. You haven’t forgotten her birthday, have you?”

“Of course not, sir,” Joe said. “I will attend.”

Brother Joseph regarded Jamie with a bemused, patronizing expression, as if he’d just seen him for the first time. “Young James,” he said. “So you have a gift. That much was obvious, that first time we touched the Holy Fire together.” His eyes narrowed. “Yes. Special. And *very* gifted indeed,” he said in parting, and as he walked away his laughter echoed down the metal walls.

The sound made him feel empty, and somehow unclean. As Jamie watched Brother Joseph’s back recede he felt a new dread, a growing horror that had no name. The Chosen Ones didn’t see it, saw only the bright side of him. They followed Brother Joseph wherever he went. Sarah was the only one who knew about it besides Jamie, that’s how hidden it was. And when the preacher made him “channel” the Holy Fire, they both saw this darkness, so scary that Jamie made himself forget what he saw and touched, most of the time.

But every time he saw Brother Joseph he remembered. *And we’re going to do it again tonight. Oh, no*, he thought, and shuddered.

In silence Joe finished cleaning his firearm and put it all back together. He seemed humiliated, and justifiably so. But Jamie still had questions to ask. About the milk carton, about his mother. And he was going to ask them; they were alone now, and there would be no better opportunity.

“Is he your daddy?” Jamie blurted, knowing no other way to start.

“Yes. He is. And it’s nothing we need to talk about. As far as anyone is concerned, I’m just another soldier, fighting for the cause. I get no special treatment,” he said, his eyes narrowing at Jamie. “And don’t you treat me no different. If you do that I’ll have to rough you up.” He added that last, lightly, like a joke.

But in that second, with that brief, angry expression, he looked just like Brother Joseph. *Joe, Joseph. Of course. How come I didn’t guess before?* Jamie knew he could get real depressed over this if he let it happen, but he tried not to. *Joe’s still Joe. Even my daddy’s bad sometimes.*

“Why didn’t you know your daddy was coming?” Jamie asked, but immediately knew it was the wrong thing to say. Joe was looking at the ground, apparently not paying too much attention.

“Sometimes I just have to turn it off. . . .” Joe said absently, then looked at Jamie in mild alarm. “No one can read minds. Remember that. And don’t call him my daddy. He’s my leader, and that’s all that matters.”

“Oh,” was all he said, and Joe looked relieved. Apparently, other people down here made a big deal over it. But then, those other people *liked* Brother Joseph. “Something weird happened today when we were out getting supplies.”

“What’s that?” Joe asked, brightening up. He sounded glad to change the subject.

“I saw my picture on a milk carton. It said I was a ‘missing child.’ What does that mean?” he said, waiting for *some* kind of reaction from Joe.

He found none, absolutely nothing. A stone mask went over his face, and Jamie knew something was amiss. It was the same mask he had worn when his father sneaked up behind them.

“Are you sure it was you?” he finally replied.

“Yep,” Jamie said. “Sure was.”

Joe frowned. “Did you tell your daddy about it?”

Jamie felt a little cold. “Y-yeah, and he said it was someone else.”

Joe stopped and knelt again, but it was with an expression of such severity that Jamie wasn’t annoyed by it; he was frightened. “Then listen to your father. Do not disobey him. It is the way of the Chosen Ones. It was wrong for you to ask another grownup when your father already told you it wasn’t you.” Joe held his chin in his right hand, forcing the boy to look directly in his eyes. “If your -father said it was someone else, then it was someone else. *Don’t ask anyone about it again.*”

Jamie wanted to cry. This was the first time his friend had spoken to him like that, and it hurt terribly. *This is still not right*, he thought. *But he isn’t gonna tell me anything else, either. Maybe I’d better not ask about Mom, then. Daddy already told me why she isn’t here. It’s -because she doesn’t want to be.*

But as Joe walked him back to his room, he couldn’t believe this was the real reason.

\* \* \*

Joe walked him back to the tiny cubicle that served as his home. It was in a section of the underground that was lined with sheet metal, forming tubular habitats for most of the “civilian” Chosen Ones. That meant all the women, little kids, and the few men that weren’t in the Guard, like Jamie’s dad. The Guard and Junior Guard lived elsewhere, in barracks-type quarters, austere living for even a seasoned soldier. At first, Jamie had thought it was a kind of jail, without the bars. Joe had showed the Junior Guard barracks to him once, but it did not inspire the awe the older boy had apparently hoped it would.

Jamie’s quarters were cozy in comparison. The cult had found scrap carpeting and had used it to create a patchwork quilt on all the floors. The three pieces of furniture were all used, and none of it matched: a chair, a formica coffee table, a burlap-covered couch with the stuffing coming out in white, fluffy lumps. For the first week they didn’t have a bed and had to sleep on blankets and blocks of soft foam that had been in a flood, according to Jamie’s dad. The two twin mattresses they had now were an improvement over the floor, but Jamie overheard one of the men who carried them in say they had been stolen from a motel. Their lighting came from one dangling lightbulb that had no switch and had to be unscrewed each night with an “as-best-ohs” rag kept specifically for that purpose. The bathroom and single shower were down the hall and serviced the entire row of ten tiny rooms. Moist, musty air occasionally blew through a small vent, enough to keep the room from getting too stuffy. But since they were underground, the cool earth kept the temperature down.

At first the rugged environment was more exciting than uncomfortable, this secret place where he hid with his dad from the rest of the world. But as a week passed, and he began to miss his mother and

wonder about where she was, the experience became disturbing. He missed his things, his toys, and especially his clothes. He missed having three meals, or even *one* meal, a day. He couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten, other than Joe's gift of candy. *It wasn't yesterday. I think it was the day before.* When he went to the dining hall, all they would give him was juice. Orange juice at breakfast, vegetable juice at lunch and dinner, and apple juice at night. Everyone *else* got to eat, but not him.

*Joe's answer wasn't good enough, Jamie thought, -morosely. It wasn't even close. Didn't tell me nothin'.*

Jamie sat on his bed and leaned against the curved, metal wall. His father was not here yet, but it would only be a matter of moments before he came and fetched him for supper, which was served in a large, communal hall. *But I've got time to talk to Sarah, before he gets here.*

The wall was cool and pulled some of the heat out of his body. *Good. That'll help me to think real hard.*

He closed his eyes. "Sarah?" he said. "Are you there?"

*:I'm here, Jamie,: he suddenly heard in his head.: I was getting worried.:*

## CHAPTER FOUR

Cindy looked a little better now that she was in the cool, dry air of Andur's air-conditioned interior. Her conversation was certainly more animated.

"Well, like I said, he's a car nut. That's why I was here, looking for him at the track." Cindy repeated herself -often, apparently without realizing it, as Al's elvensteed, Andur, pulled slowly through the paddock.

Andur was disguised as a white Mazda Miata, although usually Andur was a much flashier Porsche 911. Andur's choice of form—and Alinor's transportation of choice—had changed through the ages. To flee the Civil War, Andur had been a roan stallion. Some years later he had manifested as a Harley Davidson, but this had attracted the *wrong* kind of attention, and Al had asked him to change to something less conspicuous. On a racetrack the little sports-car fit in quite well; though it was an inexpensive one, anything more ostentatious might have attracted questions.

Besides, Al rather liked Miatas. Their design was rounded, purposeful and sensual, like a lover's body or a sabre's sweep.

Andur in this form had only two seats, but Bob claimed there were last-minute things to do at the pits before calling it a day and sauntered off to check on his precious engine.

Al didn't spare a second thought for the man, who seemed just as happy to deal with metal and machine-parts, rather than an unhappy lady on the edge. In some ways, Al didn't blame him; Cindy seemed very close to the end of her resources—mental, emotional and physical. Bob was young and might not be much help with an emotional crisis. And he certainly couldn't be counted on for sparkling, cheery conversation if Cindy got too morose.

The summer sun was setting, casting an orange glow on the Hallet raceway, silhouetting Bob against the red-and-gold sky. He appeared solid. Someone to be depended upon. Al was very thankful Bob was here, as he pulled away from the pit area, heading for the nearby campground.

Cindy clenched her hands in her lap, as tense as an over-wound clock-spring. Al's senses told him that her anxiety attack had yet to run its course. She was not paying much attention to things outside of herself, which was all to the good for him, but that wasn't a healthy state of mind for a human.

She was surely running on pure adrenalin by now. Her hands shook slightly, and she still had trouble catching her breath, and that also concerned him. He wasn't a Healer, except maybe of metals. If she were to become ill, he wouldn't know what to do with her.

*How am I to calm her down? She can't have been eating well, lately—and the heat hasn't done her any good, -either. I have to get her settled and balanced, or she won't be of any use at all.*

Alinor frowned as he considered her distress. From the moment they began talking he had been forced to put up an array of shields usually reserved for the most intense of emotional moments. There was no doubt that she was in dire need of some kind of release, and out of consideration for her state of mind, he allowed a small amount of her anxiety to seep through. She wouldn't know what he was doing—not consciously—but even though she was only marginally psychic, her subconscious would know that someone was “listening” to her, and cared enough to pay attention and not block her out. It was simply common manners among elves not to shut someone out completely, unless absolutely necessary; what he had done so far was enough to keep Cindy from pulling him in with her. Later, when he could concentrate on the task, he would see what he could do to apply some emotional balm to her misery.

On the other hand—so far as keeping his “cover” -intact was concerned—in her present state she probably wouldn't notice that the Miata had no ignition, or that it was driving itself. Al rested his hands on the steering wheel, to make it look as if he was in control, but the elvensteed knew where they were going.

“I think I left the air-conditioning on in the RV,” Al said conversationally, reaching forward with a tiny touch of magic and activating the air-conditioning switch. With any luck, it would be cool by the time they got there. *Let's see . . . Gatorade in the fridge? Yeah, plenty of that. And ice. We should be in good shape when we arrive .* “It has a shower,” he added, hesitating. Al realized what this might sound like, and he glanced over at Cindy for a reaction. She offered none, gazing blankly forward, apparently -unaware she was tying the edge of her blouse in a knot.

*At least she didn't take exception to that suggestion. That is, if she even heard it.* It wasn't as if he was trying to seduce her in any way—

*Even though she was attracted to me, I could feel that. . . .*

But he wasn't demanding sex—he wasn't even expecting it. It was just—

*Damn. I am trying to seduce her. Am I trying to prove to her that I'm attractive, or to myself? This is something that a good session of sweat cannot fix. I should know better.*

But she was very vulnerable at this point, and in obvious need of comfort. Comfort which could be physical or otherwise—and if physical, could take any number of forms. And he was skilled at offering that kind of comfort. He'd had lots of time to practice, after all—

*Stop it!* he scolded himself. He was tempted to reflect on the last time he'd had any kind of relationship, but he knew it would only heighten his desire. In his childhood, so many years ago, the maxim had been drilled into him by his father: *never get involved emotionally with a -human, except on the most casual of terms*. There was a good reason for this guideline, as evidenced by centuries of elvenkind's experience. First of all, going by most definitions of a "relationship," the human involved would eventually become aware of the existence of the Folk and want to know what was going on. With the exception of humans like Bob, the foster children who were brought up Under-hill, this was seldom a good idea. Word could get out, and if enough humans became convinced that elves were "real," the elves in question would have to go into strictest hiding. This was usually done with concealment spells, but in the more dangerous cases of hostile humans, an all-out retreat to Underhill often became necessary.

But that wasn't the real danger. One way or another, those situations could be handled. The Folk were experts at hiding from the humans, and throughout their long history had even enhanced their disguises with "fairy tales" they had written themselves.

The main reason the Sidhe avoided relationships with humans was simply that humans grew old and died.

However, when Alinor was younger, he had decided to ignore this advice. Being young, he had convinced himself that he was immune to such pain—

*And I told myself that killjoy adults didn't understand love. They couldn't see how it meant more than life or death.*

Or so he thought.

It had been around a century and a half ago. After falling head over heels in love with a young pioneer girl, Janet Travis, they settled in what was now North Dakota. They were one of the few settlers able to maintain a homestead in that area, as they were the only *wasichu* who could get along with the Lakota Sioux living there.

It helped that they honored the beliefs of the Sioux themselves, hunting rather than farming, never taking from the land more than they could use, never wasting anything, and giving thanks for what the land gave them. Alinor's magic, carefully disguised as earth-medicine, brought the deepest respect from the tribes.

The years passed, the seasons turned, and Alinor and his human bride enjoyed what seemed in retrospect to have been an idyllic existence in the Plains. It was the longest stretch of time he had ever spent away from his own kind, and if it hadn't been for this periodic sojourn Underhill, he might not have survived with his sanity intact. Janet only knew that he was going out hunting—to trap furs to trade for the things they needed. He never told her that he went off Underhill to reproduce the flour, salt, bolts of linen . . . and that the few things he *did* trade for, he went to the Lakota for. Men did that, and she understood. He would go off and return with three elvensteeds laden with enough to see them through -another six months or so.

The problem was, it was hard work reproducing enough goods to last six months. He could be gone as long as a month. And time did not pass Underhill the same way it passed in the real world. He never knew exactly when he would emerge. . . .

One bright winter afternoon, Alinor came back from his semi-annual trip and discovered his beloved Janet was dead.

He had never learned the cause then; and the reason was still a mystery. The Lakota might have been able to tell him, but they were in their winter hunting grounds, and no one had been near the cabin. She could have been hurt—she could have caught an illness—he had no way of telling.

She was forty years old, advanced age for humans of that era, but she had been healthy and young-seeming, without the burden of producing a child each year as women of her time usually did. She had been fine when he left her, and from the condition of their cabin, whatever had killed her had sickened her so quickly that she hadn't had time to do more than close the door, put out the latchstring, and get into her bed.

He'd thought in the first month that he would join her, dying of grief. He'd thought in the second month that no one of the Folk had ever suffered so. In the third month, he burned the cabin to the ground with his power, gave his furs and treasures to the Lakota, and returned to North Carolina and Underhill.

A little older, a little wiser, Alinor sought out the High Court of Elfhame Outremer. He returned to his brethren with his grief. There he learned that others had made the same bonds to mortals as he had, and understood.

*Janet was many years ago, he told himself. I promised myself I would never do that again.*

Still, it had been a very long time since he had taken a human lover; despite her distress he found Cindy appealing, and sensed that she was attracted to him as well.

*But not now. There is a time for everything, he thought, and the time hasn't arrived yet.*

The RV was parked on a section of the Hallet grounds reserved for campers. The camaraderie was as evident here as at the races; the temporary city of tents, campers and rec vehicles provided some sanctuary from the frantic pace of the track. The portable communities followed the races much like the ranks of carnies did at the state fairs, and the faces were always familiar. Al could have walked the distance, but Cindy had seemed ready to melt—and Andur had been right there. And, truth be told—human women found sports-cars exciting. He'd been strutting like a prize cock, hoping that she would admire his "Miata," and that some of that admiration would spill over onto him.

They pulled up next to the RV, near a copse of trees that offered some shade. "My parents had an RV like this. A Winnie, isn't it?" Cindy said as she got out of the Miata.

"Class C Winnebago. With a bunk over the cab," Al said. "Did you say you have parents?"

"Had. They died last year. I had to sell the RV to help settle their estate or I'd still have it," she said. Her words trailed off, and she seemed to withdraw a little.

*I guess I'd better not pursue that one, Al thought, realizing that he'd touched on a sensitive subject. Sounds like this poor girl is all alone in this mess. Without even parents to fall back on. Hearing that surprised him somewhat. For the most part, his small sphere of friends, though far away, were Sidhe. Al thought in terms of the Kin's longevity, not humans'.*

The interior of the RV was pleasantly cool, to Al's relief. But as they entered the door, he found himself embarrassed by the state of the interior. He wished that he had cleaned the place up a little; he couldn't even see the second bed under all the animal, vegetable and mineral flotsam that somehow migrated into the cabin, seemingly of its own volition.



*I think junk breeds in RVs.*

He scooped up an armload of dirty clothes—and other things less identifiable—then dumped the entire load in the tiny bathroom to be sorted. Later. Then he popped the table up, making the bed into a place they could both sit.

“Cozy,” Cindy commented, but it sounded like she was trying to be polite. He noticed her nose wrinkling at an odor.

*Yes, I know. The place smells,* Al thought apologetically. But at the moment she looked like she didn’t care too much. *Why clean the place every day when I can effortlessly make it into my normal nest?* Being one of the Sidhe had its advantages; Al could conjure whatever he wanted for the interior. On most days, his digs would make a Pharaoh envious. Silk sheets covered the beds, and intricate, woven tapestries draped the walls and ceiling of the compact RV, giving it more depth, an illusion of space it just didn’t have. Bob certainly never had any complaints about it. But all that luxury would have to stay in magical “storage”; at least until Cindy was safely stowed away somewhere else.

His harem of illusory dancing girls, complete with fans, grapes and feathered garments, would also have to remain in hiding, stashed away in the netherlands of his magical universe. Only his statue, an ornamental metal reproduction of an art-nouveau Phaeton mascot, could remain the same. When “activated,” it became a graceful, liquid-chrome servant. In its inanimate state, however, it looked like something that had been stolen from someone’s lawn. He’d have to do without her as well.

He sighed. For the time being his home would have to remain a plain, unaugmented recreational vehicle, complete with a monumental mortal mess.

“I don’t think I have to ask if you’re thirsty,” Al said, pulling a large square jug of orange Gatorade from the fridge. “Despite appearances, the cups are clean. I promise. And so is the ice.”

Cindy settled down at the smallish table, letting the cool breeze of the air-conditioner brush across her face. “That feels so good,” she said. “I don’t know how to thank you for all this. Are you sure your friend won’t mind if I stay here tonight?”

“Positive. We’ll work something out,” Al said, though he didn’t know what it would be. He sat at a second place at the table with the other plastic cup of Gatorade. “Feel better?” he asked, as she gulped the orange potion.

*That much we have in common. We both need this magical stuff after all that heat. It always tastes good when you really need it.*

“Much,” Cindy said, sounding like she really meant it. “Tell me, what exactly do you do at the racetrack? You’re not all dirty and grubby like most mechanics I know.”

*Like her ex,* Al thought with hostility, but set the feeling aside. *You don’t know he was a mechanic. Parts store, remember?*

“Originally I’m from the East Coast.” *I’ve come from many places. I’d better tell her one she’ll believe.* “North Carolina, mostly. That’s where the South Eastern Road Racing Association is based. SERRA, for short. And the firm I work for, Fairgrove Industries. We’re running a test-project for the Firestone team.” He didn’t mention he had conjured an engine block from thin air, and was here with Bob to watch how it performed.

“So what, exactly, are you doing here?” she quizzed. “This must be small time compared to what you’re used to.”

“Well no, not really,” Al lied. “Hallet is unique. It takes skill to keep our cars on this one at the speeds we’re traveling. This is a good venue to heat-stress test the cars and their engines. I’m on loan to the Firestone team as I said—what I’m actually doing is monitoring one of our cast-aluminum engine blocks. Different drivers, different conditions, out in this neck of the woods. A good way to make sure that what works at Roebing Road or Road Atlanta will work everywhere.”

“I see,” Cindy said, but it looked like he was losing her again. A faraway, distant look fell over her. Thinking other things.

“Do you think I’ll ever find him?” Cindy finally said, looking at him as if he was the original Sibylline Oracle, or an Archdruid.

He spoke from his heart. “Yes, I think we will. But first things first. Are you tired?”

“Exhausted,” she said, yawning. “This cold air. Feel’s good, but . . .”

“Putting you to sleep, isn’t it?” Al observed, wryly.

“Some,” she admitted. “What time is it, anyway?”

“Eight something, probably. Why don’t you go ahead and crash? I have to go check some things before I turn in.”

“You’re sure I’m no trouble?”

“I’m certain. Go ahead, scoot. Take the bunk over the cab. That plastic curtain pulls across for privacy and snaps at the corners. I can make this table back into a bed for myself.”

*Which should reassure her as to the purity of my -intentions.*

Cindy finished off two more cups of Gatorade before she climbed the ladder into the overhead and finally gave in to sleep. It didn’t take long. *She must be dehydrated*, Al decided, leaving a fourth cup of iced Gatorade in the well at the head of her bed, in case she woke up thirsty.

Before leaving the RV, Al stood in the doorway, looking back at Cindy, lying there asleep. *So trusting of strangers*, he thought. *She doesn’t know anything about me, yet she falls asleep so easily, leaving herself vulnerable. Either I look completely harmless, or the poor girl is very, very naive. Or else she’s so desperate she’d take an offer of help from anyone.*

Alinor left the RV, locking the door and making certain it was secure. He seldom locked it, having his own devices for safeguarding the Winnie, but this time he made an exception.

Night had fallen on the track, and locusts and crickets were out in full force, replacing the race-car roars that had dominated the daylight hours. Around him were small impromptu parties, barbecues, none of which would last very long. Racers tended to respect the next man’s sleep time, and brought the noise inside after about nine or ten at night, adjourning to quiet poker games or TV. Some of them traded videotapes, and a couple had Nintendos casting *their* spell. A tranquil atmosphere fell over the little

makeshift city of tents and campers at night, reminding Al of why he liked racing in general, and these humans in particular. It was as an RV marketer had advertised once, “a community on wheels,” where the people next to you were your neighbors, even if for only one night at a time.

Al walked beyond the campers to an emptying parking lot. Not a lot of spectators on trial days. Only hard-core racing fans showed up for days like these, and those that were not friends of someone here were long gone. *This was a good day to look for her child*, Al thought. *If he had been here, he would have been easy to spot. Too bad they weren't here. Maybe tomorrow . . .*

Maybe—but he didn't have a lot of hope that they really would show up.

Cindy looked a lot like Janet; flyaway brown-blond hair, freckles over the bridge of her nose, direct, blue eyes. Really, allowing for the differences in clothing, she looked amazingly like Janet. He guessed that her sense of humor would be very similar too—and that if she ever really smiled, it would light up her face and make her dazzlingly lovely.

And he was afraid of the effect that would have on him.

He told himself that he had other things to think about, and plenty of them. *I will deal with that later.*

So, what should they do about this missing child? Sit around and wait for him to appear on their doorstep? It didn't seem a very logical way to handle things. *We could keep an eye out for her child tomorrow, but it sure feels like a longshot. I didn't want to tell her that, since this is her only hope. What if they don't come tomorrow? What then?*

Feeling tired, and just a little depressed, Al sat on a tire-wall, watching the sparse traffic on the nearby Cimarron Turnpike. His vision blurred as he gazed at the occasional retreating red taillights, and he began to see how tired he really was. His thoughts turned to his partner, Bob. *He's not going to like this one bit. And I didn't even ask him if she could stay. It's my RV, but it's his home, too. I just took it for granted that he wouldn't mind.*

But then, what else could he have done? She was alone and broke, and a child was involved. . . .

How could he turn his back on a child—or on someone as childlike in her distress as Cindy?

But then again, he didn't know exactly what he was getting into and was beginning to feel a little put out with himself for getting so deeply involved so quickly. *I know what Bob will say: leave it to the Sidhe to stick their noses in where no one else would.* But that thought simply catalyzed his resolve again. *Well, so be it! That's why we get things done.*

Al paced the edge of the parking lot; the asphalt radiated heat and the scent of baking petroleum, still warm from the day's sun. Portions were cracked and dry, the result of years of weathering. A lone Hallet employee wandered the empty parking lot with a bag, picking up litter. *If I had lost a child in this part of the country, how would I go about finding him?*

It didn't take long for him to see that he knew very little about how the mainstream of human society worked. He might as well have been from another planet. For years, especially recently, in modern times, he had relied on humans like Bob to provide a smokescreen for him, concealing him from suspicious eyes and coping with the intricacies of the modern world for him. In fact, of all the Folk Al knew, only Keighvin Silverhair in Savannah knew enough of the modern world to move about in it unaided.

Even at Hallet, Bob played interference for his partner. This was a world within a world, essentially transparent to the rest of the population. His niche as a SERRA and Fairgrove mechanic made him part of the landscape; nobody asked questions around the track if you were an insider, and SERRA automatically qualified him as that. Only outsiders were subject to suspicion. Outsiders—like Cindy, which was probably the reason she'd had so much trouble this afternoon.

When anything went wrong, if an accident happened, there was always a human there to pick up the pieces, to drive the ambulance, to call the hospital. Al had never had to do any of those things. On the rare occasions that police were involved, Al had observed from a distance, preferring to keep his presence as discreet as possible, even -throwing in a concealment spell for good measure. But out here, there were no police to call—those were attached to cities, and Hallet hardly qualified as that. There was someone else in authority in these parts, but he couldn't remember who, or what, they were.

*Blessed Danaa*, Al thought, throwing his arms up in helplessness. *Where does one go for help around here?*

He had no idea. Back at the RV he had felt rather—superior. What was it Bob said? *Macho*, that was it. -Macho to be able to help Cindy out like he did. Then he was in control of the situation. And he was also on his own territory, the racetrack, the Winnie. But now, faced with the prospect of going Out There, into the humans' everyday world, he was at a complete loss.

Then he remembered an ad he'd seen once. *Can't find it? Try the Yellow Pages.*

“The phone book. Of course,” he whispered, barely realizing he'd spoken aloud.

Near the observation tower was a row of public telephones. Al had generally avoided such devices, even when they were in their infancy. There was something inherently wrong about one of the Folk using such a contrivance, when he could send his thoughts and messages to faraway places without them. It was like using crutches to walk when nothing was wrong with your legs. But he went in search of one, and spotted it by the lighted symbol built into it, with the phone book attached by a chain. Some of the pages even *looked* yellow.

“Let's see, her ex-husband's name was Jim Chase. That's the same as James Chase, I think,” he muttered to himself. He fished out the last of his cookies and ate them while he thumbed through the book. The phone book was a bit thinner than the ones he had seen, which might have been a clue to its usefulness had he been operating on the proper wavelength.

Nothing. Not even a “Chase” was listed.

*Okay, then. Be that way. Can't find it? How about “missing children” in the yellow pages?*

No luck. Hallet wasn't exactly a large town. In fact, the directory listed several other towns in the same directory. Frustrated, and tired, he gave up on the phone book. *Time to find Bob*, Al finally admitted. *Maybe he'll have an idea. After all, it's his society.*

Bob wasn't very talkative, as usual, and suggested they tackle the missing child situation in the morning. They had both had a long day, he pointed out, and besides, tomorrow their crew had a day off. Good time to play private investigator. Al agreed, finding it difficult to stay awake. He'd been short on sleep last night, and his body knew it. A few hours from now, he'd be alert, his mind running at top form. Now was

not the time to try to solve -problems.

But there was the need to figure out where to put Bob—

He solved the sleeping logistics by having Andur turn himself into a white van, complete with bed—truth be told, a much nicer environment than the Winnie was at the moment. Bob volunteered for it without Al having to ask; Al retired in the table-turned-bed, with Cindy chastely asleep in the loft, and instantly fell asleep, the woman's proximity notwithstanding.

Dawn brought something besides the crowing of roosters in the nearby farmyards. There were sounds of someone stirring in the RV. Not unusual; Bob often got up before he did, and sometimes even started breakfast, if he felt motivated enough. But the sounds he heard were different, not of someone making a new mess, but of someone . . . cleaning an old one up.

This was terribly out of place. Alarmed, Al sat up abruptly.

“Good morning,” Cindy greeted him cheerfully, from an arm's-length away. “When was the last time you guys cleaned this dump?”

*Egads. A morning person,* Al thought muzzily, as the evening's events came flooding back at him. *I took this Cindy under my wing last night, didn't I? If she's going to be awake and active this early in the morning, maybe I'd better think about putting her somewhere else.* Al fell back on an elbow, watching her sweep the narrow aisle of the RV. The place smelled strongly of ammonia and Lysol, in spite of the fact that the windows were open, the air-conditioner off.

“We have a broom?” Al inquired, yawning.

“Yes, you do,” she replied. “It was in the back of the closet. Still wrapped up with the cardboard thingie on the back. Never used.”

Horried, Al watched her sweep up the dust into a shoebox and begin wiping down the plastic runner with a sponge.

“We don't have a . . .” *What was it called? Oh, yeah,* “A mop. Didn't know you could do it that way.”

She paused, then looked up with a faint smile. “I can tell. Don't worry, I'm almost done. And I guarantee you won't be able to find a thing.”

“That's nice to know,” Al said, uncertain of what exactly she meant. He realized that he was still fully clothed, either because he had been too exhausted to remove his garments the night before, or in his foggy state he was too modest around Cindy to get comfortable. He'd even left the track cap on, with his hair pulled back into a thick ponytail, so as to better hide his ears. *Good. Saves me the trouble of getting dressed.* He glanced out the little side window at the white van that was his elvensteed, and reached with his mind to the sleeping human within. Bob wasn't sleeping; in fact, he wasn't even there. *Must be off doing something.*

He sat up and regarded his small—but now spotless—home. The sink and stove had been cleaned, as had the microwave and refrigerator. These items were now new colors, ones he didn't recognize. Even the cabinets had been wiped clean. He was suddenly ashamed that this human had had to stay here

without the usual concealing spells that made its squalor into splendor.

She deserved better. He began moving the foam-block cushions to make the bed back into a breakfast table, pondering the changes in the RV, and the more unnerving ones deep in himself.

Something was missing, but in this unnatural state of cleanliness, he didn't know what. It was all so . . . -different.

*My clothes!* he realized, in panic, remembering the crumpled, smelly pile of fabric that was developing a life of its own, a fixture that was moved from one location to another without ever really being dealt with. *What did she do with them?*

"Bob is at the laundromat," she said, as if reading his mind. "I had to show him where it was."

Which answered two questions. "It is sort of hard to find," Al said, wondering where it was himself.

She eyed him strangely, then said, "Would you like me to make coffee?"

*Caffeine! Blessed Danaa, no. . . .*

"Uh, no thanks, Cindy. I don't drink coffee." Or anything else with caffeine. "Hard on my stomach. I'm—uh—allergic to it. To caffeine. Badly." Al checked his wristwatch. Ten-thirty. "It's early. And it looks like you've got a lot done. Why don't you take a break?"

"I think I will. Oh, I wanted to ask you. Where did that white van come from?"

Al feigned nonchalance. "Oh, that's ours. The crew's. It kind of gets traded around," he said, hoping she believed him. *I meant to have that changed back to the Miata before anyone got up*, he thought, and hoped that Bob told her the same, if not a similar, story.

Cindy dropped into the tiny booth the bed had become. Al opened a Gatorade, his standard breakfast fare. "How do you feel?"

"Much better. Since it was cool this morning, I went ahead and opened the windows. The cleaners, and all." Al nodded; it was still an uncomfortably strong scent. *Guess that's what clean smells like*. "Thank you for letting me stay here. Hope you don't mind the cleanup."

"Oh, not at all. I'm glad you did. Forgot what the place really looked like."

Bob came into the narrow door, first shoving in a huge laundry bag that Al was distantly aware of owning. It was stuffed to its maximum capacity with, he assumed, clean clothes. A rare treat. It caught in the doorway, and with a visible effort Bob wedged it through.

"Just set it up there," Al said, indicating the now vaca-ated loft. "We have things to do today."

Bob looked around at the RV and the sparkling results of Cindy's work. "Jesus," he said, and sat. "You've been busy. I've been asking around about your boy, Cindy. Nobody here knows anything. Might be they've never been here."

Cindy looked down, to hide the sudden surge of despair. Al felt it anyway. "Oh well. It was worth a try," she -replied, sounding defeated. "I don't know what else to do now."

“Have you called the sheriff’s office?” Bob asked.

“I’ve talked to the Tulsa police. There wasn’t much they could do about it. Then I called the Tulsa County sheriff’s office, and they were sympathetic, but not much help either.”

“Eyah,” Bob said. “But we happen to be in *Pawnee* county here. What you say we give ’em a call? If those nutsos that your ex is involved with set up shop around here, you can bet the Sheriff will know it. And in a place this small, everybody knows everybody else. A new man in town with a small boy is likely to get noticed.”

Al finished his Gatorade and all three trooped to the pay telephones to call the Pawnee County Sheriff’s office. Bob gave Al a nod and a significant look; Al shrugged and stood aside to let Bob make the call.

“Well, I think we might be in luck,” Bob said, hanging up the phone. He had spoken for several minutes in a hushed monotone that was hard to listen to. The one-sided conversation shed little light on what the person on the other side was saying. “Deputy named Frank knows about some kind of whacked-out religious cult in this area. -Actually, it’s closer to Pawnee than Hallet, from what Frank says. He wants to talk to us.”

“Well, then,” Alinor said. “Let’s go.”

“In what? The Miata’s only a two-seater,” Bob said.

Al gave him the hairy eyeball, cleared his throat loudly, and continued. “The crew gave us the van. Remember?”

“Oh, yes. The *van*, ” he responded, while Al wondered what he had told Cindy about the elvensteed and the mysteriously appearing and disappearing van.

But at the moment, Cindy didn’t seem to notice the awkward exchange, or care. She had a gleam in her eye, excitement that could only be a glimmer of hope.

Pawnee was a tiny little burg nestled among the rolling hills of Northeast Oklahoma, similar to a dozen other towns that Bob and Al had passed through on their trip to Hallet. Pawnee itself was built on a series of hills, giving it an uneven, tilted look. It looked old, and for -Oklahoma, which had been granted statehood in 1907, that meant sometime early this century. The dates on the masonry of some of the buildings confirmed this: 1911, 1922, 1923. City Hall was behind an elaborate storefront, on a red brick street unevened with time. Across a street-wide gulf of time and technology was a Chevy-Geo dealership, displaying the latest Storms and Metros in the same showroom window that once must have hawked carriages, Model T’s, and Woodies.

Al had a definite feeling of *déjà vu*, thinking maybe he had been here before, in his youth, when horses and sprung carriages were just starting to replace horses and buckboards. Even in modern times the town maintained a tranquil, relaxed atmosphere.

They passed a Texaco, a mom and pop steakhouse, a tag office, a Masonic temple and assorted city blocks of ancient brick structures that had no obvious function, their windows boarded or bricked over. Pickup trucks and enormous cars from the sixties and seventies seemed to be the preferred mode of

transportation here. Townfolk strolled the sidewalks, casting annoyed or disdainful looks at the few hopped-up teenmobiles haunting the streets. *Lunchtime*, Al noted, thinking there was probably a high school nearby.

In the center of Pawnee was a grassy knoll, surrounded on three sides by brick streets; Al had forgotten such anachronisms still existed. The seat of Pawnee County government sat atop the knoll, guarded by a large piece of artillery, a museum piece forever enshrined on the front lawn. Behind this stood a WWI memorial, a statue of a soldier with flowers spelling "PAWNEE" at its feet. The courthouse was a three-story brick building, surrounded by a few cedar and oak trees. Carved in stone, across the top of the structure, were the words: pawnee county -courthouse.

As they approached, Al could see a single car in the parking lot, with the traditional silver star of authority painted proudly on its side.

"This *is* it for the whole county?" Bob exclaimed as they climbed out of the van. "Doesn't seem like much."

"Pawnee County *is not* highly populated," Al reminded him, then jibed, "I thought you didn't like metro areas."

"I don't. I just expected more, is all."

Cindy held her purse closer, as if it were a teddy bear. Then she checked to be sure the photo of Jamie was still inside. "I don't care if it's a shack, as long as they can help me find my son. Is the sheriff's office in there?"

"Should be. That's where the car is. Let's have a look."

The courthouse smelled old; smelled of dust, layer upon layer of ancient floorwax, more layers of woodpolish, of old papers stuffed away in boxes and forgotten, and of heat-baked stone. There was no air-conditioning in the central part of the building. The floor was hand-laid terrazzo, cheap and popular in the thirties, and worth a small fortune today. In the hallway, handpainted signs hung over battered, wooden doors, thick with brown paint applied over the years. There was not a person in sight in the overpowering silence. Al began to wonder if they were in the right place.

"Is there anyone here?" Cindy said, as they walked uncertainly down the hallway. "No people."

"This is it. Look," Bob said, going towards a sign that said "sheriff's office," with an arrow pointing down. They took a short flight of stairs to the courthouse basement, and found the Pawnee County Sheriff's office behind a glass door.

Again, the place seemed to be staffed by ghosts. They looked over a receptionist's counter into a well-furnished office. The walls were half-faded government-blue and half-wood paneling. Then, from an adjacent office, a chair squeaked, and a deputy appeared.

"Yes? Can I help you?" the young man said. "Are you . . ."

"We called a half an hour ago," Bob said.

"You must be Cindy Chase, then," he said to Cindy. "Please come in. I'm Frank Casey, I hope I can help you."



Frank was exactly what a deputy in Oklahoma should look like, Al decided. He was sizable, with short, coal-black hair, dark skin, high cheekbones. He was without a doubt part Native American, *alarge* man who barely cleared the doorway to his office. He wore a dark brown uniform with tan pants, and had a deep, booming voice that commanded immediate attention. He moved slowly, as if through -water, and had a gaze that suggested he was drowsy. But Al saw he was anything but dim; his eyes shone with subdued intelligence, an intensity that seemed appropriate for anyone in a position of authority. He was capable, and concerned about Cindy. Al decided that he was an ally.

Frank pushed open a creaking brass-trimmed door and led them to his office. Three ancient varnished-oak folding chairs had been set up, apparently in preparation for their visit, in front of a pressboard computer desk with a gleaming-white IBM PC sitting incongruously atop it.

“Have you filled out one of these?” Frank asked right away, shoving a piece of paper across the desk to Cindy, a form for a “runaway or missing person report.”

She nodded without taking it. “In Atlanta, and again in Tulsa. Last time they said it was already in the computer.”

“Good,” Frank said, sitting at the computer. “That will save time. Lets see what the NCIC has to say about it.”

“NCIC?” Al asked.

“National Crime Information Center.” Frank tapped away, and soon a menu filled the screen. “If you filled out a report in Atlanta, then it was entered there. This will tell us if anything else has developed lately that you don’t know about yet.”

After a few moments he frowned and said, “James Chase, Jr. Kidnaped from school by one James Byron Chase, your husband—”

“Ex-husband,” Cindy quickly interrupted.

“And last seen in Tulsa, a week ago. Hmm. And now you think he’s in Pawnee County?”

“I thought he might have been at Hallet. You know, the races. They’re big car fans, the both of them. . . .”

“Tell me about it,” Frank said calmly. “Tell me the whole story. From the first time you thought something was wrong. There might be something there I can use to help you, and we’ve got time.”

Al paid no attention to the words; this time he narrowed his eyes as he tried to sort out the feelings involved. As Cindy told the deputy about the changes in her husband, Al had the feeling she was somehow trying to justify the search for her son, emphasizing that James Chase was no longer the man she married, that he had become a -monster and was nothing like the caring, giving father of her son that she knew. Almost . . . apologetic. *For as many years as those two had been married, there must have been somekind of ongoing emotional abuse for her to feel so responsible about the situation. Emotional abuse results in emotional damage. Great Danaa, look at Bob when we rescued him. Gundar thought he was autistic until he peeked out from under that thick, defensive shell .*

When she got to the part about the Chosen Ones, Frank became visibly more alert. “After that first

meeting I knew I had to get Jamie to a shelter, but I was too afraid to do anything. Then, after James dragged him off the second time, he came home in hysterics. Something happened—I still don't know what. But it was the last straw."

Frank's eyes burned with an intensity that made Al think of the Lakota warriors he had known so many years ago. "I see. And the leader of this cult, what was his name?"

Cindy bit her lip. "Brother something. Brother *Joseph*, I think it was. Totally nuts."

Frank calmly got up and went to a file cabinet. When he returned he held a thick file, and opened it out on his desk. He handed Cindy a glossy photograph from a stack of others. "Is this the man?"

Cindy stifled a gasp as she looked at the picture, holding it by the edges as if it were tinged with poison. "That's him, all right," she said, half in fear and half in anger. "Those eyes. I could never forget them."

"Then it is true. More evidence. Another angle to this mess."

"What mess?" Al asked.

"This cult," Frank said, speaking the word as if it tasted vile. "They've set up shop right here in our county. There's hundreds of them, perhaps thousands. For the past three years they've been building this damned thing right under our noses and we never knew about it until recently. Here. Look at these."

Frank handed her what looked like an aerial photograph. Bob and Al, sitting on either side, leaned in closer for a look.

"What am I looking at?" Bob asked.

"We asked the State Highway police to fly in and take some pictures a few months back." Frank's eyes continued to smolder, and Al sensed a deep and abiding anger -behind the calm facade. "The construction you see there is pretty much done by now. But there you can see the equipment in use. From what I can see from these, and it's not much, it looks like they're digging bunkers for World War III."

"That would make sense," she said thoughtfully. "I remember something from that sermon, or whatever it was, about an invasion that was going to happen any time now."

Frank raised one eyebrow. "From any particular direction? Any special enemies?"

Cindy shook her head tiredly. "The Soviets, the Jews, the blacks, the gays, the Satanists, pick a group—any or all together. They didn't seem to differentiate one from the other. But from the sounds of that bunch, I don't think it would matter. He could say hairdressers or Eskimos and they'd still believe him."

Frank sat back in his chair and fingered one corner of the file folder. "We've tried to get a search warrant to kind of check things out. No luck. They have a tight-assed lawyer—pardon my language, ma'am—who has filed injunction after injunction, blocking the warrants. The judge has no choice but to grant them. We don't have enough evidence. The lawyer, as crazy as he is, knows his business. Especially the loopholes in our legal system. You'd think he wrote 'em, he knows them so well."

"What about building codes?" Bob asked. "Those bunkers look a little questionable."

“That’s the sad part about it,” Frank said. “That part of the county is unincorporated, so there aren’t a lot of permits you have to get. We already cleared them, including the Environmental Impact Assessment, years ago, without really checking it out. The inspector in charge back then has since retired, when we found out he had serious problems of a nature I’m not at liberty to discuss. We even have the blueprints to the place they filed when they applied for the permits. It *looks* like they built more than originally declared, but it’s all underground, and we can’t tell from outside. And we can’t get a warrant to go in.”

“Can we see the—blueprints?” Al asked, though he wasn’t sure what a blueprint was.

“Nothing much to see,” Frank said. The blueprints were in a desk drawer, and he spread them out over the open file.

“All this here, and here, looks like living quarters. The area isn’t zoned so we couldn’t get them on zoning violations. The rest, I don’t know. But it’s legit. All of it. At least everything they actually filed for.” He folded the blueprints up and returned them to his drawer. “After they scared the EPA guy off with a squad of six armed bald goons following him around, nobody wants to go in and inspect. And there’s nothing leaking into the aquifer or spilling into the creek, so we can’t go in there *on that* excuse.”

“They had guns. Lots of guns. What do your laws say about that?” Cindy asked.

“They’re legal, on private property. To own and to discharge. They’re not within any city limits. They’re their own city. Unincorporated, of course, but a city nonetheless. And if they ever incorporate—they can make their own laws.”

“Even machine guns are legal?”

Frank gazed at Cindy a long moment. “Are you referring to assault weapons?”

“I guess,” she said doubtfully. Frank got to his feet, amazingly agile for such a big man.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” he said.

While Frank was gone Al leaned forward and glanced through the file. On top was a map, crudely drawn, which seemed to be of the cult’s hideout in relation to the land and roads around it. He leaned back in his seat before Frank returned.

“Did they look anything like this?” Frank said, brandishing a fierce-looking rifle. “It’s a Colt AR-15. If they have too many of these I’ll be most displeased.”

“Well, they had some of those.” She frowned. “But there were other kinds, too. Can I have something to write with?”

“Here’s a pad,” Frank said, shoving a notepad and pencil across the desk to her. “Can you draw what you saw?”

She was already sketching. Frank stowed the assault rifle and returned; she gave him the rudimentary drawing of a weapon.

He frowned. “This looks like an AK-47. The clip curled out, like this?”

She nodded vigorously. “Uh-huh. They had other guns—.45s, shotguns, 30-30s. My husband owns a World War II Luger. He has it with him. But I saw an awful lot of the ones with the curled clip.”

“Christ on a crutch,” Frank muttered. “Just what we need. A nest of crazies with assault guns in our hills, waiting for Commies.”

“It’s the same group,” Bob interjected. “The same ones *we know* James Chase was with. And we know he took the boy and vanished when they did. Isn’t that enough for a search warrant?”

Frank gave him an opaque look. “To search for what, exactly?”

“To search for Jamie. That’s why we’re here today,” Al pointed out.

Frank frowned, and said slowly, “I’ll talk to the DA, but I don’t know. *I would* have said ‘yes,’ but that was a while back. I’ve already locked horns with these crazies and come off losing too many times. There were some things about this cult that I thought were cut and dried, but I was dead wrong. Can’t shut someone down for their religion, no matter how weird, and their lawyer knows every angle of religious-discrimination law. And they’ve tied themselves in to being a Christian group, and Christians have the swing around here. That’s the story.”

“How much evidence do you need?” Cindy said, sounding mystified. Al was just as frustrated, a hard ball of tension forming in the pit of his stomach. He could not believe this group was getting away with so much, as Frank phrased it, right under their noses. *Brother Joseph is a shrewd one, to have picked this community. He did his homework.*

“I understand your frustration, Miz Chase,” Frank said, rubbing his temple with his knuckles, as if his head hurt. “And I have my own set of frustrations. I’m the only one around here who wants to get excited about it. I think part of the problem is folks around here, they don’t quite grasp the magnitude of what’s taking place. Those people don’t come into town, not even to shop. They do that in Tulsa, by the truckload. Most of them stay cooped up in that complex. Those that do leave, they leave their guns -behind, except for maybe rifles in the gunracks in the cab window and big crucifix stickers, and you see that everywhere.” Frank shifted in his chair, looking thoughtful. “What I’ve seen up close I don’t like either. They have guards at the gates leading into the complex, and they politely ask me to leave whenever I show up. There are probably more children in that place than we realize, but I’ve only seen a half-dozen of the kids go to the schools here.”

“They what?” Cindy said, sitting up. “Is Jamie one of them?”

Frank shook his head, and motioned for her to calm down. “Don’t think so, ma’am. I mean, I can’t be sure without checking, but I truly don’t believe they’d let him off their grounds if they have him. I’ve talked to some of the teachers. Kids seem to be from all over the country, complete with school records. They’re legit, all right. But, the teachers say the kids are basically quiet; sort of keep to themselves, don’t say much about religion or anything else. They don’t trust the other kids. They move around in a tight little huddle, staying together. You can talk to them, but they won’t talk to you. They just stare at you till you go away. And that pretty much describes everyone at the compound.”

“Could I talk to one of them?” Cindy asked hopefully.

Frank shook his head. “Even if you could get one to talk, might not be a good idea. Could tip them off. If they sent your husband and Jamie out of this county, there’s nothing we could do about it. My guess is these kids are brainwashed to the point of being ‘safe’ to let outside the group. Doubt you’d get much

more out of 'em than I have.”

Soon, after more dead-end discussions, both parties came to the conclusion that there wasn't a great deal that could be done right then. Cindy's frustration was obvious even to the deputy; Bob had his jaw clenched tight, and Al felt the muscles of his back and shoulders bunching with the need to do *something*. But there was nothing to be done.

Legally.

*And that's the real trick, isn't it?*

Frank wished them well and gave them each his card, with his home number on it, along with instructions to call him “if anything came up.” Al noted later that the deputy seemed embarrassed that he couldn't do much. Something else was holding him back, but Frank wasn't saying what it was. He also had the feeling that if *they* did something a little on the wrong side of the fence to get information, Frank would look the other way, even cover for them. He didn't come out and say that, but he kept giving both him and Bob significant looks whenever he mentioned how much *his* hands were tied.

*That doesn't matter; we don't really need him now. We know their location, some of their habits, and we have a lead,* he thought, plans of his own beginning to form, as they left the county courthouse. *I think I should go check out these people myself.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

The day after Jamie and his father had gone to Tulsa for supplies, Jamie gave up the search for allies, especially regarding the question of his missing mother. Nobody, including Joe, wanted to discuss it.

That negative reaction from Joe had been a disappointing surprise. He'd always thought he could tell Joe anything—and *he knew* how much Joe loved *his* mother, even though he never said much about it. He was always taking her bunches of wildflowers. He'd thought Joe would understand how much he missed her. . . .

Anyone he'd even mentioned his mother to specifically forbade him to bring the subject up with anyone else; so by the time he talked with Sarah, he had already decided to keep quiet about it, even with her.

But today he was having second thoughts about that, as the situation at the vacation place began to weigh more heavily on him. They still weren't letting him eat anything, and the juice they gave him never came close to filling him up. Hunger pangs came and went, with increasing frequency and intensity. Sometimes lately he had trouble standing up, and he always got dizzy if he walked too far. If he was getting sick, he knew it would be his own fault because he didn't have faith in Brother Joseph; at least, that was what everyone else would tell him. Then they'd tell him he had to confess his lack of faith and be healed.

Not a chance! He'd rather just suffer. Brother Joseph was too frightening to trust, but try to get the rest of *them* to see that! If you had faith, everyone told him, you wouldn't get sick. If you didn't, you did.

So he didn't tell anyone about the fainting spells, but he knew the time would soon come when he wouldn't be able to keep them secret.

In the meantime, he drank all the juice they'd let him have, and lots of water. He was still allowed to do that, and if you drank enough, the hunger went away. For a little while.

He had trouble sleeping again that night, and not just from the hunger, since Daddy had brought several bottles of joy juice to their room, the strong, amber kind, in funny-shaped bottles. The only word he could read on the label was Kentucky, and why it was on there he didn't know, 'cause that was a state. When Daddy drank that kind of joy juice something happened to his throat that made him snore real loud, and he rolled around on the bare mattress in his sleep. To keep from getting squished Jamie slid off the mattress and curled up in the corner with a blanket that was covered with tiny bugs.

But that didn't really matter to him. He just wanted to sleep. The bugs didn't bother him as much as usual.

He got up before Daddy did and went down to the showers, where other kids were getting ready for school, too. He had forgotten to wash his clothes out the night before, so he would have to wear them again, with that funny smell they got when he slept in them. A week earlier one of the other boys had stolen his clothes and hidden them down the hallway while he was in the shower, but his daddy caught him and whipped the living tar out of him. Jamie overheard some of the things they said, things he didn't like. The daddy told the boy that Jamie and his dad were poor and homeless before joining the Sacred Heart, and that it was wrong to pick on needy people like that. Jamie never thought of himself as poor, and he knew they had a home; Mommy was there, or at least that was what he thought, since she wasn't in Tulsa.

Now the boy would have nothing to do with him, and had turned the others against him as well, because he'd been punished. The other kids said nothing as they got cleaned up, and Jamie started to feel a little bit to blame for the whipping the first boy got. It hurt when they ignored him, although it made him even more grateful that he had Sarah for a friend.

School that day was a little different. They didn't talk about Jews and blacks much, or Israel or the divine plan Brother Joseph had in store for them. Part of the day was spent studying a machine for making drinking water. The process was called "reverse osmosis" and Miss Agatha made them memorize it and spell it fifty times on the chalkboard. "There will come a time when we will need this," the teacher admonished; Jamie didn't understand the need for the machine when you could just turn a faucet on, but he didn't ask any questions. Miss Agatha would just have made him write something else fifty times on the chalkboard, and it would probably be nasty and full of hate.

During lunch break, Jamie was sent to a room all by himself with his juice while the other kids went on to the cafeteria. He was still under orders to not eat until they summoned the "Holy Fire," Miss Agatha reminded him.

He tried to make the juice last, but it was gone all too quickly. Funny, he'd never liked V8 before, but now he would have drunk as much of it as he could have gotten. He wished that Brother Joseph would go and get it over with. His stomach was not hurting as much anymore, but he did feel weaker today. Daddy had slipped him some crackers and cheese the night before, and that helped a little, and there had been Joe's Tootsie Pop. But sitting here alone in the empty, thick-walled room, with nothing but a chair and a lightbulb, made him want to cry. He heard Miss Agatha say something about "sensory deprivation" and this room, but didn't understand any of it. He just knew it was boring in here.

Nobody was around, not even Miss Agatha. After a while, he realized that would make it easy to talk to Sarah.

“Sarah,” he offered cautiously. “You there?”

*:Right here,:* she said, her voice filling the space between his ears. Jamie had put a pair of stereo headphones on once, and this was the same kind of effect. *:They’re all gone?:*

“To eat,” Jamie said dejectedly. “There was something I wanted to talk with you about yesterday. But I was afraid to.”

Jamie sensed anger, which quickly dissipated. *:You don’t have to be afraid to talk to me. You know that.:*

“Sorry,” he said. “It was just, I was confused, you know? First Daddy gets weird, then Joe yells at me. . .”

*:It was about the milk carton, wasn’t it?:*

“How did you know?”

Silence.

“Okay, okay,” Jamie said, a little sullenly. After all, she was only a girl—she didn’t have to rub it in how much more she knew. Everybody here said girls weren’t as important as boys. “You know a lot more than I do. You already told me.”

*:Iseemore, is all,:* Sarah said, impatiently. *:And you know everything else they tell you is a lie. Why shouldn’t I see more than you do? Because I’m a girl?:*

He blushed with embarrassment at getting caught thinking nasty thoughts. “Sorry,” he mumbled. “Just, they kepttelling me—”

*:And it’s hard to keep remembering how much they lie. I know, Jamie. What’s bugging you?:*

Jamie had the feeling she already knew, but he told her anyway. “I haven’t seen my mother in a long time. Daddy said she’d be in Tulsa, but she wasn’t there. Nobody around here wants to talk about it. What’s going on?”

*:I’m not sure, right now,:* Sarah said, hesitantly. Jamie didn’t know if he could believe her or not. It wasn’t like her to not know everything. *:Look, it’s not ’cause I can’t tell or won’t find out. I need more—stuff. Think about your mother. Think about what she looks like.:*

Jamie did, fully aware that Sarah could see exactly what was going on in his mind. This once made him uncomfortable, when he remembered all the bad things he used to think about girls, and even some of the mean tricks he used to play on them at school in Atlanta. But if Sarah saw these things, she didn’t let on. She accepted him unconditionally, the only one besides his mother to ever do that. He reminded himself just how much he trusted her. Hey, she’d even been nice when he was thinking girls weren’t as good as boys. . . .

*:She’s not here, not at their Sanctuary anyway,:* Sarah said suddenly. *:But I think . . . she’s close.*

Nearby. *She's not as far away as Atlanta, anyway.:*

Hope flared. "In Tulsa?"

*:I don't know. Don't give up, all right? I'll keep looking. Until I find her, though, you can trust Joe. I think I could even talk to him directly, if he didn't close his mind off the way he does. He has . . . things he can do, but he doesn't want anyone to know, because of what they would all think about him. They'd figure it was the work of the devil, and there's no telling what they would do about it.:*

There was a warning in her voice that made him shiver. Miss Agatha had hinted some horrible things about what was done with people who were "possessed of the devil."

"I dunno," he said doubtfully. "I mean, his daddy is Brother Joseph. I don't think he'd snitch on me, but—"

*:His father might be Brother Joseph, but that doesn't mean Joe's like him. There's a lot of good in Joe, and he doesn't agree with much of what his daddy does. He'll help you, the same way he tried to help me.:* She sounded very positive, and very tired.

But he hadn't known Joe had been helping Sarah. "What happened, you know, with you and Joe?"

Again, silence. Jamie had learned that this usually meant she didn't want to talk about something, and he let it rest. He sat on the crude chair for some time, wondering if she had left, when she spoke again.

*:Joe will see you after school. Go with him.:*

And she was gone. Her presence vanished, like a candle blown out by the wind. In the past he had tried to get her back, but once she was gone, he knew that it would be a while before she would return. He wished he could have had time to say good-bye. As usual, he didn't. That was just Sarah's way. Maybe she didn't like saying good-bye. . . .

*Joe will be there, after school. We'll get to go do something, maybe go outside,* Jamie thought, as the lingering traces of Sarah disappeared. The prospect of being with his "big brother" was enough to dissipate the misery, even enough to make him forget his hollow stomach. *Oh boy!*

And even though his gnawing hunger made him forgetful, so that he made mistakes when Miss Agatha asked him questions that afternoon, talking with Sarah must have brought him luck. Miss Agatha just nodded indulgently, said something to the others about "the special Gift Jamie has is coming through," and prompted him until he got the answer right. That didn't earn him any friends among the other kids, though, because Miss Agatha was even harder on them as if to make up for being easy on him—

But in the end, he didn't care. He had Sarah, he had Joe. If the other kids were going to be dumb-butts because of something *he* couldn't help, let them. They were jerk-faces anyway. If he'd been home in Atlanta, he wouldn't have hung around with any of them. All they did was parrot Miss Agatha's hateful stuff and play games like "coon hunt" and "burn the nigger." That was what they called blacks; niggers. Jamie *knew* that wasn't right—his teachers in Atlanta, the ones he trusted, said that calling a black kid a "nigger" was like calling a kid in a wheelchair "cripple" or "freak."

After school was over, Joe was waiting outside for him, just like Sarah said. It wasn't the first time Joe had met him afterwards, but since his guard duty usually ran past the time school was out, it was rare to



see Joe right -after class. As always, he was wearing his uniform, with his AK-47 slung over his shoulder alongside a backpack.

The other children coursed around him like a flooding river around a solid rock. Some shot him angry glances, including Miss Agatha, who sniffed as she walked past. Jamie had sensed the contempt earlier, some sort of jealousy over his relationship with Joe, and as usual he disregarded it.

“Wanna go fishing?” Joe asked right away, and instantly, Jamie’s world lit up.

“Sure!” he replied enthusiastically. Then he frowned, not knowing where exactly you could fish around here. Unless Joe wanted to go to a park somewhere else; but that would mean leaving the vacation place, and he had never been allowed to do that, unless he was with his father. After drinking as much joy juice as he had the night before, James wouldn’t be very good company today. “Where?” he asked doubtfully.

Joe chuckled. “There’s a pond over near the north side of the complex. Only a few of us know about it. We’ll have to stop and get a bow to fish with, though.”

Jamie had thought the only way to fish was with a pole, or maybe even a net. But as they walked, Joe explained how it could be done with a bow and arrow, if you were good. There were plenty of hunting bows in the armory. Joe had a special bow in mind, one his dad had purchased for him when he was Jamie’s age.

After the revelation that Joe was Brother Joseph’s son, Jamie had begun to see that his friend had a few more privileges in the Guard than others his own age. They were, he realized, exercising some of them now; nobody else had unlimited access to the armory. At least, not among the kids.

“Let’s walk,” Joe said. He had talked about borrowing a motorcycle, but had apparently decided against it. “It’s not as hot today. Rained this morning.”

Living underground, you didn’t notice things like rain or sunshine. Jamie squinted at the bright glare of the sun. It reminded him again how dim it was below. They passed by guards periodically. Joe waved and they waved back, letting them out of the complex without question. The boy knew that the story would be different when they came back through, when they would be searched. But he wasn’t going to worry about that yet. When they came to the final gate, Joe told the guard they would be fishing a while and would be back before too long. The guard wished them luck and locked the tall chain-link gate behind them.

It occurred to Jamie that if they caught fish, he might be able to get a bite to eat. But eating meant cooking, and cooking meant a fire and things to cook with, things they didn’t have. Jamie remembered something called sooshee that was raw fish, and before today the idea never appealed to him. Today was a different story. If Daddy could cheat and sneak him some cheese and crackers, maybe Jamie could do the same with the fish they could catch.

So he asked him, “Hey, Joe, when we catch the fish, can we make sooshee out of it?”

“Naw,” he said. “We have to throw them back.” Then he eyed the boy warily, as if suddenly understanding the purpose of the remark. “You know you’re on a strict Holy Fire fast. I’d get in big trouble if I let you eat anything.”

Somehow Jamie wasn’t surprised. Even though Joe was his best friend, next to Sarah, he was still under

orders from Brother Joseph. Now that he knew Brother Joseph was Joe's father, that added a new dimension to the threat. Jamie knew you couldn't get into nearly as much trouble with other daddies as you could with your own.

He dropped the subject about food, remembering the vehemence with which Joe had responded to the milk carton question. He didn't want a replay of *that* miserable scene.

The barbed wire fences receded behind them as they took a trail through the oak forest skirting the northern edge of the complex. Jamie felt a little happier, knowing the other kids, who would kill for a chance to go into the woods and play, were sitting somewhere underground dreaming about what he was doing now. Birds called and flew overhead, and something skittered through the grass and leaves along the path.

Presently they came upon a clearing.

Jamie suddenly felt cold. There was a foreboding sense of dread attached to the place, a feeling of evil, or suffering. He was sort of seeing things inside his head. The vague images flowing through his mind were shifting and confusing; having been told by Brother Joseph not to share these impressions with anyone else, he didn't tell Joe about his feelings or what he was seeing.

"You've never been to this place before," Joe said firmly. "And don't you never tell anyone you were here."

Jamie nodded, feeling a little sick to his stomach. The images grew stronger, and he began to wonder if Sarah was feeding them to him. She had done that before, when they first met, but that was a long time ago and they were good friends now. Sarah could talk to him in person now. That is, if she wasn't afraid of coming to this place.

"We had to bury somebody here," Joe said suddenly, and the words shocked Jamie. "She died real young, but the Chosen Ones, we bury our own here."

"This is like a graveyard?" Jamie asked, hesitating.

Joe nodded absently. "Yep, but no one knows about it."

Jamie looked about in alarm. "What 'bout the headstones?"

"Like I said, nobody knows about it. If there were headstones, everybody would know, wouldn't they? Daddy was afraid of putting tombstones up because he was afraid they'd be visible from the air—" Joe suddenly cut his sentence off, sounding like he'd said something he shouldn't have. Jamie acted like nothing was wrong, even though the bad, dark feeling was getting stronger. It was different here than it was with the Holy Fire, and not as bad. The feeling was more a terror of something that had already happened, as opposed to something that *was about* to happen *to him*, as during the rituals with Brother Joseph. But he also suspected the two feelings were related, in a distant sort of way.

They went over to a mound of dirt about as long and wide as a beach towel. The earth had been turned sometime recently, maybe this spring, but Jamie could see that it had been more than a few weeks. Wild weeds had sprung up, while the more permanent grass, which took longer to grow, came in around the edges. It was plainly somebody's grave, and the revelation left him feeling hollow and icky inside.

Joe knelt and took off the backpack. From within the front pouch he pulled out a battered bouquet of

wild-flowers. *Must have picked those while I was in class*, Jamie thought, surprised. *Must have been someone important, whoever this was*.

“I hate to think nobody remembers Sarah,” he said as he lay the flowers on the mound.

*Sarah? My Sarah?*

Joe sighed. “You wouldn’t remember her. She died long before you came here.”

“But . . .” Jamie blurted. He didn’t know what to say, other than: *Sarah can’t be dead, I just talked to her! In my head!* But that sounded too strange and unbelievable, so he didn’t. Besides, Sarah was his secret, and lately Joe was showing basic problems where certain topics were concerned. Not untrustworthiness yet; but, well, there were things he just wouldn’t discuss with someone who had blown up the way Joe had over the milk carton.

Joe just knelt there, staring at the grave.

Suddenly, despite the fact that he didn’t want to believe it, Jamie knew this was the *same* Sarah. *Had to be*. As he looked at the mound of dirt, images formed mistily in his mind, a gust of something, a spirit, a smell, like baby powder, only a little sweeter. Sarah’s scent. Jamie watched Joe in concealed horror, finally accepting that all along he hadn’t been talking with a person, exactly.

He had been talking with a ghost. And ghosts were supposed to be scary.

*But Sarah’s not scary*, he thought, in confusion. *Sarah’s my friend!* He stared at the grave, while Joe bowed his head like he was praying.

The images that had been lurking at the periphery of his mind now sprang into full, vivid life, coalescing, condensing, forming a story, a kind of movie in his head. A scary story—the kind his mommy wouldn’t let him watch on TV. He knew that without knowing how he knew it. And he knew he would have to watch *this* story, because it wasn’t just a story, it was real.

*Jamie saw her clearly now, standing just beyond the clearing on a short, grassy knoll. Sarah was a girl his age with black hair and delicate brown eyes, in a calico dress that fluttered slowly in the windless afternoon. Joe didn’t see her, and Jamie knew that was only because she didn’t want to be seen.*

Her mommy and daddy had joined the cult, too, only they had disappeared suddenly, and nobody knew where they were. Brother Joseph told Sarah that they would be back, that they had just gone to Tulsa for a little while. Sarah didn’t believe it then, but played along because she feared Brother Joseph, just like Jamie did now.

And for the same reason. Brother Joseph had been starving her just like he was being starved, and had used her as an instrument for communicating with the Holy Fire. At first her parents had objected. Then they went along with it, or at least they told her to do what Brother -Joseph said, until they worked things out. Then, they disappeared. Sarah was afraid Brother Joseph had something to do with that. The weeks went by slowly, and still no parents. This was starting to sound familiar to Jamie.

Meanwhile Brother Joseph held the Praise Meetings, and the Black Thing came closer to Sarah no

matter how hard she tried to keep it away. Sometimes, during the same rituals that Jamie dreaded, she actually touched that dark, horrible thing, but most of the time she pretended to see it, telling Brother Joseph what he wanted to hear.

The preacher said it was a good thing, this Holy Fire, but Sarah knew better, and kept it at bay as best she could.

Then one night it came too close, and she couldn't repel it. The hunger had been intense, and the lack of food had weakened her will as well as her body. Brother Joseph yelled at her to touch it—and, unable to fight him, she did.

The suffocating thing tried to pull her in. She cried hysterically and broke with it. Brother Joseph ordered the congregation to leave, informing them the Praise Meeting was over. When they had gone, and his personal bodyguards had locked all the doors, he turned to Sarah and grabbed her throat with his perfectly white manicured hands.

“You will do what I say, you little slut, always!” Brother Joseph screamed, and the images became shaky as Sarah lost consciousness. Then the series of images ended, and Jamie was vaguely aware of . . . a different kind of -darkness. . . .

“Jamie! Jamie, what is it?”

When he opened his eyes Joe was looking down at him, his face contorted with concern. “Are you okay? What's the matter?”

Jamie's vision blurred again; he closed his eyes to keep from being sick, and he felt Joe pick him up and carry him away from Sarah's grave. He felt something wet and cold at his lips, and he drank deeply. The water had a funny metal taste to it, but he didn't care as he guzzled all that was offered.

He opened his eyes again. Joe was kneeling in front of him, his expression a mixture of concern and fear. The clearing where Sarah was buried was in sight but further away, making it tolerable now. Above, an enormous oak shaded them from the summer sun, and nearby he heard water running.

“You passed out back there.” Joe frowned. “Weak?”

“I guess,” he said, and admitted to Joe what he hadn't told anyone else. “I feel funny.”

Joe felt his forehead. “You're warm, but that ain't nothin' in this heat. Are you going to be all right? You wanna go back?”

Jamie sat up, finding his strength returning—as much of it as there was, anyway. He didn't want to go back, so he forced a smile and said, “I'm fine now. Let's go fishing.” He looked behind him, toward the sound of running water. “That a creek back there?”

Joe seemed to be having second thoughts. “No, I'd better get you back. I don't like the way you just dropped like that.” He paused, as if considering something. “You said you knew Sarah, back there. After you passed out. What didja mean 'xactly when you said that?”

“Dunno,” Jamie said. “I'm okay now,” he added, trying not to let the disappointment show in his voice.

“We’d better hurry, if we’re going to get to supper on time.”

About halfway back to the vacation place, Jamie remembered he wasn’t going to be getting any supper.

Frank Casey felt his tired eyes drying. He’d stared at the computer screen for a solid minute before blinking. There it was, right in front of him, all the information he needed to find a kidnaped little boy. And not a damned thing he could do about it.

The three people who had just left his office, the boy’s mother and the two oddball road-warriors, were the only people in the county who seemed to care about this peculiar cult setting up shop in their backyard. When he first learned of the Chosen Ones, Frank had been willing to live and let live, until he saw the clues that people were -being controlled in some obscure, sinister way. And after listening to Cindy talk about the assault weapons, and the other implements of destruction the cult seemed to take a keen interest in, not to mention the power that one man had over the whole lot . . .

It was all just too damned dangerous. Frank Casey could already hear the zipping of body bags.

The cutbacks in the department couldn’t have come at a worse time. Given that the county’s economy was mostly tied to the price of a barrel of oil, the decrease in revenues from real estate and other taxes was inevitable. With fewer men, he couldn’t collect evidence and be discreet at the same time. But if he spent enough time—some of it his own—he would probably see something that would justify a warrant, something that their high-powered attorney couldn’t block.

Frank Casey remembered the glint he had seen in Al’s eye when he mentioned the stakeout, and smiled. The man was smart; so was his partner. They’d seen the hints, he was sure, just as he was certain they’d act on them. *Yeah, you’re hungry for it, too,* the tall Cherokee thought. *I can’t author-ize civilians to do stakeouts, but if you find something I’m sure gonna back you up on it. Every inch of the way.*

Al waited, his arms crossed over his chest, projecting every iota of authority he had—not as Al Norris, Fairgrove mechanic, but as Sieur Alinor Peredon, Knight-Artificer in the service of Elfhame Outremer, who had once commanded (small) armies.

Now all he had to do was convince one human of that authority. . . .

Bob sighed, finally, and shook his head. “All right,” he said, though with a show of more reluctance than Al sensed he really felt. “All right, I’ll cover for you here, and I’ll keep Cindy from asking too many questions, if that’s what you really want.”

“It’s what I want,” Al said firmly. “Absolutely. I don’t want to raise her hopes that I’m one of your foolish movie-star corambos—”

“That’s *commandos*, or *Rambos*,” Bob interrupted.

“Whatever. I don’t want her thinking I’m going to charge into unknown territory and carry her boy off. I want to get the lay of the land and check defenses.” Al frowned, though it was not intended for Bob. “The fact is, there is a very odd feeling about that place, even at a distance. The Native man, the deputy sheriff, he feels it too, although he considers himself too rational and civilized to admit it. I am not going to

stumble about blindly in there—”

“Fine, fine,” Bob interrupted again. “But while you’re off with Andur, where am I supposed to be sleeping?”

“Ah,” Al said, grinning with delight. “I have solved that small problem. Behold—”

He took Bob around to the side of the RV; parked there, beside the Miata, was a white van. He enjoyed the look on Bob’s face; enjoyed even more the expression when he opened the door to reveal the luxurious interior. *Not* as sybaritic as the RV would have been had Cindy not been with them, but a grade above the RV in its current state.

Bob turned back to him, his incredulity visible even in the dome light of the van. “How in hell did you do that?” he demanded. “*I know* you didn’t ken the van, you’d need more time than a couple of hours to make the copy—”

“This is Nineve,” Al informed him smugly. “Andur’s twin sister. I called her from Outremer last night, when I -realized that we would need two vehicles. You rightly said that the elvensteeds can crack Mach one in forms other than four-legged; she arrived here as soon as darkness fell.” He permitted himself a smile. “Now you have lodging *and* transport.”

Bob regarded Nineve with a raised eyebrow. “Hope she was in ‘stealth’ mode, or there’s gonna be UFO reports from here to Arkansas.” Then he unbent and patted the shiny side of the van. “Thanks, Nineve. You’re here in right good time. And you sure are pretty.”

The van’s headlights glowed with pleasure.

“Now listen,” Bob continued, “I got an idea. How ’bout we put Cindy in Nineve, and you an’ me go back to bachelor quarters, eh?”

Al thought about that; thought about it hard. Not that he had any doubt that a strong reason for Bob’s request was his inherent puritanical feelings—

But with Cindy in the van, he would be able to transform the RV into something far more comfortable—so long as he remembered to change it back before she entered.

*And I won’t have to wear a hat to sleep, either.*

He sent a brief, inquiring thought to Nineve, who -assented. Andur’s twin spent a great deal of time with the human fosterlings of Fairgrove and liked them. Just as she had liked Janet. . . .

“Good idea,” he said, thinking happily of a long soak in a hot shower when he returned, and a massage at the skilled hands of his lovely chrome servant—small as she was, her hands never tired.

Doubtless Bob was thinking of the same things.

*Better to get Cindy out of the way of becoming a temptation. Bob is right about that much.*

“Well, fine,” Bob said, a slow grin spreading across his face. “I’ll move her things now. Soon’s she gets back from the laundry with her clothes, I’ll intro—I mean, show her the new quarters. That oughta keep her busy enough that she won’t be asking too many questions.”

“And I had best be on my way,” Al observed, “if I am to learn anything of these people tonight.”

Andur revved his engine a little, as if the air conditioner compressor had come on, to underscore his eagerness to get on the road. It had been a long time since he and Andur undertook a rescue mission. It would be good to get back into harness again.

Andur popped his door open as Al approached the driver’s side of the car and shut it as soon as he was tucked into the seat. Al let the four-point seat-harness snake across his shoulders and his lap, and meet and fuse in the center of his chest. Not that he often needed it—but no one allied with racing ever sacrificed safety.

Or an edge.

Andur flipped on his lights, turning everything outside the twin cones of light to stark blackness by contrast. Despite the impatient grumble of the pseudo-engine -beneath the hood, Andur had more sense than to spin his wheels and take off in a shower of gravel. Such behavior at a track was the mark of an amateur, a poseur, and would earn him and his rider as much respect as Vanilla Ice at a Public Enemy concert.

Instead, Andur prowled out with slow grace, making his way to the single unlocked gate for the after-hours use of mechanics and drivers. They proceeded with courtesy for the few folk still about and on their feet after the long day. Alinor thought briefly that it was much like being back at Court; it was considered good form to be socially graceful as a means of preparing one’s mind before an imminent battle, and the coolness displayed gained one more status than strutting or worrying.

Al did not have to touch the steering wheel; Andur was perfectly capable of reading his mind to know where they were going. Down the gravel access-road to the roughly paved county road that led to Hallet, and from there to the on-ramp for the turnpike—

And there he paused, while Al read the map of the area and matched it with the one in his mind; the one that showed the rough details of the cult enclave. The turnpike was one possible route—

But there was a better one; so in the end they passed the turnpike and took another county road, then another. Andur knew precisely the route to take, so Al leaned back into the embrace of the “leather” seat, and let his mind roam free.

This was a land like a strong, broadwinged bird—with a deadly, oozing cancer. In this area’s heart hid a festering wound in the power-flows of the earth, a place where energy was perverted, twisted, turned into something it made him sick to contemplate.

He might not have noticed if he hadn’t been looking for it; it was well-hidden. He might have dismissed it as a stress headache. There was no doubt in his mind that this was the work of “Brother Joseph”; it had that uniquely human feel to it, of indifference to consequences. There was also a hate, an anger, and a twisted pleasure in the pain of others.

He opened his eyes and oriented himself, calling back the suppressed elven night-vision that made the darkened landscape as bright as midday sun. Andur had long since darkened his headlights; *he* certainly didn’t need them to see his way. And now as Al watched, the shiny white enamel of the hood darkened, softened, going to a flat matte black. The engine sounds quit, too—they rolled onto a gravel-covered secondary road with no more sound than the crunching of gravel, which also quieted as Andur softened

the compound of his tires. The sound of the cicadas in the trees beside the roadway drowned what was left.

Then Andur turned off the road entirely—

And Al was sitting astride a matte-black stallion, who picked his way across the overgrown fields like a cat crossing ice. The hot, humid air hit him with a shock after the cool of the wind and Andur's air-conditioner.

Al realized that his white track-suit was not the best choice of outfits for a scouting mission. With a moment's thought, he changed the Nomex to a light garment of matte black silk; then blackened his face and hands as well with a silken mask and gloves. His feet he shod in boots of lightweight black leather, easy to climb in. In this guise they approached the first of the three fences surrounding the complex.

This far from the road, there was only the patrolling guard to worry about—and the trip-wires and fences.

He felt Andur gather himself and hung on while the elvensteed launched into an uncannily silent gallop, the only sounds muffled thuds when his hooves hit the ground. Then he felt Andur's muscles bunch—

He tightened his legs and leaned forward, as Andur leapt.

No human would ever have believed his eyes, for the elvensteed began his jump a good fifteen feet from the fence, cleared the top of it with seven feet to spare, and landed fifteen feet from the fence on the other side.

*Without a stirring of power-flows. The magic of good design, sweet Andur.*

They passed the second fence the same way, but halted at the third, innermost fence; the one that surrounded the compound itself. This was as far as Al wanted to go right now. There was no way he was going to go nosing about an enemy camp without scouting it first.

Andur concealed himself in a patch of shadow, and Al climbed a tall enough tree that he was able to see the compound quite clearly. Whatever the sheriff might have imagined at his most pessimistic, the situation was worse.

The guards prowled within the fence like professional soldiers. There were a lot of them, and the number of life-essences Al detected below ground indicated that this "Brother Joseph" must be fielding an army.

There was Cold Iron everywhere, low quality iron which disrupted his senses; it was difficult to concentrate when using his Sight, and even more difficult to find ways around the barriers. And deep inside the complex was that evil cancer he had sensed before. It was not a spell or item, but it *was* magical. It wasn't elven in origin, nor was it human . . . no, something old and experienced had created the magical "taste" he'd sensed. There was something alive and not-alive shifting its enchanted form inside the compound.

It was quiescent when he first approached it, but as he studied it, the thing began to rouse. He drew back, thinking that *he* had caused it to awaken and stir—but then his questing thoughts brushed the thoughts of humans—many humans—in the same area, and he realized that *they* were the ones waking it.

He withdrew a little further, heart racing despite his wished-for cool, and "watched" from what he hoped



was a safe distance.

The humans were gathered in one of the underground areas for a spectacle of some kind.

*Could this be one of the “Praise Meetings” that Cindy described?*

Something—someone—moved into his sensing area. Another human—but where the life-fires of the others burned with a smoky, sullen flame, more heat than light, *this* person’s burned with the black flame of the devourer, who feeds on lives. Even more than lives, this human thrived on the *hate* of those around him. Al knew him without ever seeing his face. This *must* be Brother Joseph.

With him was a tiny, fitful life-spark, so close to extinction that Al nearly manifested in the full armor of an elven warrior-noble and carved his way to the child’s side. For it *was* a child, who had been so starved, so abused, that his hold on life and his body was very tenuous indeed.

Jamie. It had to be Jamie.

And as Al held himself back, with anger burning in his heart, the evil thing at the heart of the gathering woke.

And reached for the child.

## CHAPTER SIX

By the time the Praise Meeting started, Jamie was having a hard time keeping himself from throwing up even though there was nothing in his stomach but water. And he couldn’t stand up for very long; he shivered and his skin was clammy, and he had to lie down on the floor because sitting in the chair made him dizzy.

He knew the Praise Meeting had started, because he heard the organ; it vibrated the walls all the way back here, in the very rear of the building. The vibrations disoriented him; he had his eyes closed when the door to the little room finally opened, and the two big guards came in to get him.

Brother Joseph always sent two huge men with AK-47s to get him. It was just one of the hundreds of things Brother Joseph said and did that didn’t make any sense. But maybe it was a good thing they’d been sent this time; when one of them ordered Jamie to stand, he got as far as his knees before that soft darkness came down on him again, and he found himself looking up at their faces from the ground.

He was afraid for a minute that they’d hit him—but they just looked at one another, then at him, then without a single word, picked him up by the elbows, and hauled him to his feet. His toes didn’t even touch the floor; that didn’t matter. The guards carried him that way down the long, chilly corridor to the door that led to the back of the Meeting Hall.

They came out on the stage, at the rear. The four spotlights were focused on Brother Joseph, who was making a speech into a microphone, spitting and yelling. Jamie couldn’t make any sense of what he was saying; the words kept getting mixed up with the echo from the other end of the room, and it all jumbled together into gibberish.

The two men didn't pay any attention, either; they just took him to an oversized rough-wood chair in front of the black and red flag that Brother Joseph had everyone pledge to and dropped him into it, strapping down his arms and legs with clamps built into the chair itself.

Jamie let them. He'd learned the first time that it did no good to resist them. No one out there would help him, and later his father would backhand him for struggling against Brother Joseph's orders.

Brother Joseph continued, so bright in the spotlights that Jamie had to close his eyes. It seemed as if the only light in the room was on the leader; as if he sucked it all up and wouldn't share it with anyone else.

Brother Joseph's voice, unintelligible as it was, hammered at Jamie's ears, numbing him further. He was so hungry—and so dizzy—he just couldn't bring himself to think or care about anything else.

Finally the voice stopped, although it was a few moments before the silence penetrated the fog of indifference that had come over Jamie's mind. He opened his eyes as a spotlight fell on him—light that stabbed through his eyes into his brain, making hot needles of pain in his head. But it was only for a moment; then a shadow eclipsed the spotlight, a tall shadow, with the light streaming around the edges of it.

It was Brother Joseph, and Jamie stifled a protest as Brother Joseph's hand stretched out into the light, a thin chain with a sparkling crystal on the end of it dangling from his fingers. Jamie knew what was coming next, and for a moment he struggled against his bonds.

But dizziness grayed his sight, and he couldn't look away from the twirling, glittering, sparkling crystal. Brother Joseph's voice, a few moments ago as loud as a trumpet, now droned at Jamie, barely audible, words he tried to make out but couldn't quite catch.

The world receded, leaving only the crystal, and Brother Joseph's voice.

Then, suddenly, something different happened—

This was the part where the Black Thing tried to touch him, only it didn't this time. This time he was somehow standing *next* to himself; he was standing on the stage, and there was someone between him and the boy strapped to the chair.

Sarah. And she stood as if she was ready to fight something off, in a pose that reminded him of the way his mother had stood between him and his daddy the first time he'd come home after Brother Joseph had—

*:After Brother Joseph used you, like he used me, said a familiar voice in his head.:For that—:*

The girl pointed, and he saw the Black Thing slipping through a smoky door in the air, sliding towards the boy in the chair.

Only now he could see it clearly, and it wasn't really a shapeless blot. It was—like black fire, swirling and bubbling, licking against the edge of the door. Like a negative of flames.

It was bad, he felt that instinctively, and he recoiled from it. But he found he couldn't go far, not even to the edge of the stage. When he tried, he felt a kind of tugging, like he was tied to the boy in the chair with a tight rope around his gut.

*:Don't worry, Jamie,: said Sarah.:I'll keep it away from you. It won't mess with me now.:*

The Black Thing moved warily past her—then melted into the Jamie-in-the-chair.

Jamie jerked, as pain enveloped him.

Sarah stepped forward and grabbed something invisible—and then it wasn't invisible, it was a silver rope running between him and Jamie-in-the-chair. And the minute she touched the rope, the pain stopped.

“Speak, O Sacred Fire,” Brother Joseph cried out, as the boy in the chair jerked and quivered. Brother Joseph's voice sounded far away, and tinny, like it was coming from a bad speaker. “Speak, O Holy Flame! Tell us your words, fill us with the Spirit!”

Jamie-in-the-chair's mouth opened—but the voice that came out wasn't Jamie's. It was a strange, hollow voice, booming, like a grownup's—like James Earl Jones'. Gasps of fear peppered the audience when he began speaking, outbursts which the people quickly stifled. The audience reaction turned to awe as the echoing voice carried into the crowd. It said all kinds of things; more of the same kind of stuff that Brother Joseph and Miss Agatha were always saying. All about how Armageddon was coming, and the Chosen Ones were the only people who would be saved from the purifying flames. About the Jews and the blacks and the Sodomites—how they ran everything, but after the flames came, the Chosen Ones would run everything.

But then the voice said something Jamie had never heard Brother Joseph say—

“—and you, Brother Joseph,” boomed the voice. “You are the Instrument of the Prophecy. You will be the Bringer of Flame. You will be the Ignitor of the Holocaust. In your hand will be the torch that begins the Great -Conflagration—”

Brother Joseph began to frown, and his frown deepened as the voice went on with more of the same. *This must be new—* Jamie thought.

*:It is new,: said Sarah, relaxing her vigilance a little, and turning to look over her shoulder at him. Even though he knew she was a ghost now, he was somehow no longer afraid of her. In fact, in his present state, he felt closer to her, like they were the same kind of people now. And it helped to be able to see her. He moved a little closer to her, and she took his hand and smiled.*

*:This stuff is all new,: she said without moving her lips, cocking her head to one side.:And Brother Joseph doesn't like it. Look at him.:*

Indeed, Brother Joseph's face was not that of a happy man, and Jamie could see why—for out in the assembled audience there were stirrings and murmurs of uneasiness.

But when the voice stopped, Brother Joseph whirled and raised his hands in the air, his face all smiles. “Halleluia!” he cried. “Praise God, he has chosen me to lead you, though I am not worthy! He has called me to witness for you and lead you, as John the Baptist witnessed before the coming of the Lord Jesus and led the Hebrews to the new Savior! You've heard it from the mouth of this child, through the instrument of His Holy Fire—I am the forerunner, and it is my coming that has been the signal and paved the way for the end—andour *beginning* !”

Cries of “Praise the Lord!” and “Halleluia!” answered him, and there were no more murmurs of dissent.

Brother Joseph had them all back again.

*:Now comes the part they've really been waiting for,:* Sarah said, an expression of cynicism on her face that was at odds with her years.*:The miracles.:*

“Half Hi to win, Saturn Boy to place, and Beauregard to show in the second,” boomed the voice. “Righteous to win, Starbase to place, and Kingsman to show in the third. Grassland to win, Lena’s Lover to place, and Whatchacall to show in the fifth—”

*:Miracles?:* Jamie said, puzzled.

*:Those are all the horses that are going to win at Fair Meadows tomorrow,:* she replied.*:They're going to make a lot of money by betting on them.:*

“Fifth table, fourth seat, Tom Justin,” said the voice. “Tom should get in line behind the fat woman in a red print dress and take two blue cards, two red, two yellow and two gray. Sixth table, twelfth seat, Karen Amberdahl. Karen should get in line behind an old man with a cigar, a turquoise belt buckle and a string tie with a bearclaw slide, and take one of each color.”

*:And those are the people that should go to bingo tomor-row night, where they should sit, and what cards they should take. If they do that, they'll have winning cards.:* Sarah’s lip curled.*:But it won't be a lot of money. They're just making the seed money for the real stuff. The horse races, and what comes later.:*

Finally the voice stopped; Jamie felt dizzy, and when he looked down at himself, he was kind of—transparent. He could see the floor through his arm. Had he been able to do that when he first found himself here? He didn’t think so.

*:You're fading,:* Sarah said, looking worried.*:I don't know why. I think the Black Thing is using you up, somehow—:*

She didn’t get a chance to elaborate on that; the guards were escorting everyone except for a chosen few out—those few filed up to the front and waited in a line just below the stage. Jamie noticed, as they arranged themselves and waited for the guards to get everyone else out, that he was getting solid again. So—the Black Thing used him up when it spoke. And if it wasn’t talking, he got a chance to -recover.

“All right,” Brother Joseph said, in a brisk, matter-of-fact voice that was nothing like what he used when preaching, “We got the El Paso crack shipment tonight on the airstrip. Bill, you’re new; hold your questions until the Holy Fire is done speaking.”

What came out of Jamie-in-the-chair’s mouth then, was not anything like what he had expected.

“Apartment 1014B over in the Oaktree Apartment Complex is a new dealer, he’ll pay top prices to you -because he’s been having visions. His line dried up. Sell him a quarter of the shipment. You’ve got enough regulars for another quarter. For the rest, take a quarter to Tulsa, peddle it Friday on Denver, on Saturday over by the PAC, Sunday on the downtown mall. The narcs will be elsewhere.*Don't* talk to anyone in a blue Ford Mustang, license plate ZZ611; they’re cops. Get off the street on Friday by two in the morning, there’s going to be a bust. Take the other quarter to Oklahoma City and—”

*:Is he talking about drugs?:* Jamie asked Sarah, bewildered.*:Like dope? Like they said to say no to in school?:*

She nodded grimly.: *That's where the real money is coming from,*: she replied.: *Brother Joseph is a dealer, and the Black Thing knows where all the cops are, and where the best place to sell is.*:

The man Bill, who had been designated as “new,” looked unhappy, and as if he was trying not to squirm. As the voice finished—and another wave of dizziness and transparency passed over Jamie—he saw that Brother Joseph was watching this man very closely. And before the man could say anything, Brother Joseph spoke, in still another kind of voice. Friendly, kind, like Daddy used to be before all the joy juice, back in Atlanta.

“Now, Bill,” Brother Joseph said, “I know what you must be thinking. You’re wondering how we, the Chosen of the Lord, could *stoop* to selling crack and ice, this poison in the veins of America. How we could break God’s law as well as man’s.”

Bill nodded, slowly.

“Bill, Bill,” Brother Joseph said, shaking his head. “This is part of our *mission*. The Holy Fire *instructed* us to do this! We aren’t selling this to innocent children—it’s -going to Satanists and Sodomites, uppity Jews and niggers, Commies and hippies and whores—all people who’d poison themselves with the stuff anyway, whether we sold it to them or not. They’re killing *themselves*; we’re no more to blame than the man that sells a suicide a gun. And what’s more, we’re drying up the trade of the regular dealers, godless nigger gang members. The ones who *do* sell this poison in schoolyards.”

Sarah snorted.: *No they aren't,*: she said angrily.: *That's a lie! They're supplying the guys who sell dope to kids. White and black.*:

Jamie nodded, remembering the stuff about “the dealer whose supply line dried up.”

Bill looked unconvinced and replied, hesitantly, “But—what about the bingo games, the horse races—”

“Peanuts,” one of the guards scoffed, in an insulting tone. “Grocery money.”

“Now Tom, that’s not fair,” Brother Joseph told him, in the tones of a parent mildly chiding a child. Then he turned back to Bill. “He is right that it’s really just the cash for our day-to-day expenses,” the preacher said. “Bill, *you* know what an AK-47 costs these days, I know you do.”

Bill nodded, reluctantly.

“And we have hundreds—thousands. And that’s just one of the guns we have stockpiled. Then there’s the anti-tank weapons, the grenade launchers, the SAMs—that’s just weapons. *We bought* those tractors and bulldozers, outright—”

“I was a farmer,” Bill said slowly. “The gear you—we—have is about a quarter mil per tractor, and I dunno how much them earth-movers run. But—we never win big at the track or the bingo games, and I know there’s big pots—”

“And there’s IRS agents waiting right there at the track and the parlor, waiting for the big winner,” Brother Joseph interrupted. “*We can't* let the gov’mment know what’s -going on here, and if a lot of our people start winning big, not even our fancy lawyer is gonna be able to keep them off our backs. Hell, Bill, that’s how the gov’mment got Al Capone, didn’t you know? Tax evasion!”

“Dope money’s big, it’s underground, and can’t be traced,” said one of the other men, complacently. “And nobody in this state would put dope and a church together.”

Bill thought for a moment, then nodded again, but this time with a lot less reluctance. “I guess you’re right—”

“It was I *who ordered them*,” boomed the voice of the Black Thing, unexpectedly, startling them all. “Holiest Brother Joseph was reluctant, but I showed him the way, the way—”

“The way to acquire the money we needed without hurting innocent children,” Brother Joseph took up smoothly, when the voice faltered.

“Well, I guess it’s all right, then,” Bill said, looking relieved, and glancing out of the corner of his eye at Jamie-in-the-chair, nervously. “If the Holy Fire ordered it.”

“That will be all, then, soldiers of faith,” Brother Joseph said in his old, commanding tone of voice. “You have your marching orders. Tomorrow you will be assigned and go forth to implement them, in the name of the Holy Fire.”

The guards herded the last of the Chosen Ones out, leaving Brother Joseph alone with Jamie. And the Black Thing. And Sarah—but he didn’t know she was there.

Brother Joseph turned to Jamie-in-the-chair, with a terrible, burning hunger in his eyes, a hunger that looked as though it could have devoured the world and not been satisfied.

“Tell me,” he ordered, in a harsh voice. “Tell me about the End. Tell me about my part in it.”

The voice began again; more of the same kind of stuff it had told the crowd at the beginning, but more personal this time. About how Brother Joseph was the One True Prophet of the age, how he would lead the Chosen Ones in a purge of all that was evil on earth, until there was no one left but his own followers. How he would be made World President for Life in the ruins of the UN Building; how he would oversee the building of the Promised Heavenly Kingdom On Earth.

There was a lot of that stuff, and Brother Joseph just ate it up. And Jamie faded and faded—

Finally even the hunger in Brother Joseph’s eyes seemed sated. The voice stopped when Jamie was like one of the transparent fish he’d seen in the aquarium at school, or like a boy made out of glass.

And so dizzy he couldn’t even think.

“Blessed be the Holy Fire,” Brother Joseph said, standing up straight and making a bow that was half adoration and half dismissal. “Blessed be the Sacred Flame. I thank you in the Name of God, and in the Name of Jesus—”

The Black Thing started to dissolve from Jamie-in-the-chair, pulling out of him, and Sarah let go of the silver cord. She stayed protectively between it and him, though; until it went into that door in the air—

The door in the air shut—and another kind of door opened behind it. And the Black Thing somehow dissolved into the *flag*.

Or the flagpole—

That was the first time Jamie had ever seen *that*— at least, that he remembered. But then, a lot had been different tonight. He'd never been shoved out of his body, either. He turned to Sarah, suddenly desperate to ask her questions—

But Brother Joseph clapped his hands three times—and suddenly he was *back* in the chair, in his body, and as nauseated and dizzy as he had ever been in his life.

His gorge rose, and he couldn't help himself or control it anymore. As Brother Joseph released his arms from the straps, he aimed as best he could and made Brother Joseph's white shoes not so white.

After Brother Joseph had Jamie taken away, the preacher retired to his private quarters. Exhausted, he stood in the clothes closet that was as long as a hallway, the aroma of cut pine overpowering in the bright fluorescents. The evening's events swirled in his mind like a lazy tornado, and he knew he was on an emotional roller coaster, swaying between doubt and conviction; as soon as he thought that the Sacred Fire had turned against him, he saw that it was, indeed, still in his court, shucking and jiving to mark his way to the top, spewing the useful information like a self-digging gold mine.

Hanging from brass rods were a hundred or so suits, worth anywhere from two hundred to a thousand dollars each, wearing a thin plastic wrap from the dry cleaners, each embodying its own, distinctive memory. Brother -Joseph often surveyed his collection of expensive clothing in times of turmoil and change, to remind himself of the tribulations and triumphs that had already taken place. The suits reassured him and quelled his doubts, reminding him that he still held power, that his gifts were infinite.

Much of his preaching, especially after the founding of the Sacred Heart of the Chosen Ones, incited his crowds to violence. These suits had seen riots and marches and demonstrations against the unholy, and had born witness to his struggle. They felt like faithful supporters, always there when the important things happened; like the protest of the godless Unitarians, who questioned the Bible, slandering its very truth. The demonstration his people staged at the YMCA (so weak was their minister that they couldn't even raise the money to build a decent building!) was a wondrous thing, especially when the riot broke out. Joseph spotted the suit he'd worn that day, a conservative gray Oxford, and gloried in its cleanliness. The bloodstains which once darkened its immaculate surface were now only a memory. His suit, like his ministry, emerged from the wreckage of that incident unblemished. A good lawyer could prove—and disprove—anything.

At the end of the closet, hidden where only he could find them, were his white Klan robes, where it all began.

*Ah yes*, he thought nostalgically, savoring the sudden memory the robes brought. *The beginning of my struggle. The end, alas, of my youth*. The smell of gasoline and burning wood, the secret meetings, the handshakes, the passwords. The hillsides filled with the faithful, their pointed hoods aimed heavenward, toward God. The sweet hatred that flowed in the gatherings, lubricated with cheap beer and even cheaper whiskey.

*Those were the glorious days.*

He'd joined the KKK as a teenager, and insisted early on that he be permitted to participate in a real nigger lynching, that nothing else would hold his interest. He just wanted to kill niggers. The old-timers, they seemed to find him amusing if overly rambunctious. He had been all of seventeen when he joined.

He looked older, and was able to pass as a twenty-year-old, not that it would have mattered if they'd known his true age. The Klan loved new, young blood. His raw hate sustained him for some time, but as he matured, he began to need specific reasons for the hate—he began to doubt, when he saw others his age burning with the same fervor for causes the very opposite of his.

Justification came bound in faded black leather; the Grand Dragon began quoting scripture. In the light of a burning cross, somewhere on a hillside in Mississippi, he saw the glimmer of his true destiny. The feelings of hate he had for the godless actually had *a meaning* behind them, reinforcing his beliefs. He could attach names to the things he hated, and they were impressive names, all of them: Satan's spawn, heathens, the non-believers. His soul had swelled with pride. His feelings, after all, were *justified*. And others enabled him to act them out.

It was the first time the Bible had any meaning for him, the first time its truth made any sense to him. *There is only one right way, and I know what it is.* So he had believed, and the Bible provided proof. The Bible was all the justification he needed.

After all, look at how many people lived by it.

He thought he had found his place, his kindred. But as the months progressed, he had participated in only two lynchings. *Any more, and the FBI will come after us*, one of the senior members of their Klan said.

But Brother Joseph knew it wasn't prudence that had spoken; it had been cowardice. They didn't have the guts, he knew then, and his faith in the Ku Klux Klan faltered.

By the time he had turned twenty, the Klan began admitting Catholics for the first time in its history, and he realized it was time to leave. They just didn't have it straight, was all. Time to forge a new organization, a new group.

A . . . *church*.

He never attended a formal seminary; he earned his sheepskin through a four-week correspondence course. All he needed was a piece of paper to hang in his "office," to point at when anyone questioned his credentials. He knew it was a facade, but a necessary one needed to carry out his work. He knew the *real* truth, and in his hands he held the secret to the One True Church. He stumbled across a passage in the Bible, and from this he produced a name for his movement: The Sacred Heart of the Chosen Ones.

He studied the Bible night and day, highlighting the passages which lent particular weight to his beliefs. These were the passages he emphasized in his sermons, adding some flourishes of his own.

He preached hatred. Hate was cleansing; the Sword of the Lord—didn't the Bible speak over and over about the Wrath of God? Hate purified. Hate separated the weak from the strong, the *doers* from the idle, the pure in spirit from the dissenters, the doubters. Hate separated the men from the boys—and from the women. He knew about women. They were too weak to truly hate. They were inferior to men.

There were many men who came to him just on that basis alone. And women, too, the *real* women who liked being told their place and liked a strong man who'd keep them there. Like his own wife, who went where he told her and never lifted her voice or her eyes. . . .

He claimed credit for the killing of Martin Luther King during an especially rousing sermon before a congregation of a dozen men and twenty elderly women. The next day the FBI came by, asking him to



expand on that sermon. Nervously, he explained to them that he meant it in *aspiritual* sense, that he hadn't pulled the trigger after all. *Notreally* .

This was back in the sixties, and the ball had barely begun to roll.

His congregation slowly built to around a hundred, and peaked there for several years. He had masqueraded as a Baptist minister because he'd heard those people could sure fork out the money if you pleaded hard enough. With a minimum of hassle he found the necessary contacts to forge the proper documents to become a "bona fide" Baptist minister. After skimming the till for five years, stashing a good chunk of it in gold and CDs, his credentials came into question when he refused to attend an annual Baptist minister's conference in nearby Atlanta.

Before the darkness could gather completely he -absconded with what he could and assumed a new identity in California, where he took to the airwaves as a -radio preacher. As "Father Fact" he had enjoyed a sizable following for close to a year.

Then, as the spirit moved in him, his sermons took a more radical slant. More and more often, his true feelings began to overcome him in the midst of a sermon, raising the ire of the Federal Communications Commission. Soon "Father Fact" became "Father History," and after several unsuccessful attempts to find similar employment with other stations, he holed up in a cheap hotel in Los Angeles with one hundred thousand dollars in the bank and a fire in his gut.

At the San Jose Hotel he had a revelation, sent to him directly from God. At first he interpreted the message to mean that he was to become the second Christ. Then, as he mulled it over a bit, he decided instead that it was time to write a book, *amanifesto*, for his new church. It was time to come out into the open, to preach his new school of thought unfettered by anyone else's rules. The time of hiding behind the "established" order of religion had come to a screeching halt. He started using the name "Brother Joseph," which at first was going to be a pseudonym only, since he suspected the authorities in Georgia might still be looking for him. But he liked the sound of it, and it stuck. "Brother Joseph, leader of the Sacred Heart of the Chosen Ones," was a fitting title. But the movement would need a users manual, and over the next fourteen months, with an old Underwood, he hacked out the *Manifesto of the Sacred Heart of the Chosen Ones* . Editing or retyping, he had decided, would not be necessary. After all, this was the divine word of the Lord; who was he to decide what the Lord wanted left in and what He didn't? Had the Apostles edited the books of the New Testament? Had Moses edited the Ten Commandments? Those were not choices for a mere mortal, he reasoned then and now, so he let the work stand as written.

Unwilling to trust the task of *publishing* his holy book to anyone else, the Brother Joseph purchased an old offset press and developing equipment. Stray lumber and cardboard became a darkroom. For weeks, after typing God's Word on nine by eleven rag, he shot the individual pages directly from the single-spaced typewritten sheets.

The manifesto wasn't simple; Brother Joseph required 1532 pages to explain his leap of intellect, excluding the table of contents and index. On the "reference and bibliography" page the word God appeared seven hundred and seventy-seven times. In all-caps.

With some basic binding equipment, which was used to make cloth-bound books the old-fashioned way, he went to the next phase of his project. Between inexpensive meals of Discount Dan's macaroni 'n' cheese and cold Van de Camps Pork and Beans, selected from his immense survival cache, he lovingly handcrafted each volume. They were easily the size and weight of an unabridged dictionary. On a good day, he could produce three to five books, which were soon given away. The preacher sent

the very first volume to the newly elected Ronald Reagan, with a simple note reading: "Have your men read this immediately."

Six months later he signed and numbered the five hundredth volume. The four hundred ninety-nine volumes preceding it had been given away to Klansmen, defrocked ministers, congressmen, mayors, governors, shriners, a hundred right-wing organizations, and anyone else he thought would be interested. But that day, holding volume number five hundred, Brother Joseph frowned and scratched his head. Despite the address he had clearly printed on the title page, no tithes were pouring in to finance the new movement. Not even a letter or a postcard. Nothing. Although he had close to seventy thousand left in the bank, he didn't want to dip into that yet. He simply couldn't understand the lack of interest. He had thought that by now *someone* would have seen the wisdom in God's words.

Fifteen years and a thousand miles away, Brother -Joseph stood in the closet of expensive suits, regarding with a sense of melancholic nostalgia the box of books marked, in purple crayon, "original manifesto." There was only one of the hefty tomes left, and it was stored here. The time would soon come when he would have to publish the full-length manifesto again. With new plates, of course—hell, in fancy, scrolled type, scanned from the original book and set by computer and fed directly into the bowels of his own printers. Now he owned his own little publishing empire. Never again would he have to type a word.

During the early years of the Chosen Ones, someone convinced him to condense the book a little, to where it was only about eighty pages long. It wasn't even an *outline* of the original masterwork—it was a mere *pamphlet*. The decision angered him, but he permitted the sacrilege in order to attract more followers.

In 1983 Brother Joseph purchased a stolen mailing list from *The Right Way*, an ultraconservative monthly which featured articles on assault weapons, Israel Identity theory, the Jewish Question, survival tactics, quilting tips and home cooking recipes. With the pilfered list he mailed, at great expense, one hundred thousand copies of the condensed *Manifesto*. The new edition contained simple instructions on how to start your own Sacred Heart chapter.

The ruse worked. Almost overnight congregations -began to pop up all over the country, mostly in the South and Midwest. Ten in all, in the beginning, and he kept himself busy ministering to each. Money poured in. A few of his larger CDs, left over from his Baptist preaching days, began to mature. In the conservative atmosphere of the Reagan Administration, his church flourished. Congregations swelled. Finally, his message was receiving the attention it deserved. Humanity might survive after all.

Reluctant to end his brief jaunt down memory lane, Brother Joseph disrobed and hung his latest acquisition, a tailor-made Sacred Heart uniform with all the relevant religious markings, in a separate valet in the closet. The coat alone was a work of art, with Sacred Heart insignia, military decorations of his own creation, gold cord and epaulets. The severe black shirt and white collar gave it a religious look, and despite its Catholic undertones he let the creation stand. It looked more impressive, after all. The entire outfit cost nearly two thousand dollars to have made and it fit perfectly; it was his most treasured possession.

*Nothing too good for the founder of the Sacred Heart*, he thought.

As he selected one of fifteen bathrobes, each a different shade of blue, gray or black, he noticed a plaid suit. He hadn't worn this one very long because of a certain place in the trousers where it was too tight, but nevertheless, he remembered the circumstance of this particular outfit, and scowled.

*That reporter will never stand on Sacred Ground again,* he seethed, tying the robe. He meant to have the suit burned, to erase the bad memories it represented, but had never got around to it. He had worn it once during the early growth of the church, about six years before, when he was attempting one of the first channelings during what he would later call “Praise Meetings.”

There had been a new lamb in the fold, a young man who had been to the meetings for the past three months or so. Brother Joseph had picked him to be the vehicle for the channeling session, and he had agreed. The young man was an admitted Democrat, and that alone should have tipped him off, but in those early days followers were coming out of the woodwork from every conceivable direction, and he hadn't really cared. The “channeling” went well, and the subject had shown every indication of the holy trance. The original plan was to channel John the Baptist, but somewhere it all got sidetracked and the subject -recited passages from the Bible, claiming to be one of the twelve disciples. He never said which one, an omission which should have been another clue. The response from the gathering was questionable, but Brother Joseph declared the session a success and adjourned the meeting. The subject vanished soon afterward, and after a cursory asking around, nobody seemed to know who he was.

The next day, on the front page of the *Wichita Eagle*, Brother Joseph saw an article prominently displayed in the upper half of the paper. “Eagle Reporter Infiltrates ‘Channeling Cult,’ ” read the headlines, and accompanying the article was a photograph of the reporter. He was, indeed, the same subject who had “channeled” the night before.

Aghast, Brother Joseph read on. The “sting” had taken three months, and while it had been unplanned, the leader of the cult had picked him to be channeled. In detail the reporter described the “high visibility” of firearms and the “gullibility of the audience, who seemed to come from rural, uneducated backgrounds.” As the final insulting touch, it seemed that the “scripture” he'd quoted while in the “trance” was all fabricated, but had been accepted as “fact” by Brother Joseph and his followers.

Brother Joseph, staying at the house of one of the flock, packed his bags and left Wichita, Kansas, in a hurry. He left the situation in the capable hands of one of his followers, hoping the brouhaha would remain local. During the next month it appeared that it would, but the preacher had learned his lesson. To the best of his ability and the ability of the chapter members, each new member had a thorough background check.

The incident had happened many years before, but still it grated. He had been *so certain* he had a true medium sitting before him. In time it would become clear to him that a true channeling would be much more compelling and believable than an agent of Satan spouting made-up scripture.

Putting the distasteful experience behind him, Brother Joseph entered the bathroom adjacent to the long hallway, finding one of his servants sitting at the makeup table, reading a Bible. Brother Joseph recognized him as one of the Junior Guard, with beret, t-shirt and camo pants. Within the walls of his private living quarters full assault rifles were waived; this youth wore what appeared to be a WWII Luger sidearm. The young man looked up expectantly, closing the Bible.

“Your bath is prepared, Brother Joseph,” the boy said, standing and bowing slightly.

The leader nodded, noting the perfect way in which he had been addressed. *I must remember to compliment his CO when I see him,* he thought complacently.

“Have a seat. Make yourself comfortable, young man,” Brother Joseph said fondly. It felt good to have servants, especially the faithful young followers who were so bright, so energetic, so enthusiastic for the Church and what he wanted to accomplish with it.

To call this room a “bathroom” would be a disservice, Brother Joseph mused, as he eased into the immense marble bathtub. The bath, which was installed on a raised platform surrounded by roman columns, could have held at least five people at once. But such a thing would be wanton and sinful. This was his solitary pleasure, his just reward for serving the Lord, to be shared with no one.

“More patchouli,” Brother Joseph said, and the boy poured more pink powder into the swirling baths. “More air in the jets,” he added, as an afterthought, and the boy adjusted the knob to make the water more bubbly. The flowery fragrance rose from the steamy bath. To call this heaven would have been a sacrilege. But then, the preacher speculated, maybe God provided a tiny piece of heaven for his top workers.

Once Brother Joseph’s needs were seen to, the Junior Guard lad bowed and returned faithfully to his Bible. *Fine young man*, the preacher observed, trying to ignore his own shriveled skin, the liver spots, the flab, and other nagging signs of aging. He thought of his age in terms of what he had told his congregation, not the date on which he was born. Instead of being fifty-nine, he was actually forty something. Nobody questioned him. Being leader of the Church had its advantages.

*So much accomplished, so much more to do*, he thought, glorying in the evening’s events. These Praise Meetings energized him in ways nobody even suspected; he felt years younger after a successful night like tonight, and if there had been time he would hold one every night. But it was late when the meetings concluded, including the little private meeting afterwards, and his people needed rest to be able to put in a full day for the Church. The information he had gleaned from the Holy Fire would take days to process. Any more meetings, and the data would be wasted. Such a waste, the preacher calculated, could well displease the Holy Fire, and that was the last thing he’d wanted to do.

*Overall it was a pretty good Praise Meeting. At least until the little brat threw up on those shoes*, Brother -Joseph thought, melting further into the hot, steaming bath. *I didn’t like throwing that pair out, but I didn’t exactly have a choice. Oh, well. Plenty more where they came from.* Adjoining the long closet was another closet, which held around two hundred pairs of fine dress shoes, each pair assigned to its own cubby-hole in the extensive shelving he’d had built.

*Despite that disgusting display of nausea there at the end, the boy is a remarkable tool.* The fasting had been so effective that the preacher was contemplating extending the fast until the next Praise Meeting, three days hence. No resistance to the Holy Fire this time—and that seemed to please it a great deal.

And what it *said* . . . Brother Joseph was still wallowing in that praise, an honor bestowed to *him* . Now he knew what Christ felt like: powerful, right, still the obedient servant of God, yet also the Sword in His hand.

This was, he reflected, all he ever really wanted to do, since the days of the burning crosses and the dangling niggers, and throughout his long days in the San Jose Hotel. Yes, *this* was all he wanted to do, this service to the Lord.

Especially now that he was much *more* than a mere servant. The Sacred Fire surpassed his wildest expectations tonight. It not only affirmed his position in the Church, but in the God/Man hierarchy. Tonight, his status went up more than a few notches. The memory warmed him like a fine glass of burgundy. He raised his arms out of the steamy, fragrant water, half expecting electricity to arc between his hands.

*Life is grand. It's good to be the king.*

Until now, everything the Holy Fire had allowed him to do had been mere parlor tricks. He reminded himself that the parlor tricks had convinced many a borderline believer in his power, and in his ability to call forth the glory of Jesus and God.

But the boy—the boy—that his key to glory should be one small boy, who might not ever have come into his hands. . . .

He suppressed that thought. *It would* have happened. The Lord willed it. Just as the Lord had willed that he find that flagstaff.

He had been looking for a suitably impressive staff for the church flag, the symbol of all they stood for, the banner under which his armies would eventually march to victory. But the stores that sold such things had only the same wooden poles, topped either with brass spearheads, eagles, or round knobs. He had wanted something more.

And something not so . . . expensive.

Surely God had directed his steps to the little junk shop in Lafayette, Indiana, a place run by two senile old people, so identical he could not tell which was the husband and which the wife. One of them had directed him to the back of the room when he answered their vague mumbles with “I’m looking for a pole.”

Wedged in a space between two enormous oak dish-cupboards, pieces that would fit only in a room with a fourteen-foot ceiling, had been a selection of poles. Curtain poles, fishing poles, poles for punting—

And yes, flagpoles.

Standing tall among the others was a grime-encrusted flagpole of indeterminate age and origin. It stood taller than the two dish-cupboards that flanked it, its top ornament hidden in gloom. When he reached out to heft it doubtfully, he received a double shock.

First—it was *heavy*. Too heavy to have been made of wood.

Second—a real, physical shock, like a electrical spark that arced from it to his arm. It only lasted a moment, but in that moment, he knew he *had* to have it.

He carried the thing forward to the old couple—who, when they learned it was to be used for a church banner, refused to accept any money for it.

He remembered thinking as he carried it out that even if it wasn’t *quite* suitable, the price was certainly right.

Back at the revival tent, he began cleaning his find—and discovered that under the years of dirt and grime, the pole was of hollow brass, three sections fitted together like a portable billiard cue. He had expected that the threads would have corroded together, but they unscrewed smoothly, as if the pole had just been machined and put together for the first time.

But it was the top ornament that took his breath away and made him realize that the piece had been

waiting for him—for decades, perhaps even for centuries. A flat piece of brass, it proved to be engraved—with the Church's own emblem, the Sacred Heart pierced by twin crucifixes, the sole difference being that this heart was engulfed in flames. There was writing around the edge of the plaque, but it was in Latin and what he thought might be French, so he had ignored it.

And it was from that moment of discovery that the Holy Fire began whispering in the back of his mind, bringing the Word of God directly—if imperfectly—to him. It was then that he had decided to try channeling again, after that disastrous incident in Wichita. And that was the first time he had actually *gotten* something, through the medium of little Sarah.

And now, even more effectively, the Fire *acted* through the medium of young Jamie.

The boy had proven to be an effective bridge. On the very first channeling he allowed the preacher to invoke a ball of flame, which he held in his unprotected hands. The Fire spoke then, but he later learned that only *he* had heard it. The next Praise Meeting he had arranged to have a bed of hot coals ready, and at the appropriate moment, to the horror of those attending, he walked barefoot over it. Only once, though. He didn't want to try the patience of the Sacred Flame by showing preference to another, lesser flame. That one time though had been enough. The congregation flocked to the stage to examine his unblemished feet. And then, surprisingly, to kiss them.

As he thought back on his career in the light of the Sacred Fire's words tonight, Brother Joseph began to see a pattern emerge, one which placed him at the very center of things. Gradually, since the lynching days of the KKK, through his rise in the Baptist Church to the present, God had slowly but surely been revealing truth to him, and only him. Those other would-be leaders, as he was so fond of preaching, didn't have it right, never did, never would. This latest revelation, for it was truly *arevelation*, put him in a position only slightly lower than Jesus himself.

Though he hadn't felt that way when the boy threw up on him. Had Jesus had people throw up on his holy robes and sandals? At least nobody had been around to see it. If anyone noticed the condition of his shoes after leaving the altar, they had politely, and intelligently, withheld comment. Still, he didn't like how that memory played in his mind. It seemed like Satan might have had a hand in this—

No, that wasn't possible, since Satan was too afraid to mess with personal friends and agents of God Almighty. Satan's tools didn't projectile-vomit no matter what was in the movies.

It couldn't have been interference. The boy simply lost his control, and whatever it was he drank last, from the sheer excitement of channeling the Holy Fire.

At least, he hoped that's what it was. But as he considered this, an alarming thought came to mind. What if this was some kind of *signal*, sent by God, to warn him that the boy was going to be trouble? A similar signal had been sent in the case of the little brat Sarah, in the form of a sickness during one of the Praise Meetings. That had been embarrassing, and it had required maximum use of his silver tongue to quell the audience. It had looked like some sort of epileptic seizure at the time. Eventually the congregation returned to their seats, including her parents, and watched as the girl flopped around on the stage; *possession*, that's what he'd said, he remembered. This incident had happened weeks before he had to actually kill her, and now it seemed to have been a sure sign that trouble was to follow.

*Time will tell*, he thought, with a sigh. The water's heat was making him dizzy, but he stayed in nevertheless. He didn't feel clean, not yet. The preacher had made sure that the boy had been taken back to the isolation room, away from his father. It had come to his attention that Jim Chase had been drinking a bit heavily in his private room with his son. That just didn't seem right. Also, he wasn't sure if

he could trust the man to maintain the integrity of the fast and had suspicions that he'd slipped the boy some food. Tonight, at least, Jamie would have to be separated from his father. Perhaps the separation should be permanent. The boy seemed more exhausted and muddled than the last time, but the preacher didn't worry; God would see to it that the boy survived. His body, anyway. It really didn't matter if the boy had a mind or not. He was only a mouthpiece, to serve the Holy Fire as an object, not a thinking being. And his soul would surely be purified from contact with the Holy Fire. Why, if the soul could talk to him directly, it would probably be thanking him right now.

"After all," he'd told the boy's father, while escorting the boy to the isolation room. "Children are the property of the parent who gave them life. And now, Jim, you owe me your life. You should rejoice that I have a use for your son."

Jim had agreed, nodding numbly, shuffling off to his room after locking the door on Jamie's new home.

The Holy Fire would protect the boy, as it always had, despite the apparent exhaustion he was displaying.

*The Holy Fire always survives.* He knew that, as surely as he knew his own name. Brother Joseph.

If the boy became unsuitable, there would always be others. The boy could even be buried beside Sarah and her parents.

As could his father, if he objected in any way. This, however, was unlikely; the man was a faithful, unthinking servant. The best kind. Meanwhile, so was the boy, though he had little choice in the matter.

*Neither did Sarah,* he reminded himself.

The pitiful creature never once understood the importance of her sacrifice, and that in itself was a tragedy. It was ironic that he hadn't even been trying for the Holy Fire, didn't even know that it existed. He remembered Sarah's parents telling him how *receptive* she was, how *special*. And he remembered how the voices whispering in the back of his mind had urged him to try channeling again, that this time it would be different. So he had tried -using Sarah to shoot for a garden variety prophet, like Elijah.

But instead, he got *it*. The Holy Fire. The same fire that had spoken to Moses from the burning bush.

Never, ever, had he thought he would reach something like *that*. It had all come about so casually—almost by accident.

Channeling was very big, he had realized, after reading an article about Shirley MacLaine. Californians were making lots of money with this idea, and while he didn't believe for a second that MacLaine was telling the truth, it had a certain macabre appeal. And surely in the hands of the God-fearing, if anything happened, it would be with God's will.

So he gave it another try. Sarah seemed pliant, her parents appeared cooperative, and he staged a "channeling" one night where there were few in the audience, before he had moved all of the Sacred Heart chapters to this central location. After several unproductive tries at contacting "Elijah," it happened. The Holy Fire spoke through the girl, in a voice that made her sound like Satan. As the girl spoke, it dawned on the preacher that it was not Satan but God, *thereal* God, that was talking to him directly.

Cunning, the Holy Fire was; in its first message it told the preacher what he would have to do for it so that it could aid him in his mission. It could assist the Chosen Ones in attracting new members, give them

information on gambling, tip them off when the police were nearing their operations. All sorts of helpful things, meant to bring wealth to the faithful and to confound the unbelievers. And money meant power, in anyone's language.

But the girl proved a disappointment. She resisted any further attempts to channel the Holy Fire again, much to his humiliation and, later, rage. Oh, the Fire came through, but it was a struggle, and the information it was able to convey was meager compared to what he *knew* it wanted to give.

Yet Brother Joseph had not given up. He knew enough about the Holy Fire to begin seeking another suitable subject.

It didn't take long. In fact, the father had practically dumped Jamie in his lap. Jim had been attending the Atlanta Praise Meetings intermittently at first, but then he began appearing on a regular basis. He had mentioned to the preacher that he had a son, a trusting, receptive child. Something about those words triggered an excitement in him. "Would you like to bring the boy to the next meeting?" Brother Joseph had asked, and Jim did.

Along with his mother. *She* should have been left -behind, the preacher realized instantly when he first saw her. She sat stiffly in the audience, full of resistance, looking scared and angry at the same time. Over the years the preacher had learned to spot that type, the unbeliever who would always be an unbeliever, a wife or a husband who had been dragged along. The infidel who would compete with God for the ear and soul of the newcomer, and sometimes even win.

But the boy—the *boy* was special, more than Jim -realized. And from the first moment he'd set eyes on Jamie, he knew that the Fire wanted him.

Jim had brought Jamie by himself one day, and Brother Joseph seized upon the opportunity. The faithful were anxious for a good channeling, and he had prayed earnestly for success before it began. He wasn't disappointed. The boy proved to be a superb conductor of the Holy Fire.

Then the mother had intervened, before he could get Jim to turn the boy over to his hands.

The divorce came as a surprise, to both himself and Jim, he had to admit. The preacher hadn't thought she'd had it in her. *The whore*, he thought, seething. The woman and her son went into hiding before he and Jim knew what was happening, but when the divorce papers were filed by that smart-assed lawyer, Brother Joseph knew what to do next: wait. Eventually, she would have to let her guard down. Just let her think Jim was gone, and then go in for the boy. Once she thought she was safe, she'd go back to the old house, the familiar surroundings. The preacher assigned a private in the Guard to discreetly watch the school for Cindy, and a few days later, after she showed up, Jim went in to pick up his son.

The father had been wired with a remote microphone, which they used to monitor the situation. Fifteen Chosen Ones waited beyond the school's perimeter in three separate vehicles, ready to go in and take the boy by force, if necessary. It wasn't; the school had no idea what was up. In fact, they had been downright *helpful*, to the delight of those listening in. Within moments Jim emerged with his son and quietly drove off in their pickup, followed close behind by a Bronco, a Cadillac and Brother Joseph's God-given stretch Lincoln. The convoy of Chosen Ones were well on their way to Oklahoma before the mother had any idea of what had happened.

*A brilliant mission. Brilliantly planned and brilliantly executed, just. . .brilliant*, gloated Brother Joseph. He looked up from the swirling waters, just in time to see the young guard bring a snack in on a silver tray. Cheese, crackers, caviar. A kind of salad he didn't immediately recognize. *And the police in*



*this county still don't suspect a thing .*

He knew this was primarily because of their lawyer, Claudius Williams III. The old man came down with the Detroit flock three years ago, a true believer in God, Country and AK-47s. In his collection of assault weapons he had fifteen of the Russian-made rifles, all of which he has cheerfully donated to the Sacred Heart armory. As a citizen of Detroit, Williams had practiced law during the week, favoring the male side of divorce proceedings. On Saturday, he had participated in a white supremacists' organization. On Sunday, he had been a church preacher, teaching the Israel Identity to hungover auto workers. *All in all, Brother Joseph thought, a well-rounded individual. Even though he wanted to continue preaching. He saw, with God's help, the light of wisdom. After all, we needed his expertise in the legal field. And his performance in that capacity has been exemplary.*

Once the underground lair of the Sacred Heart was discovered by the county's law enforcement, Claudius Williams III went into action. For months prior to moving to Oklahoma, he had studied the local laws in books acquired by Guard agents, finding loopholes, exploiting weaknesses. Pawnee County turned out to be ideal for their purposes. Since the building permits had already been granted, it was a simple matter to keep the sheriff off their property. What the law didn't cover, court injunctions did. In Pawnee County, it was difficult to obtain a search warrant.

And it didn't hurt that the district judge was an old college buddy of Claudius. The judge had been battling with the DA and sheriff for years now, over run-ins with his *own* friends and relatives, so naturally the granting of injunctions was a simple matter, reduced to a rubber-stamped formality. The judge and lawyer smiled and shook hands, the DA and sheriff fumed and scratched their heads, and the Sacred Heart of the Chosen Ones existed, more or less, as a sovereign state.

Brother Joseph chuckled at the sheer perversity of it all; his young servant looked up quizzically from the Bible. Their eyes locked for a brief instant before the boy looked away, apparently embarrassed.

"I must awe you," Brother Joseph said. "I know that service in my private quarters is a rotational thing, but you must feel *achill* of excitement to be here. Am I correct?"

"Of c-course, sir," the boy stammered. "Is there anything I can get you?"

"My bathrobe, my boy," the preacher said. The boy scrambled for the robe, lying on a chair on the other side of the immense bathroom. "And a towel. I'm through here for the night. Secure the area and report to your CO. You will be commended."

The boy blushed when he handed the preacher the robe. *Such a young face. And such dedication to one he worships. What, Oh Lord, have I done to deserve such favor?*

Jamie was only vaguely aware of the two beefy fists gripping his arms as he was led away from the Praise Meeting. Behind him he could hear Brother Joseph talking some icky stuff to his father, none of which really made much sense. It was just more gobbledygook. More of the same.

When the man grabbed his arm he realized that his arm had gotten smaller, and that he felt lighter. These facts didn't register immediately, but somewhere along the way he saw what it meant, and wondered if he would go away if they didn't feed him. His body, he reasoned, must be feeding on itself, and pretty soon he would be all gone. Would his real body fade away like the ghost-one had during the Praise Meeting, going all see-through, until there was nothing at all? Or would he turn into a stick-figure, like the pictures

of Ethiopian kids?

Then Jamie was dimly aware that he was going someplace different, that he wasn't going back to the old room. In a way that made him glad. He wouldn't have to worry about being rolled over on, and he wouldn't be using a blanket full of little white bugs. He didn't really care where he was going, though he was fully aware that it could be far worse than his room, if Brother Joseph was taking him there. His consciousness was fading, and he wondered if you could walk and sleep at the same time.

Somewhere in his schooling he had heard about the place they took bad boys who ran away from home, played hooky or used drugs, the place called "juvie detention." If that was where he was being taken, he now knew that you didn't have to do something bad to get there. But he wasn't scared about it, and he wondered why.

Finally they put him into a little room that had a little bed in it, but no carpet or other furniture. The blankets on the bed smelled clean, something he had barely noticed when they put him down on the bed; all he could do then was lie there and pant, and look at the stars that sparkled in his vision.

The darkness became absolute when they slammed the door on him. Jamie let out a little whimper before falling asleep, into a world of nightmares he was too tired to wake up from.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Al climbed a little higher in the tree, further away from the chain-link fence. The added distance he'd put between himself and the steel decreased the interference that disrupted his senses, and made it easier to get around the metal barriers, but it didn't make him feel any better about what was taking place down there at the "Praise Meeting."

In fact, the impromptu fine-tuning made what was happening down there all the clearer, and it took every ounce of his willpower to keep from dashing to the boy's rescue.

*No heroics*, he lectured himself. *I can't do Jamie any good if I'm shot full of holes. Lots of holes, by the look of those automatic weapons they're lugging around*. But anxiety knotted his stomach, and the urge to get over there and do something kept him in a state of nervous tension.

When he remembered what he looked like, in black clothing, boots and mask, he couldn't help but grimace; he looked either like a Ninja or a black-power commando. With this group, who hated black and Oriental people as much any other scapegoat, he wouldn't last very long. In the bright lights he would make an easy target. He didn't think he could dodge that many bullets, even with Andur's help. The elvensteed could run fast, but not *that* fast.

When the gathering began, and his brief glimpses into the humans' minds gave him more and more information, Alinor quickly identified this as the same kind of "Praise Meeting" that Cindy had told him about. Everything matched what she'd described, including the peculiar flag in the stage's background. What he hadn't expected was the evil thing that Brother Joseph summoned as soon as Jamie arrived. Al had not expected ritual magic, not here. He had assumed that the dark power he'd touched had been something the cultists didn't know about, or something that was using them without their knowledge. It seemed he was wrong—terribly wrong.

Given the magical power of the entity, he was still afraid that it might have detected him, there at the beginning of the ritual. He couldn't shake a sense of familiarity, a haunting foreboding that he had, indeed, seen this thing, or something like it, in the past. Alinor had to admit that it wasn't often these days that he ran across such things. One was more likely to encounter such things in the halfworld, beyond the borders of Underhill, not in the technological environment of the "real world." But here it was.

And it threatened Jamie's very survival. It would have to be dealt with, destroyed. At the moment, Alinor was most likely to be the one to face the beast.

Provided it didn't find and devour *him* first.

After he'd withdrawn his probes from the immediate vicinity of the entity, he studied its reactions. Soon he was satisfied that it hadn't sensed him, and that the humans who had gathered were responsible for its waking. And then the creature saw the tiny life-spark that had to be Jamie, and reached. . . .

But instead of devouring the boy, the child's soul *switched* with the dark thing. Alinor did a double take; suddenly, outside the boy's body, stood the boy—or rather, the boy's spirit. And speaking through the body was the evil force, in full control of mouth, tongue and vocal cords.

The elf's first reaction was awe at the expertise this human, Brother Joseph, had with the magics of the half-world. But as Alinor surreptitiously explored this -"expertise" he found the preacher wasn't responsible for the shift at all. In fact, the switch took place *in spite* of the preacher and all he did. He saw the interference the emotional energies were creating: strong, gusty waves of hate and fear, intermingled with the human excitement of the Praise Meeting. Brother Joseph didn't engineer the switch, the evil force did, deftly sidestepping the waves of psionic energy the meeting generated, shunting them off.

Alinor narrowed his eyes and frowned, gathering his thoughts. His perch in the tree was getting uncomfortable, but he dared not move. If *that thing* didn't notice him, the guards down there might. The entity might even see him then, a complication he quite easily could live without.

*I'm assuming too much, he decided. I don't know that it perceives magics and energies the same way I do. In fact, it probably doesn't see it the same way. It seems quite alien—and it's not like an Unseleighe creature, either. The emotion-driven psychic force that Brother Joseph is raising may be acting as food to it, not a loud distraction. I wish I had someone with more experience here with me. . . .*

As the darkness enveloped the boy, Alinor became aware of yet another creature, creeping quietly out of the halfworld.

*Who is she?* Alinor wondered, suddenly aware of the being's gender. This was not something cut from the same fabric as the present occupant of Jamie's body.

She was quiet, yet strong. And the fact that she retained a sex, and a vaguely human semblance, finally gave him the clue he needed to identify *what* she was, if not who.

A human ghost.

Al sighed. A ghost tied to this place could only mean that it was bound somehow to Brother Joseph or the cult. Such bindings were rarely anything other than tragic. *So much unhappiness in this place, invoked by a crazed human preacher who doesn't even know what he's done!*

And now there was another complication to what had seemed straightforward last night. That this was a ghost with Jamie told him a great deal. The woman, no *girl*, had evidently died a violent death. Spirits with that kind of ending frequently lingered near the earth-plane, still not convinced that they had died; wandering about aimlessly, knocking things over and making a general nuisance of themselves. The very tragedy of their death acted as a burden, an anchor weighing them down until the conflict surrounding their demise was resolved.

Yet even as he thought that, he knew that wasn't the case here; he could sense it. This spirit had a purpose, and the purpose involved Jamie.

*Was this her way of dealing with her own death?* Al wondered as he watched the flicker of light take form. The girl sent Jamie's spirit a thin tendril of energy, which began blocking the boy's pain.

*Well done!* Alinor complimented silently. *I hope that before this is all over and done with I'll get to meet this little one, and perhaps help her leave this plane. . . .*

But this was getting more complicated by the moment; not the simple "snatch and grab" of the usual elven rescue. His premonition had been correct. There had been death, sadism and violence here, and there was more to come.

He resisted a particularly strong urge to contact the ghost-child. Allies in this situation could only help to tip the odds in his, and Jamie's, favor. But to reach out to her could alert the beast to his presence and, conceivably, to hers. How she had managed to aid Jamie was something he would have to ask later.

Alinor listened, and watched.

The thing began to speak through Jamie, and the -reaction from the audience was dramatic and varied. The thing fed on the roiling emotions of the preacher's flock. *A true parasitic spirit*, Al thought. Parasites in any world were disgusting things to him, *especially* when they attacked children. This one seemed particularly insidious, in view of the total possession the thing had of the boy's body. He wondered what would happen if it weakened Jamie to the point where it could make that possession permanent.

The entity spoke, ranting in the same vein as Brother Joseph, an outpouring of racial hate and convoluted biblical theory that was enough to make him ill. It made even less sense than Brother Joseph, something Alinor had to hear to believe.

And he could not shake the nagging sense of -familiarity.

*Where else have I seen this thing?* Al asked himself, now certain he'd encountered it, or perhaps a relative of it, before.

It began saying things, things the preacher seemed unprepared for. The man stood back, apparently trying to form some kind of rebuttal to what was coming out of the boy's mouth. *You, Brother Joseph, you are the instrument of the Prophecy. You will be the Bringer of the Flame. . . .* The boy's distorted voice ranted on, while the preacher just stood there, open-mouthed, slack-jawed, for once at a loss for words.

Alinor took note of how the preacher reacted to this unexpected tirade. Brother Joseph did not like what he heard—but more importantly, the words disturbed the audience as well. The congregation shifted nervously, and the deep wrinkle between Brother Joseph's eyebrows -deepened.

But like the professional orator he was, he bounced back from the uncomfortable moment as soon as the entity gave him the chance to speak, replying with a rambling continuation of his previous sermon.

Within moments he had reconciled everything the creature had said with his own words, exerting a powerful charisma to charm the flock and lull them back into their feeling of comfortable *belonging*. Apparently relieved that what the Sacred Fire had to say was no real surprise, they responded with mindless shouts of “Praise the Lord,” resolutely erasing any lingering doubts from their own minds.

A guard passed by the tree Al was sitting in, startling him and catching him unawares. He pulled his attention back to his immediate surroundings. *Need to watch that*, he thought, as his stomach lurched in alarm. *I am, after all, sitting in a tree in hostile territory.*

But the guard continued his patrol around one of the buildings. Apparently he had not noticed Alinor perched above him. This time he’d been lucky, but luck could only stretch so far.

Al checked cautiously for other guards, found none, and eventually sent his mental sight back to the Praise Meeting. But now the hall had been cleared of all spectators, except for a handful of men gathered at the foot of the stage. The boy continued speaking, but *what* he was saying . . .

Alinor smiled sardonically. *Now we get to the practical part of this evening’s programming*, he thought, making mental notes on the kinds of information the entity produced for Brother Joseph. *Bingo. Horse racing. Gambling. What else?* he wondered. And then he heard what else—

Drugs. Information on the police. *Great Danaa, this thing has a lead on just about everything. It knows more about the humans and their world than they do. Not only that, but it’s engineering the sale of drugs . . . to children!*

Now he was not only sickened, he was outraged. *The man is a monster. He has the ability to manipulate whoever listens to him—and he uses it for this. And beneath it all, he’s still a puppet, a tool. The thing that controls him, that’s the culprit, the blackness behind this entire charade masquerading as faith . . . some Christian, he hasn’t got a clue. . . .*

Then, with a cold shock of recognition, Alinor finally remembered where he’d seen this *thing* before. *The church and all its esoteric trappings*, he chided himself angrily. *Brother Joseph, and all his blithering religious lunacy, should have been a dead giveaway. Of course—of course. I know where this thing came from—what it is. It’s been nearly a thousand years, but I shouldn’t have forgotten, no matter how long ago it happened. This dark creature, this blackness, this thing, this blot of evil, this . . .*

Salamander.

It shouldn’t be happening again. But *it was*.

Only this time, the Christian soldiers weren’t toting shields, swords and arrows. They were armed with the latest in automatic weaponry, killing tools designed to exterminate humans by the hundreds.

Yet how could it be happening here, now? When he had witnessed the creation of the United States, Alinor had thought that the Constitution would prevent religious crusades from destroying lives and souls ever again. The Constitution was, after all, designed to protect *all* religions, not just the Christian one. At its inception the new nation was easily the freest place in the world. It still was, though the Folk still needed to remain concealed.

*The Salamander is behind it. Blessed Danaa*—he thought angrily; wishing, as he had so many times before, that he had found a way to do away with the creature, or to at least send it back from where it came.

*And nothing has really changed since the last time.*

The last time, ten centuries ago.

*I was only a child. . . .*

It was his first excursion outside Scotland, to the home of his mother's people. He'd looked, at the time, like a teenaged human boy, and although he was considerably older than he appeared, he acted and thought like the sheltered youngster he was.

His father, Liam Silverbranch, had taken him to meet his mother Melisande's kin in Elfhame Joyeaux Garde in France.

His mother's mother had been Elaine du Lac, who had fostered the famous Lancelot du Lac, and both parents had deemed it high time that he meet his celebrated relatives and learn the Gallic side of his heritage. But there had been no one near his age there, not even human fosterlings, and the older elves had gotten involved in hunts and Court gossip and politics. Eventually they had left him to his own devices. He had run off on an exploration of his own as soon as the idea occurred to him.

It was his first chance to see mortals in any numbers, humans other than the fosterlings. The humans were so—bewildering. He had wanted to see them up close, to see the way they really lived; their capacity for violence astonished and intrigued him with morbid fascination. They seemed to throw their short lives away on a whim, to court injury and death for the strangest of reasons or no reason at all. He *had* to learn more.

He had slipped off in human guise when his father and King Huon were off on a three-day hunt. He had planned to stay human for several months, knowing that the time-slip between the human world and Underhill would make it seem only a day or two—five at the most—for the elves. He had even picked out a human to imitate.

His intent, originally, was to pass as a tanner's apprentice. The boy was being sent from a cousin in another village—the tanner had no idea what the boy looked like, only that he was coming. What he did not know—because his cousins didn't tell him—was that the boy was much younger than he'd been led to think; instead of being an adolescent, the proper age for an apprentice, he was only six. The cousins had hoped to fob the boy off on their richer relative; since he was already foregoing the usual apprenticeship fee, they figured once the boy was in his custody, he wouldn't turn him away. He'd lost his way and been found by one of the fosterlings, who'd taken him Underhill with her.

Alinor turned up right on schedule. For a few months all was well; the tanner was relatively prosperous, and since he catered to the wealthy with his finely tooled leather horse-goods, Alinor got to see all the violence he wanted, quite close. But in the third month of his apprenticeship, his master had died of a madness that, he later learned, had been caused by a poisonous mold in rye bread. Knowing that it would be unwise to be associated with a -human who had gone mad, he attempted to return to Elfhame Joyeaux Garde.

By that time, he was weary and sick of the mortals and their unfathomable ways, and he had seen enough of the humans' world by then to extinguish any lingering desire for adventure. The bloody battling of the humans, their insatiable desire for conflict, was all very fine in a ballad or tale—but when you stood close enough to the scene of the battle to be spattered with blood from the combatants, it was another case entirely. He was tired of the poor food, the unsanitary conditions, the coarse garments. He was tired of being either too hot or too cold, and very, very tired of rising before dawn and working until the last light had left the sky.

But the ruling council of Joyeaux Garde forbade his return. And that had come as an unpleasant shock.

After all, he had left on his own, without asking leave of the ruling elven royalty, without even telling his parents. Such carelessness had led to exposure in the past—led to the deaths of elves at the hands of mortals, led to witch- and demon-hunts. Or so the ruling council said.

So he was to learn a lesson about the consequences of selfish and unthinking behavior. Alinor suspected that his own father Liam Silverbranch had something to do with the “exile.” Liam had admitted to being worried sick over his disappearance, and Liam did not care for being inconvenienced or discommoded in any way. He especially was not amused at his son's audacity in addressing the council without even a touch of humility. And since Alinor was too old for a switch to his rear, he would receive a punishment equivalent to the crime.

It was, King Huon explained (looking much like one of the pictures the humans painted in their churches of a stern and unforgiving God), time for him to get a good dose of the humans. Especially since he had left his rightful home and Underhill without regard for rule of elven law or the feelings of his elven kin.

Alinor knew that he had not been mature in any sense, back then. *I was such a little—what do they call it these days—“rug rat?” Trying to be an adult, without the mental equipment to do so. It's a wonder I didn't get into more trouble than I did.* The Court gave him a year, human time, before he could return to the elves' world, and in that year he was told to survive as a human, not as one of the Folk, and face death if he was exposed as Sidhe. Which meant, in so many words, use your wits, not your magic. Fortunately the humans were wearing their hair long in those days, and most peasants wore hats or hoods night and day, making it easier to hide his conspicuous, pointed ears.

Rebuffed, Alinor did as he was told. To a point. He wandered aimlessly, in the guise of a peasant, which wasn't too difficult since he didn't have a pot to pee in anyway. For a few days he managed to convince himself of the romantic nature of his travels, living on the edge, evading the Death Metal of humans' weapons by a hair's breadth. Great adventure for a youth, and it would have gone on for some time, except for one thing.

Alinor was cold, tired and *hungry* .

In any of the elven enclaves, food was available in abundance. But in the humans' world, starvation prevailed—at least for the lowest classes. Drought and floods regularly wiped out much of the agriculture, and what the weather left, insects and plant diseases ravaged. Small game was difficult to catch without a bow—which, as a peasant, he was not permitted to own—and it was nearly impossible to find a forest that some human noble hadn't already staked a claim to, a claim which was enforced by sword- and arrow-wielding sheriffs. His early attempts at kenning eatables resulted in a tasteless, unpalatable mush that mules would turn up their noses at. Before a week was out, the youngster knew he was in trouble, and began searching for a human he could influence and to learn the mundane ways of making a living as a freedman of some kind. Not even he was romantic enough to think of the life of a

serf as something to be pursued.

Alinor had been contemplating pilfering and slaughtering a chicken, and wondering if it was worth the risk of -being caught. The farmer in question had several fierce dogs guarding his property; Alinor had thought he would be able to lull them into sleep, but what if he missed one? He finally decided that it wasn't worth the risk and was -going in search of a field he could loot for turnips after dark. That was when he came across an elderly man wearing a peculiar robe and a towel around his head, muttering something to himself as he trudged along a dirt highway. He was leading a sickly mule and cart, and nearly walked into the youngster.

The old man had stopped dead in his tracks and gazed at him strangely for a moment. Where he had come from, and what he was doing here, Alinor had no idea. And at the time Alinor couldn't have cared less; he was *starving* .

And whoever the old man was, he didn't speak French, Norse, Saxon English, or Gaelic, the four tongues Alinor knew. After several aborted attempts at communication, the elf finally conveyed his need for food, and to his surprise, the old man gave it to him. Though it was only a bit of bread and a stick of dried meat, gamy and heavily seasoned, Alinor had devoured it hungrily. Only after finishing the meal did he realize that, by accepting the gift, he had become an indentured servant to the man.

Not that it really mattered. Here was the help he'd been looking for. Alinor had even felt very clever, knowing he could leave at any time, since the old man was weak and helpless. Besides, he had reasoned, this had the potential to be interesting.

Over time Alinor learned that the man was known in the region as Al-Hazim, also called the "Mad Arab," though he was neither Arabic nor mad—he was, in fact, a Moor from Alhambra. After some time, he wondered how Al-Hazim escaped being set upon by the other humans—he was, after all, an infidel and fair game. He finally -decided that most humans thought the old man was a Jew, not an Arab—Jews had a tenuous immunity from persecution, since when a noble needed money, he had to go to the Jews for it, his own fellows being forbidden to lend money by the Church. This led to a kind of dubious safety; no one wanted to kill the man who would lend him money, but when the debt came due, sometimes it was easier to end the debt with the life of the creditor. . . .

And those that knew the old man was Arabic had -another reason to fear him and leave him alone.

He was a magician. He might traffic in demons. He might be protected by horrible creatures. No one human wanted to chance that, and by the time the local Church authorities were alerted to his presence, or the local nobleman was told the Arab was on his property—or a mob was gathered from the braver folk of the village—the Mad Arab was long gone. He never stayed anywhere that he was known overnight. Alinor had the feeling he'd probably learned that lesson early in his career as a wanderer.

Al-Hazim was an alchemist by trade and possessed a handwritten copy of the *Emerald Tablet* , a rare and eagerly sought-after book. Though the book was a famous treatise on Arabian alchemy, it had never been translated because it was knowledge that had been uncovered by the infidels, and for a fee the Mad Arab would read it aloud in broken but understandable Latin. To Alinor it was only so much gibberish, but "scientists" in the towns they passed through would provide food and shelter for the privilege of transcribing while Al-Hazim spoke.

The elf couldn't understand the reverence other alchemists paid the *Emerald Tablet* . It was all just half--mystical nonsense compounded with human ignorance, and Alinor privately thought the work and its owner equally ridiculous.



They fell into a pattern of traveling from town to town, usually in search of “scientists” and the very few churchmen who were interested in the *Emerald Tablet* and its secrets. Alinor listened to them debate the secrets of -alchemy, and absorbed this “great wisdom” to the best of his abilities, at least until he couldn’t stand the cryptic nonsense anymore.

Alchemy, he learned (albeit reluctantly), was considered to be more than just a science, it was a philosophy that supposedly represented mystic, occult knowledge. Al-Hazim’s goal was to produce the “elixir,” which could be used to convert cheap metal into gold. Alinor knew something of metals; every Sidhe did. What the alchemists were talking about was possible, but not in the way that was outlined in the *Tablet*. When Alinor was able to examine a nugget of pure gold, payment from an isolated monk from the Saint Basil Monastery, he kened it thoroughly. The gold was the purest Al had ever actually touched, for the Folk preferred ornaments made of silver over those of gold, and the contact enabled him to ken it well enough to produce a perfect replica.

Now he could assure the prosperity of his “master”—and not inconsequentially, himself. And all without risking the exposure of his magic-use by the Folk.

Of course, he couldn’t claim responsibility for doing so. It had to appear to be the work of Al-Hazim the Alchemist, not Alinor of the Sidhe.

So he produced a nugget of gold in the crucible at the appropriate moment, the next time Al-Hazim made the attempt for some of his fellow scientists.

Needless to say, it caused a sensation.

This would not have been the first time the Sidhe had produced gold for humans—though usually, it was as a gift to a mother with hungry children, or a father with girls to dower and no money. But Alinor had been specifically forbidden to work this kind of magic by his elders. . . .

He decided, rebelliously, that he didn’t care. If he had to substitute gold for a few worthless lumps of lead in order to fill his belly, then that was what he would do. After all, *he* wasn’t getting the credit—and notoriety. Al-Hazim was.

Word of the Mad Arab’s success filtered down through the countryside, and as they neared towns the populace cleared out of the streets, avoiding them at all costs. Only the few who sought knowledge, power or greater wealth—often at risk to their souls, according to the Church—ever sought them out. Perversely, this increased their safety. The lowborn were terrified of the demons Al-Hazim *must* have had to protect him; the highborn were well aware of the tale of the goose that laid golden eggs and were not -inclined to risk either the demons or the loss of the secret of making gold to the hands of a torturer. Al-Hazim was careful with his “talent,” changing only the “choicest leads” to gold, and small nuggets at that.

Meanwhile, Alinor worked the magic that created the actual miracles, while Al-Hazim conjured the “elixir” over the tiny brazier they carried with them. Chanting passages from the *Emerald Tablet*, the Mad Arab carefully heated the vessel, a small copper pot with tubes running back into it, like a still, while his tiny audiences watched.

In a trance, the Mad Arab held the vessel over the coals, sometimes for hours, often in conjunction with astrological conditions, while onlookers stared at the flames, mesmerized. Alinor became a little uncomfortable in the intense emotional energy generated at such gatherings, but he held his youthful

impatience in check, reminding himself what this was all for.

He had to work stealthily, so that his “mentor,” Al-Hazim, got the credit, and sometimes he was a little jealous at the attention the decrepit old Moor received. But the astonished looks and hysterical applause when a little chunk of lead “turned into gold” was well worth a little discomfort and unrequited envy. This was the most fun he’d ever had, and behind the curtains of the wagon the youngster would break out in unrestrained laughter, holding his sides, chortling until he wept.

*All this, for a little lump of yellow metal.* Alinor would shake his head and chuckle, as the gold was scrupulously divided between the Moor and whoever had provided the costly ingredients of the elixir. Soon they were able to buy a healthy pair of horses and a full-sized wagon, so they could ride instead of walking. They began to wear decent clothing, and Alinor took on the look of a young nobleman. They stayed in a well-appointed tent instead of sleeping in the fields. Life was a little better, when alchemy worked the way it was supposed to.

“Everything comes from the One and returns to the One,” the Mad Arab chanted from memory, as they traveled. They were on their way from Toulouse to Clermont in the southern part of the Kingdom of France, in early November of what—these days—was denoted as the year 1095. Back then, calendars were few, and dates a matter of guess. “It is truth and not lies. What is below is what is above, as all things have been from One by the mediation of One,” he continued. From that he went into a recitation in what Al had determined was his native language. Al-Hazim had been particularly pleased with himself lately. They had received word from none other than the “king” of the Catholic nation, Pope Urban II, that their presence was requested in the city of Clermont-Ferrand. The messenger had been sent with a considerable sum of gold coin, with promises of more when they arrived.

The youngster had gotten the distinct feeling that the old man’s excitement had more to do with who they were seeing than what they were receiving for coming. Alinor had only a vague understanding of the humans’ religions at the time; to him, it all seemed completely nonsensical, whether it was Al-Hazim’s brand of Mohammedism or the local variant of Catholicism.

Still, it could not be denied that the Church had considerable significance; indeed, most of the towns and villages they’d passed through seemed to be governed by the Church, with a king or lord installed as an afterthought. The Pope seemed to be a particularly important figure. Al gathered that it wasn’t the man’s religious significance, though, that Al-Hazim was ecstatic over. He was, after all, a follower of a different faith. It was the man’s *political* power that interested the Mad Arab.

Alinor studied his strange mentor as they traveled the mountainous terrain south of their destination. *Not quite as mad as he would have us think*, he observed, wondering if this was something he had overlooked, or if the man had actually changed. The recent sessions with the “elixir”—a mixture of blood, ground pearl, mercury, sulfur, and several herbs Alinor couldn’t identify—had generated vast amounts of psychic energy, powers which Al-Hazim could not see, and which Alinor had thought at first that he was probably not aware of.

Alinor had known just enough to be a bit worried about that. Such situations, or so he had been told, were dangerous in the extreme. Most humans could not see these powers, or what they could do, but that didn’t stop pockets of power from forming, usually in places where they could do the most harm.

This seemed different somehow, as if Al-Hazim, in spite of his apparent lunacy, knew what he was dealing with. Alinor could not be sure, and it worried him now and again. But he was easily distracted by the novelty of their journey, and he kept forgetting to be concerned.

The last town they stopped at before Clermont was not much more than a church and an inn that served cheap ale and sour wine. Here, as at the other towns, Al-Hazim's fame preceded them, but this time the locals were less afraid and more in the mood to be entertained, as if the Moor were some kind of showman. Alinor was tired and a little irritated, and his usual envy for Al-Hazim's fame had become amplified in proportion to the size of the new audience. When the Moor agreed to perform his usual transformation ritual, the youngster decided for him to have a lapse in abilities.

The villagers gathered around, determined to see the miracle occur, as Alinor stood in the shadows. For hours Al-Hazim gazed at the little brazier, occasionally adding coal to keep it going. As night fell, more villagers, now finished with their work in the fields, wandered into the inn to witness Al-Hazim's Great Work. Some became impatient and began ignoring him in favor of the strong, sour wine, but the Mad Arab continued with his tedious task -unperturbed.

Alinor gleefully listened to the villagers murmur dissatisfaction with his mentor's work.

*See. He's not the great wizard you thought he was, is he? It was me all along, and I still have the power to make him look the fool!*

The copper vessel simmered and boiled, and when Al-Hazim tested the elixir on a sample piece of lead, nothing happened. The Mad Arab frowned but continued his chanting, while the villagers around him became more and more vocal in their dissatisfaction.

Alinor found this increasingly amusing. He considered giving the poor Moor a break and producing an unusually large nugget of gold. *When the time is right*, he promised himself. *Let the old fool sweat first*.

Finally the villagers got downright disgusted with the whole thing and began jeering at the old man, threatening to pelt him with refuse, although none of them quite dared to do so. The grumbling went on for some time, growing in intensity, and Alinor became a little nervous himself. Before he could give the audience satisfaction and produce the gold, the Arab's mood suddenly changed.

The old man looked up sharply from the brazier, fixing the peasants with a dagger-like glare for a moment, and the noise dropped somewhat, but did not entirely cease. Then he snarled, silently, and his chanting changed to an evil-sounding, guttural verse that Alinor hadn't heard -before.

Suddenly a sense of impending danger fell over the gathering; a feeling of a vast shadow creeping over the audience, a shadow that held the chill of death in its depths. In panic Alinor tried, in vain, to exchange a large lead weight at the Arab's feet for gold, but something, something strong, was blocking him. Nothing ever raised by a mere human had ever been potent enough to do this before, and at this point Alinor was well and truly scared witless.

*Whatisthat thing?* Alinor had thought, in a state of panic. Normally sensitive to what humans were thinking around him, his mental gifts also seemed to be impeded. But the humans' expressions of cruel mirth, now turned suddenly to fright, said it all. The evil essence seeped into every corner of the inn, sending them into silence, while the elf tried desperately to determine where it came from and, most importantly, what it*was*.

For the first time since being cast from Joyeaux Garde, Alinor considered calling for help. King Huon, certainly, would know how to deal with this thing; it was probably beyond Alinor's abilities. As the youngster considered this option, however, it seemed less and less feasible.

First of all, they might not come in time, or come at all.

Secondly, though it might solve the immediate problem, it would make Alinor seem incompetent, and very much the child the other elves apparently thought he was. *No. That wouldn't do at all. It would only show them that they were right all along, that I couldn't handle the humans' world.*

The Mad Arab turned his attention to the fire blazing in the little brazier, which itself was beginning to glow red. In the fire Alinor saw a dark shape take form, a creature that writhed and exulted in the flames. Al-Hazim apparently saw it, but no one else seemed to take notice of it besides Alinor. As the thing grew, the youngster saw what it was; it looked like a large, black salamander, moving in the fire but unscathed by the heat. Indeed, the thing seemed to thrive in the flame, and Alinor flinched when the black shape turned and *winked* at him.

*He sees me, and he's letting me know it,* he had thought in alarm. He remembered the elements of alchemy, in particular the animal symbols, which represented the four elements of Earth, Air, Water, and Fire. Fire was represented by the *Salamander*. Until this moment, he had thought the Salamander was a creature of complete myth; he'd never seen one Underhill, and he'd certainly never seen one *here*.

That only he and Al-Hazim could see the thing told him that it was not of the humans' world, that it was from the halfworld of spirits. So far, everything he'd seen had made him more and more alarmed. And it didn't help that it could also see *him*.

The essence of the Salamander wafted into the inn as the Mad Arab continued with his dark chants, as if he was adding power to the creature he had conjured. Fights began to break out—apparently spontaneously—over minor things, and he and Al-Hazim might just as well have been invisible. No one seemed to remember they were there at all.

Alinor knew the Salamander was behind it. And in a few more moments he watched it actually take possession of a few of the younger men, whose minds were more malleable than their elders, whose emotions flared with a little less urging. It seemed to avoid the older men altogether, perhaps because they weren't resilient enough.

The fights quickly escalated. Mugs, then bodies began to fly through the air. The innkeeper locked up the liquor, corked the keg, and disappeared.

Alinor began to look for an exit, not liking the dangerous state of things one bit. He could feel the creature probing *his* shields briefly, looking for a way into his soul—

Before he could move for the door, a newcomer blocked his way. It was a monk wearing a long dirty robe, bald and disheveled, like a hundred other mendicant friars on the road. He wouldn't have warranted a second glance—ordinarily.

But there was something unique about the man and the handful of peasants that had followed him in. The monk was definitely the leader, as the others deferred to him. The monk and his entourage had an air of presence about them—

Or at least, they acted as if they were vastly more important than they seemed.

The Salamander seemed startled, as if it had seen them too—and didn't like their presence at all. Now Alinor was puzzled and abruptly changed his mind; he had to see what would happen.

The monk cleared his throat and made some kind of an announcement—

And the fighting stopped. Gradually, but it *did* stop.

The monk spoke again; it was in some tongue Alinor didn't understand. What he heard instead was the muted whispers as the inn's clientele slowly noticed the monk. "Peter the Hermit," they muttered, turning and pointing. They seemed in awe, as if he really was as important as he was pretending to be.

Now the elf noticed what he carried with him; a small copper box just large enough to contain an apple, with intricate metalwork decorating it. Alinor admired the work, but assumed it was a reliquary for a religious object and dismissed it as unimportant. There was a much more -inter-esting conflict shaping up—between his master and this newcomer.

He still might have to run for it—so far they hadn't had any trouble with religious types, but Al-Hazim *was* an infidel, and as such, was likely to come under the censure of the Church and its agents. This Peter might just give them some trouble.

Now Al-Hazim looked up, his eyes narrowing as they met the Hermit's. They silently exchanged something -between them, something not particularly polite; it was as if they had seen each other before and had some unpleasant dealings. The monk held the copper box out and opened the lid. The container was empty.

With a resigned air about him, Al-Hazim began chanting again, only this time it was something different, more intense. The foreign words did not resonate with the same dark evil as the ones before, the passage which had summoned the Salamander in the first place. But the Salamander responded, albeit reluctantly; the box the monk held seemed to act like a magnet, pulling the creature -towards it.

The peasants of the inn became quiet and looked confused, as if they weren't certain if they should be angry with each other or turn on these newcomers. Dark powers fluctuated violently in the room, giving Alinor a screaming headache.

Gradually, the Salamander was sucked into the copper box. As soon as it was inside Peter the Hermit sealed it tightly with the lid, tying it with a strip of leather and a crucifix on a silver chain.

With that, the atmosphere changed again. The people even seemed to have forgotten their disappointment in the Moor's performance; seemed, in fact, to have forgotten the Moor altogether. The fights that erupted ceased, the oppo-nents now slapping each other on the back and wandering out together.

*Whatever this thing is, Alinor thought, it brings out the ugliest feelings from humans, makes them hate. The hate was not directed anywhere, so the nearest person became the object of it. He shook his head at the pure insidiousness of the thing. And Al-Hazim must have had it tucked away somewhere. The peasants angered him, and he set this thing loose to cause mischief.*

*He's a crazy old man, but he's dangerous. Now, I think, is the time to leave him. He doesn't know I could see what he did. After all, nobody else saw his pet. If I let on that I did, no telling what he might turn on me!*

While the monk was holding the copper box, as if savor-ing its contents, Alinor stole away through the kitchen, leaving behind what few possessions he'd acquired while in the Mad Arab's employ.

Then he encountered another obstacle. Outside the door a large number of peasants had gathered, some with packmules.

He slipped out of their way as silently as he could, thanking Danaa that their attention was all on the inn door and not on anything else. Within moments, he had attained the road and was heading for the forest, congratulating himself on a successful escape.

Then he stopped—feeling suddenly guilty.

He pondered the unexpected reaction as the raucous sounds of the inn faded behind him, giving way to the more familiar and comforting sounds of the forest.

Where to go now? Returning to Joyeaux Garde still wasn't possible; his year of exile was barely half over. And now he had a better understanding of how the humans' world worked. It wasn't so hard to make your way about, if you were clever. Perhaps he could even set himself up as an alchemist and turn lead to gold, just as he had been doing with Al-Hazim.

*I can get by just fine without him, Alinor had told himself. I don't look like an infidel, I can speak the language better than he does, and as long as I can wear my hair long I can keep my ears concealed. Or I can even chance the spell being detected and disguise myself.* On the surface, it sounded like a good plan: ken the appropriate objects for “alchemy,” perform the proper “rituals” while heating and cooling the “elixir,” and he would soon be able to support himself quite well.

But—he would have to be very careful that the Folk didn't find out about his exploits.

Would that be possible? The result was tempting; to return home dressed in human finery, showing them all that he knew how to take care of himself and that he was a real adult, not just a naughty child.

But what about the Salamander?

That was a real problem and, he had realized, the source of his guilty feelings. Leaving the situation at the inn felt like he was leaving behind a responsibility. He had heard Liam and the other older elves talk about the evil things they came across in the humans' world, and what they did to eliminate the problems before they threatened Underhill.

It wasn't just a tradition; it was something that was ingrained in each of them, Alinor realized. He had to admit that he felt a distinct tugging as he walked away from the Salamander, a tugging that became stronger, not weaker, the further he moved away.

*It would be so easy to just walk away from that evil thing back there, he thought. Nobody would know the difference. Nobody in the elven kingdoms would know that I ran from the thing. A Salamander . . . this entity, a foe far beyond anything I can handle anyway!*

*Nobody would know . . . except me. I'm telling myself I'm grown up—a full adult. But can I really believe that if I don't at least try to do something about this—creature—before it becomes a danger to me and my kin?*

Alinor stopped walking. Slowly, he turned back towards the inn, still visible at the side of the winding dirt trail leading from it. *Oh great Danaa*, he thought, at length. *Does this mean I'm getting a “conscience”?* *That thing the Court sages claim raises us above the beasts, makes us greater? Whatever it is, it makes me feel larger, stronger—and frightened. Think of the trouble it could*

*lead me into. . . . Alinor smiled. Trouble indeed.*

He watched the monk leaving the inn, followed by the handful of followers who had escorted him. Outside, a hundred or so peasants gathered around him and cheered.

*Who is this Peter the Hermit, with all these followers? he wondered. Now that he has the Salamander, what is he going to do with it? The thought of this man in control of so many people made him nervous, to say the least. Add in the Salamander, and there was no telling what would happen. The humans' world is my world, for the time being, he accepted, grudgingly. I've partly caused the Salamander's summoning, and now the thing is in the possession of this monk, whoever he is. A man who had no trouble capturing the Salamander. There's no point in returning to Al-Hazim, he no longer possesses the thing. He might have other powers, but that can be dealt with later. Peter the Hermit, on the other hand. . . . Alinor frowned, knowing then what he would have to do.*

Peter the Hermit had a following far larger than the group accompanying him to the inn. They were, Alinor later found out (after blending in with the rest of peasants), some of the first to throw in with him and were escorting him for protection. Alinor had no trouble joining ranks with the motley crew that wandered back to the encampment along another dirt road; they accepted anyone and everyone who was willing to follow their leader. For the time being, Alinor kept his questions to a minimum, choosing instead to look and listen carefully to what was going on around him. The bulk of the monk's people were at a camp some miles away, and cheered loudly as the ragged procession reached the edge of the assemblage of carts and crude tents.

It was just as well he had left behind what valuables he owned; from the villainous look of some of these fellows, he guessed that a fair number of "followers" were thieves as well.

He learned he was right, after fending off the plucking hands that tried to take his clothes when he "slept." And not just thieves; the gatherings that sprung up every night in the encampments were the loudest he had heard yet in this land, and the religious meetings often turned into drunken orgies once the Hermit had retired for the night. Apparently all the rules of Good Christians had been suspended for *this* lot. And the monk was a different sort from the priests Alinor was familiar with. The more he saw, the more confused he became.

After some searching—and a few misunderstandings as to his intentions—the youngster found a lad who appeared to be around his own age and fell in with him. The boy was talkative and spent most of his waking hours with a skin of ruby wine constantly at hand. He seemed to be better dressed than the majority of the Hermit's company, and Alinor soon discovered he was the son of a knight. He was quite at ease with Alinor, probably because the Sidhe was dressed in similar wealth and style, and spoke with the accent of the nobility rather than in a crude peasants' dialect. Alinor had left the Mad Arab with literally the clothes on his back—but they were fine clothes, and clothing in the humans' world marked one's status in life.

The boy had done nearly the same as Alinor, running off from home with little preparation. The boy's name was Albert, Alinor learned, and when he told the young man that he had just joined the group that day, Albert launched into a lengthy paean to the holiness and mission of Peter the Hermit.

Occasionally his words slurred, but for the most part he was coherent. Coherent in spite of the wine he gulped at every pause for breath from the skin tied at his side.

“Peter the Hermit is God’s true prophet, incarnate,” Albert said, though in a hushed tone that suggested that not everyone in the camp shared quite that same belief. “The Turks tortured him when he went to Jerusalem on a pilgrimage. He brought back monstrous tales of barbarians seizing the Holy Land. He’ll take anyone in, as long as they follow him on his journey and pledge to fight beside him.”

Where then, Alinor asked delicately, was this journey leading?

“Why to the Holy Land, of course!” Albert announced proudly. “To free Jerusalem and return it to Christian rule. He doesn’t have full support of the Church yet, but he will, when he goes to Clermont. He’s to see the Holy Father, the Pope himself.”

Alinor remembered that Al-Hazim had been summoned to Clermont by the Pope, and wondered if this had anything to do with the Salamander. Cautiously, he inquired about the dark entity and the copper box—and the visit to Al-Hazim that had ended with the Hermit’s capture of the creature.

“Salamander?” the boy said, obviously puzzled. “Don’t know anything about a salamander. Today Peter went to reclaim something that had been stolen from him by that Arab, Al-Hazim, but I don’t know what it was. Some kind of power to fight the infidels, they say. Why an infidel like Al-Hazim would be in possession of it—well, who knows what an infidel will do, or why. Unless he took it to keep Peter from using it.” He took another gulp of wine and grew bolder. “He should be burned. They should all be burned, the heretics, the Jews, the Turks, the Arab dogs—they’re all in league with devils.”

*Which explains the odd exchange between the two men, Alinor thought. The Salamander was stolen.*

When Alinor turned his attention back to the boy, Albert was happy to continue the conversation, especially when the Sidhe asked him about himself. “Where we come from, it’s been dry for three years. Witches, again, I think. Drought wiped out the crops. Our fief isn’t doing well, father says. He’s gone back to tournaments for prize money to pay his knight’s fees and everything. My older brother went with him as his squire. They left me at home, and I was sick of it, sick of hearing Mother and the rest whine about money. This pilgrimage, this *crusade*, is a godsend. I mean, besides being holy and all. Anything would have been better than staying *there*.”

The next morning, as it turned out, only a portion of Peter the Hermit’s followers went on to Clermont. The majority remained as before, preparing for the long journey to Jerusalem. What they were going to do about the “invaders” once they got there was a point Alinor must have missed, since most seemed unsuited for warfare. Beggars, children, old women made up a large part of the mob, and those young men, including Albert, who were fit for combat did not seem to be armed. However, those who were picked to go with their leader were the few knights and noblemen who were armed. Alinor volunteered to go, and was offered a ride by a very young knight, newly dubbed, who had little in the way of armor. A leather tunic, a helm and a short sword was his entire outfit, so riding double on his mare would not add too much weight.

The ride took two days, with an overnight stop near a brook where all (for a wonder) bathed. Afterwards Peter the Hermit told them great stories about the holy city and the barbarians they were to battle. Alinor made himself inconspicuous, but spied on the monk whenever possible, seeing the little copper box either in his possession or somewhere nearby. He never let the creature escape while talking to his men; Alinor suspected that he was saving the Salamander for future use. He had an idea what that use might be—but he couldn’t be sure. He tried not to think about the fact that once he did know, there *still* wouldn’t be much he could do. . . .

The group following Peter the Hermit didn’t attract much attention, as there were similar groups of



armed men converging on the city of Clermont. The town was larger than Alinor expected. There were whole streets of houses and taverns, and *pavement* beneath their horses' hooves. On the other end of the town where the houses thinned, they came to a field where a large number of people had gathered. Nearby was fountain and a huge, partially built church; someone whispered that it was the Notre-Dame-du-Port, but Alinor wasn't sure if it was the building or the fountain they were talking about. In the center of the gathering a throne had been erected on a platform, where a king sat, surrounded by bishops, fully armored knights and more religious clerks and monks than Alinor had ever seen in his life. After listening to the hushed whispers, he discovered the king was not a king but Pope Urban II, the very Pope that had summoned Al-Hazim. Nervously, the Sidhe cast surreptitious glances around him, looking to see if the Mad Arab had appeared after all. Gratefully, he saw no sign of the Moor or his cart.

The Pope was giving a speech, but it was difficult to hear in the open field. Alinor caught parts of it, enough to gather that the Pope was raising an army to fight the Moslems, who had apparently invaded his Holy Land. This was a holy crusade to save Jerusalem from the hands of the infidel.

"Now that the barbarians have taken the holy city of Jerusalem, of what use is our religion?" Pope Urban II shouted over the not-quite-hushed masses. "The Church of the Blessed Mary, the Temple of Solomon, the very streets where trod Christ Almighty! Taken from us, by the godless!"

The people did not seem particularly upset by the -revelation. Alinor didn't understand why, unless they did not value their religion as much as the Pope thought they should. *More human folly*, Alinor thought. *To construct a religion, and then fail to abide by it. I wonder if their god knows about such stuff? Perhaps he's busy. This Holy Land is too far away for most of them; they're far more worried about their neighbors than the Arabs across the sea. They look ready to walk off at any moment.*

But the Pope didn't give up so easily. His voice rose as he chastised all those present for being sinners, for fighting and robbing their neighbors, for taking the Lord's name in vain. He invoked the name of a warrior of the past, Charlemagne, who had also defended the Holy Land from invading pagans. Alinor flinched at that last statement, remembering that so few of the Sidhe of Joyeaux Garde had gotten involved in that little altercation. And that Charlemagne had inadvertently mistaken a few elves for demons and had them burned at the stake when he could capture them. Only King Huon had managed to settle the mess with a minimal loss of life. The whole thing was beginning to make Alinor just a little nervous, especially after Albert's ranting about "witches and Jews and demons." Nearly everyone he'd seen in his travels had been unhappy, hungry, ill-clothed and ill-housed. It didn't take much to start a witch-hunt among people as discontented as these were.

The reactions of the people around him were mixtures of boredom and suppressed hostility; either the men didn't like being lectured like little children, or felt that the Pope could have condemned others—such as the nobles who guarded him—with greater cause. Alinor realized what the Pope was trying, without success, to do: whip the crowd into a frenzy, so that they could storm off to the Holy Land and pound others into the dust. This was exactly the kind of enthusiasm Peter the Hermit had managed to invoke in his own people, and in large numbers. But this Pope didn't seize the imagination of these people the way -Peter did.

Peter the Hermit smiled smugly; there was no doubt in Alinor's mind that he was well aware that the Pope was failing where he succeeded. In that moment the monk's old face resembled one of his mules, and despite the gravity of the situation, Alinor fought to keep from laughing. *Meek and defenseless as that old monk may appear*, the elf thought, *he's managed to do what the Pope has not.*

But then his blood chilled; for without a word, Peter the Hermit pulled the little copper box from beneath

his cloak.

*Of course! he could have shouted. That's why he needed the Salamander. Now he's going to release it in this mob!*

Fighting an urge to dismount and run for the wilderness outside the town, Alinor watched with dread as the monk opened the copper box.

Magic had been at work to imprison the Salamander; now the bond was released, and the creature escaped from its cage.

Alinor felt the rush of magical wind wash over him as the Salamander dissolved into the air, and its essence dispersed into the crowd. As before, it was invisible to all but himself—and the monk.

*I can't let them know I see it,* he reminded himself.

The effect of the Salamander's presence was immediate. It was as if the crowd had been doused with a bucket of ice-cold water from the Allier. Utter silence made the Pope's words clear and thunderous; suddenly he was the center of all attention, as if he spoke with Divine -inspiration.

"Are you men, or cowards?" the Pope continued, -angrily, not yet realizing that the crowd had changed its mood. Even to Alinor, the Pope seemed larger, and the throne itself began to glow, ever so subtly, drawing more attention to its occupant. "Prepare yourselves for battle. It is better to die fighting for the Holy Land than it is to tolerate this invasion of your sacred places. Arm yourselves, if you are Christians!"

The cheers were as sudden as they were deafening. Alinor could feel, beneath their horses' hooves, the ground shake with the cries for battle. Peter the Hermit stepped back at the heartfelt outcry, but quickly regained his composure. Alinor expected him to take command of the situation while the Pope was still surprised by the sudden turn of mood, but the monk remained quiet, with a subtle smile creasing his bland features. The Salamander, with its -insidious power, was doing all the speaking for him—and it seemed that he did not care *who* roused the crowd, so long as it was done.

Knights rallied around the Pope, dismounted, and -began taking vows on their knees, their hands shaking with fervor. Ordinary townsfolk began dismantling a cart, converting it to staves and clubs, apparently not knowing their Holy Land was thousands of leagues away. All around were cries for war and conquest. At the Pope's feet, a wooden bowl began filling with coins and jewelry, contributions for the glorious crusade.

A crusade of anger and hatred, fueled by the Salamander.

Peter the Hermit made no attempt to retrieve his little demon, and that was ominous.

Alinor learned, to his dismay, that the monk had several of the dark creatures in hiding. Back at the camp, Alinor spotted him rummaging about a wooden trunk, which contained an array of oddly shaped copper boxes. Orders among his followers were that none of these containers were to be touched by anyone but the leader. And those orders were enforced with fists and cudgels.

Before he had left Clermont, however, the monk had rallied all those townsfolk the Pope would not accept as fit for battle. Pope Urban wanted only young knights for his sacred army and would not take

ordinary folk. Very well, then; Peter would take those who had been rejected by the Pope in disdain for their lowly status, and *they*, not the over-proud knights, would be God's Army, the *true* instrument of freedom for the Holy Land.

Peter sowed hate for the nobility right along with hate for the infidel, and the common folk devoured it all with glee.

The Salamander had done its work well; Jews had fled their path, for fear of being "converted" in the knights' wake. By the time they left Clermont, the Hermit had assembled a small army from those rejected by the Pope. He had led the mob back to the camp, looting and pillaging the houses identified as belonging to "Jews and heretics" along the way. "We will begin the crusade *here*!" he had shouted. "We will first purge *our* land of the -unholy, then take the purifying fire to Jerusalem!"

Alinor was profoundly grateful that he had not been with Al-Hazim; they would have arrived at the scene just in time to stand in the path of that unruly mob. And he had no doubt how *that* would have ended.

The high number of noncombatants continued to amaze Alinor. *They're going to fight some of the greatest armies in the world, and who do they take with them? Women, children, old men, boys barely old enough to think about growing beards. The Salamander has poisoned everyone with hatred and anger.*

It was insane. Utterly insane. Not even religious fervor could account for it. *This entire venture is hopeless. They gladly march into battle with this Salamander riding their backs, as long as they're promised a direct trip to heaven when they die.*

Then there was the question: Why was *she* still tagging along?

It wasn't a sense of responsibility, since now he knew he wasn't to blame for the Salamanders. Peter the Hermit had obviously been keeping several for years. In fact, the Salamander Peter released was probably not the same one Al-Hazim had conjured, judging by the collection of copper boxes.

If anything, Alinor was following the army of crazed idiots out of curiosity, or at least that was the most comforting thought for a young Sidhe not yet used to his nagging conscience. After all, what could he do? *One* Salamander was too much, never mind the nightmare stashed away in the wooden trunk. Following this ragtag bunch out of conscience—well, that was as foolhardy as their quest, wasn't it? Must be curiosity.

The army was a little better behaved when they marched to Cologne in April. Armed guards appeared when they passed through certain territories, but the townspeople welcomed them graciously, and even added more volunteers to their ranks. More armies were meeting in Cologne, most better organized and better equipped than the Hermit's. The French army started off immediately after Easter while the peasants' army organized and stocked themselves as best they could. Alinor noticed that the monk was carrying an empty copper box -immediately after the French left, apparently having "seeded" their ranks.

Peter the Hermit and his army set out across Europe, gathering strength and attracting volunteers along the way. Their pace was slow; it was no trouble to keep up. Alinor stayed at the head of the group, shadowing the guards that watched over Peter, and as a result, shared in their relative prosperity.

It was amazing. Chests filled with gold and silver wherever they went. Food was not a problem. The townspeople, having heard of the looting—or holy provisioning—elsewhere, put all of their goods outside the city walls in full view, for the crusaders to help themselves as needed. Then they closed

themselves behind their stout gates and city walls.

Alinor helped himself along with the rest, accumulating bedding, clothing, even weapons—but he wondered about those in the rear of the army; mostly very old or very young, female, weak or crippled. Here at the front there was no suffering, plenty for all. But there were thousands of people in this so-called army. How were the ones behind faring? This march across Europe was tiring even for him; he slept long and hard these days, and the journey was turning him from the soft, spoiled elven-child he had been into a hardened and seasoned traveler, wary and cunning. What about those for whom this was not as “easy”?

They proceeded to the Kingdom of Hungary without serious incident, their army now amounting to twenty thousand. Alinor had seen the monk release Salamanders to encourage volunteers in Vienna, and then again in Budapest and Belgrade. They ran into resistance at Nish, when a Salamander seized control of some of the knights, who in their anger set fire to houses and farms. The local militia, city guard and army responded, rounding up a fair number of the crusaders. Meanwhile, Peter hurriedly captured the renegade Salamander and returned it to its copper prison. It was the first time Alinor saw the monk lose control of one of the creatures.

It was not to be the last.

The majority of his troops intact, the “army” marched to Constantinople, where they set up camp beyond the city walls.

And that was where the Hermit’s troubles truly began.

By this time, Peter appeared to have lost control; his people looted and pillaged within the walls of Constantinople on any pretext—only now it was all the time, instead of just at the Hermit’s behest. Alinor guessed there were still three or four Salamanders loose in the camp. The monk gave all the signs of being unable to catch his little monsters, and now they were inciting his troops to ever-increasing excesses and violence. Angered, the Byzantine Emperor Alexius told Peter the Hermit to take his people out of his domain. Faced with the prospect of seeing the emperor’s troops—real troops, armed and trained—descend on his own “army,” the monk readily complied, although it took all of his eloquence and promises of further riches to coax the mob outside the city, towards Jerusalem.

And there they stayed, camped far enough outside the walls that it was not possible for the Hermit’s followers to wander into the city to loot at will. The sun beat down on them by day, and scorpions and snakes crept into their shelters by night. Food was becoming scarce even for the Hermit’s followers, and when food could be found, it was full of sand, half-rotten or withered. The Hermit couldn’t seem to get his troops to move on, nor could he turn back to Constantinople. Alinor became more restless as the days went on. He yearned to return to the Kingdom of France and Joyeaux Garde. By now he knew only too well that there was nothing he could do, either about the hundreds of thousands of innocents in the ranks of Peter’s army, or the Salamanders that drove them here. He was no longer even curious about the humans and their ways; he was sickened to the heart by the useless violence, the pettiness and the waste of lives. As long as they were letting themselves be led about, the humans never had a clue of their potential. It was sad, so unlike the ways of Underhill. All he wanted was to go home.

Unfortunately, he had no way to get there. The army was in the middle of nowhere, camped on the shores of the Sea of Marmarra. There were no horses to be had at any price, and no ships to carry him back across the sea. Peter the Hermit had gone back to Constantinople to parley with the emperor.

Alinor privately thought he had done this not to gain shelter for his followers but to escape the effects of

the Salamanders running rampant through the camp. Isolated groups from his army began sacking and burning the Byzantine Christian churches along the shores, killing Christians and infidels with a blithe disregard for anything other than blood and loot. Alinor was deeply afraid and withdrew into himself, becoming sullen, speaking to no one. On a day when he realized he had not heard singing or laughter for a month, he decided to leave for Constantinople, trying to avoid the madmen of the crusade until he got free of them. He planned to blend in with the locals once he reached the city. The prohibition against magic—and his year-long exile—were long since expired. He could cast whatever illusions he chose, replicate some of the local coins until he had enough money to travel properly—perhaps even buy comfortable passage on one of the Italian ships. *There's nothing I can do about the Salamanders*, he told himself. *It's not my doing, and it's not my responsibility. I'd better get out of here while I can.*

He had the strange premonition that something terrible was going to happen. And he didn't want to be around when it occurred.

That night he slept fitfully under a cart in which a human couple did what passed for lovemaking. He was afraid the rickety thing would collapse, after all the stresses of the journey, but at the time it was the safest place to be. Orgiastic drunkenness ruled the camp these days, and he was soul-sick with it. *These humans are terrifying when intoxicated*, he observed, as the cart above him rocked and squeaked with the humans' rutting, *and there is no passion in their lovemaking in that state. They're like dogs making puppies in the fields*. Staying under the cart -ensured some privacy, however dubious.

When the horizon had begun to lighten, Alinor was up and around. *Enough light to see by, at least. All I have to do is follow the shoreline back to the Bosphorus. Provided the Turks don't kill me first. After what we've done to their land and their people, I wouldn't blame them.*

*We?*

The Sidhe slipped silently across the field of sleeping bodies. There were a few others who were slowly waking, some with more energy than others. Somewhere he heard a priest saying the morning mass to a flock of early-risers.

Peaceful. And totally unlike the way the camp would be in a few short hours.

He thought he had cleared the camp when he was confronted by something in the half darkness that rose up to block his path and spoke to him, mind-to-mind.

*:Whatareyou?:* the voice hissed. *:You can see me, where the others cannot. Who sent you here, and why have you been watching the Hermit?:*

Alinor stifled the scream that tried to claw its way out of his throat as a Salamander materialized before him, an outline against the sand that gradually became solid. There was only one, but it was enough; it grew as he shivered before it, until it was easily the size and mass of a warhorse. Half shadow, half dark fire, it seemed slightly transparent—but Alinor was not going to be fooled into thinking it couldn't hurt him.

*But it's not solid*, he told himself, debating whether or not he could flee the thing. After all, he had never felt its effects. Maybe he could evade any magic attacks it made so long as he ran from it rather than confronting it.

*:You were with Al-Hazim,* the Salamander continued, and Alinor realized this was the same creature that the Mad Arab had conjured, and the Hermit had seized, at the inn. *:You owed him servitude, but*

*instead you abandoned him for this,*: it hissed, and the stubby, black head jerked -towards the camp. Then the creature gave him a wry, -intelligent look.:*But you are not a fool. You have been following me, observing me. That you can see me means . . . you're not human? Is that why the detachment, boy?:*

Alinor fought the urge to run, barely winning.

*:I cannot feed on your anger like the others. And you smell like a spirit.*:It drew closer, so close that the Sidhe could smell its foul, stinking breath.

*:I ask you again. What are you?:*

It was the breath that did it. Alinor turned to run -towards the beach—he heard waves pounding the shore, and that gave him direction. But then, behind him, from the camp, came screams which increased in volume and number.

*What*—the elf thought, and the Salamander was gone, bounding towards the screams, which were now coming from everywhere.

Without thinking, Alinor sprinted for the beach, then looked back to see what was going on.

The camp was being rushed by an army of Turks. The remnants of what must have been a raiding party were running back to the camp in terror, pursued by Turks on foot and on horse. The camp, undefended, vulnerable, not even all awake, was a prime target for a well-organized force.

And this was a real army, not a handful of Moslem traders or Byzantine monks.

Peter's followers were doomed. Alinor watched in horror as entire regiments of mounted, armored and sword-wielding Turks rush the camp, killing everything in sight. Turkish soldiers put everyone in their path to the sword, without regard to sex or age. A sea of horses poured into the camp like locusts as blades and arrows bit deeply into anything that moved.

His first instinct was to fling himself into the midst—to save the little ones from the swords, the arrows—

But he was only one. And *they* were wielding Death Metal.

A stronger instinct—that of survival—overcame his initial impulse. He could grieve later that he had been unable to act.*Great Danaa, I have to run! They'll just as quickly kill me!*

And he did run, with a desperation and speed he didn't think was possible.*Even the Salamander couldn't have inspired that run*, he would later think. But that was many years and miles later. . . . *Perhaps it was my own conscience I was trying to outdistance?*

Alinor struggled to sit up. He hadn't realized he'd -almost nodded off on the tree bough until he'd teetered, and the sudden shift in gravity urged him awake. The Sidhe looked down at the ground, seeing gravel and fallen oak leaves instead of sand, wondering briefly why he didn't hear waves washing over a beach.

*Time check. This is the twentieth century now*, he thought, wondering why he suddenly felt so

exhausted. *I must have gone into a light Dream*, he decided, still shaking the confusion. Down on the ground, in the compound of Brother Joseph's domain, soldiers stood guard, but instead of Turks waving bloodied swords, radical Christian crazies waved AK-47s and AR-15s.

*Even after nearly a thousand years, it's amazing how some things simply don't change for these humans.* The elf's thoughts turned grim, however, when he remembered what else was inside the Chosen Ones' complex.

Something that wasn't human at all.

What he saw the Salamander doing with Jamie was much more subtle than its crude manipulations back in 1096, when it simply reached out for young, flexible minds and started brawls in a tavern. Or, on a larger scale, when it possessed the thousands of peasants during Peter the Hermit's crusade, inciting them to go forth and reclaim the Holy Land for Pope Urban II. No, not now; the times had changed dramatically since then. A fine degree of stealth was required to operate in this modern world, where communications were instantaneous, and strong, central governments had formed, accompanied by equally strong and effective law enforcement.

To be a Salamander, one still had to find niches, gaps in the fabric of society to operate in relative freedom. Gaps like Pawnee County.

And niches like Jamie.

Alinor seethed as he began to piece together the creature's true nature; not only did it need a place where laws were not easily enforced, it chose a vehicle, a resilient vehicle, far younger than the brash, sword-toting hotbloods led by the Pope. He remembered the effect the child had had on the Praise Meeting crowd, saw it for more than the stage show he had thought it was. Using Jamie, the creature had seized control of those people just as surely as it had seized control of the crusaders, using religious hate and intolerance as the catalyst.

*The girl, with as much skill as she's showing in the spirit world, must have had a medium's abilities before she passed over. Didn't Cindy say something about Jamie being sensitive? This would explain why he was chosen, and kidnaped, instead of Brother Joseph using one of the other kids who were already in the cult. The Salamander is now speaking through its vehicle, baiting its followers directly with wealth and power, something I don't remember it doing before.*

*I think we are all in deep, deep trouble.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Al closed his eyes, and reminded himself that not even an elven warrior and magician could take on an entire army of humans single-handedly. He was not a movie hero, or a superman, who could charge through waves of men with machine guns. If his captors had *planned* to keep the boy protected against elven meddling, they could not have chosen better. He was walled away from the outside by Cold Iron; to get at him, Al would have to go inside one of the steel-sided bunkers and past several iron-reinforced walls. His magic couldn't hold up under that; iron pulled Sidhe spells awry.

And he had no real-world proof that the boy was there, nothing he could bring to Deputy Casey to

invoke the human authorities. They needed evidence in order to act; a change in human legal process that now turned out to be a hindrance. *Used to be, we could stir up a population to do just about anything, just by convincing them that what we said was the truth. Damn nuisance, this need of hard evidence for due process, sometimes. Still, it means there is no room for doubt—guilty is guilty this way.*

In point of fact, there was very little he could do, -either with his own powers, or with the humans'. First of all, there was the Salamander; his powers were not equal to taking it on. He had never been one of the greater warriors of the Folk; he'd never been one of the more powerful mages. *His* success these days lay in his adaptability to the humans' world.

There was nothing he had learned in all of the centuries since he had first encountered such a creature that could be used to counter it. Nothing. In fact, all he had learned was that he didn't want to meet it on its own ground. And this, without a doubt, was the creature's own ground. The last time he'd seen a Salamander, he'd turned tail and had run away. The second time, he'd headed for the nearest walled fortress. But this time he couldn't run.

He ground his teeth together in frustration. Up until now, whenever he'd had to pull a rescue, it had been a fairly simple operation. He would find the child in question, spirit it away from its parents, take it Underhill, and one of the others would cover his tracks.

Quick. Easy. Painless.

*So all right, what can I do?* he asked himself, angry at his impotence. *How can I at least give the poor little lad a respite? Give them something else to think about?*

First, he had to calm himself; find the quiet place deep inside himself where his power lay.

He took two long, slow breaths. By the time he exhaled the second, he had achieved the calm he needed. He called up his mage-sight, and opened his inner eyes on the world.

Everywhere he looked, Cold Iron thwarted him, standing like dull, barbed barriers against his Sight. This was the Death Metal at its worst; if his power touched it, the metal would drain energy from him, spinning his spell-traces away into shreds too fine for him to collect back. It would be very difficult to insinuate his powers into this stronghold in anything other than a passive manner. Cold Iron protected their machineries, their storage places, themselves—even their weapons were of Death Metal. And *here* was an unpleasant surprise. Even some of the bullets were sheathed in it. Now he not only had to fear a direct hit, but *agrazing* hit might poison him.

But wait—he extended his senses a little further, frowning with concentration. A headache began just at each temple, but he would not let it distract him, reaching a little further into the maze of threatening metal and -humanity.

Everywhere there was Cold Iron, there was also something else that might provide an insidious pathway for Al's power to penetrate Brother Joseph's citadel; a network of copper tendrils weaving through the complex in an elaborate network of support. The electrical wiring system, of course; it hummed with the power coursing through it, and was as obedient to Al's touch as the Cold Iron was -hostile.

A frail enough pathway, and one that had severe limitations, but it was better than nothing.

Perhaps Al didn't know a great deal about ordinary, day-to-day living for humans—but he knew



electrical systems and knew them very well. He'd amused himself long ago with his "playing with lightning," but tonight there was nothing funny about it. He sent a little tendril of power questing curiously along the network, testing it, seeing where it went, how it was constructed. This system was mostly new, and all of it was less than five years old. Humans tended to distrust the very new, or the very old; this network of wiring was neither. They wouldn't be -expecting any troubles out of it. And they depended on the electricity it carried so completely that he found himself smiling grimly.

He explored further. There weren't any voltage regulators except on the main circuit breaker; even the computers had only the simplest of surge protectors on them. Those would protect against sudden surges; they wouldn't protect against something a little more—subtle.

Al opened his mind and his magic to encompass the entire system, holding it in his metaphorical "hands" like a cat's cradle. Then, slowly, he began decreasing the resistance of the wiring across the entire network.

This was the sort of thing that happened naturally with age and generally never caused any harm. But then, few people ever had the voltage regulators that maintained the level of power in their systems fail on them.

Soon the system was running "hot"; capable of carrying voltage of around 140 instead of 110. Which didn't matter, since 110 was all it was getting. Of course, *that* was about to change.

Al carefully skirted the iron clips and bolts around the aluminum main breaker box, and adjusted voltages at it. Slowly, so no surge protectors would trip. Eventually he brought the voltage all the way up to what the system would carry—and there were few pieces of equipment here meant to operate on 140 volts.

Now motors would run faster, burning themselves out. Electrical circuits would overload and blow. Computer equipment would be fried. But none of this would happen all at once; a lot would depend on how delicate the equipment was. Whatever; they would have to replace everything that burned out—then the replacements would fail—again and again, until they thought to check voltages. They would have to replace every bit of wiring before he was through, from the breaker boxes outward. They wouldn't discover this until they had lost several more machines and had replaced everything else. This meddling was going to cost the cult a lot of money. And time, and trouble; unfortunately, it would not be as difficult to pull the wiring as it was in a normal building, but it would be troublesome enough, and they would have to do without power in the entire circuit while they replaced the wires.

If something happened that forced them to use their emergency generator, it would all happen that much faster. Al took out the voltage regulator entirely *on it*. Power levels would fluctuate wildly as pumps and air-conditioners came on- and off-line.

He contemplated his work with satisfaction. Already, all of the electric motors in the complex were running a little faster. Pressure was building in some equipment, several water-pumps, for instance.

*Hmm. They are using common white plastic pipe. There is no more resistance to my magic than wood or leather would give. A little weakening of the pipes at the joints . . .*

There. In a few moments, the joints would burst, at least in those portions of pipe that were under pressure. There was some kind of elaborate arrangement in one corner, for instance, that was going to go up like a water festival before too long.

Using his magic—finally *doing* something—had cooled his temper enough that he could think again. With luck, the fanatics would be so hard-pressed for money by his sabotage that they would act hastily, perhaps get caught by the police. It occurred to him that the more havoc he could wreak that Brother Joseph *himself* would have to attend to, the more likely it would be that the bastard would believe some outside supernatural force was opposing him.

*Of course, it is. And for once in his life, he will be right.*

When that happened, Brother Joseph would be kept so busy trying to find the source of the interference that he would have little time for anything else.

He might leave the boy unguarded, or relatively -unguarded. At the least he would leave the child alone, give him a chance to recover. If Al could not get in, perhaps the boy could escape on his own.

So, it was up to Al to make Brother Joseph's life as miserable as possible. This, of course, would make Al's life infinitely more pleasurable. A man has to have a hobby he enjoys.

He only wished he could tell the boy's mother about this—that he could tell her he knew for certain that Jamie was here. But if he did, not only would he betray that there was something supernatural about himself, he might inadvertently tempt her into going into danger to save her child.

No. No, for all that it would comfort her, he could not tell her Jamie was here. Not until he had something more concrete to offer her than that information alone.

So, back to work. *How about a bit of blockage in some of the pipes that are not under pressure? That should be amusing.* He knew those pipes that were attached to pumps, but the rest—only that they carried water. The Cold Iron interfered with his perceptions too much to be more specific than that. Right now Al could not tell whether the pipes took fresh water into the complex, or waste-water away, but in either case, there would be problems if he blocked the pipes—say, by reaching out, just *so*, and touching the pipes to make them malleable, then—pinching them, and letting them harden.

*There. That should do it. Not all at once—but like the electrical failures, these should cascade.*

He withdrew his senses—carefully. He couldn't detect the Salamander, but that didn't mean it didn't have ways of watching the world from wherever it was hiding. More than Cold Iron, he feared *it*.

*I couldn't defeat it back then; I don't think I can do so now. The best way to deal with it for the moment is to avoid it. It can do nothing without human help and a human to work through.*

He considered what he had accomplished, as he molded himself to the trunk of the tree he had chosen and scanned the area for more guards.

Another pair of them passed about twenty feet away from his tree, peering from time to time through something attached to the top of their rifles. It wasn't until after they had passed that he realized what those instruments must have been.

Nightsopes.

He belatedly recognized them from the action--adventure movies he'd watched over the years, in city after city, racetrack after racetrack, late at night when the humans slept and there was little for him to do.

Nightscoptes: instruments that gave humans the ability to see like an owl or one of the Sidhe at night. He wasn't exactly certain how they worked—but he shivered, realizing that the only reason the men had missed sighting him was that they simply hadn't been looking through the night-scopes when they passed him.

And what would they have done if they'd seen him?

The answer to that question didn't take a lot of reasoning. They'd empty those clips into him without a second thought.

No illusion he knew of would fool nightscoptes—

But he could reproduce—on purpose—what had -occurred by accident.

He closed his eyes again and took a deep, deep breath, and as he exhaled, he *pushed* the outermost layer of his shields, expanding it outwards, slowly, until it reached about thirty feet from where he sat. Then, within that shell, he set a compulsion: *don't look at me*.

It was just that simple. Once guards reached the peri-meter of his defenses, they simply would not be able to look in his direction. Any further away, and the trees would hide him, even from the sophisticated scope. He wasn't worried about Andur; if the guards saw the elvensteed, they'd simply assume he was a stray horse. They could try to catch him, of course, but the operative word was *try*. Andur would happily lead them a merry chase over half of the county before vanishing to return to Alinor.

Feeling a little more secure, he turned his attention back to the Chosen Ones' compound. There was still plenty of night left; surely he could do more than he had.

*The problem is, everything I've done to them can be fixed. It'll cost time and money, but it can be fixed. I need something that can't be undone.*

Well, the one thing that mankind still hadn't completely conquered was—nature. What was there about this area that AI could meddle with?

There was a spring running under the property; it was the source of the cult's water, and came to the surface to form a pond and a stream leading from it at the far end. But that wasn't the only place where it could surface, if the conditions were right.

There was a crack in the bedrock just under one of the cult's buried buildings; the building itself rested a few inches above the surface of the bedrock, on a cushion of sandy soil. If AI widened it just a bit and extended it down to the channel of the spring, the water would gradually, over the course of the next few days, work its way to the surface and emerge at the rear of the building.

This was a storage building of some kind; not one for guns or ammunition, but full of heavy wooden crates piled atop each other. The crew that had built this place hadn't known what it was going to hold, evidently, for the concrete floor wasn't strong enough to support what was resting on it. The concrete had already cracked under the weight in several places. When the spring water worked its way up through the crack in the bedrock, it would soon seep into the building through the cracks in the floor, soaking, and hopefully ruining, everything on the bottom layer. By the time they found the damage, the entire floor of the building would be under a six-inch-deep sheet of water that no pump would ever cure.

*That* was something they could neither replace nor repair. They would have to abandon the building. He

contemplated other possibilities, but there weren't many at the moment. He could induce mice to invade, of course; plagues of bugs—

But that would mean a certain amount of hazard for the rest of the children. Mice could get into their things; *would* bite if cornered or caught. Insects could bring disease . . . some of the insects native to here were scorpions, whose sting was poisonous and painful, and could be fatal to a small child.

And there were snakes aplenty around here; he'd been warned about them when he first arrived. Three kinds of *them* were poisonous: rattlesnakes, copperheads, and -water moccasins. No, he couldn't turn those creatures loose where there might be children.

*Well, maybe just that one area where there seems to be a lot of plumbing, of electrical circuits. Where there doesn't seem to be a lot of people. That might be Brother Joseph's quarters, or those of his high-ranking flunkies. If it is, it's about to become unlivable over the next couple of days.*

He widened cracks in foundations, opened seams, created hundreds of entrances for insects and other vermin. Then he created another kind of glamorie—one that would attract anything small, anything hungry. From there the insects, mice and reptiles would work their way into the rooms, and there were no children in this bunker. Adults, he reckoned, would get what they deserved.

That should settle the account a little more.

It was scarcely more than an hour or two past midnight. If he and Andur got out now, he'd even have a few hours to sleep before he had to get to the track.

If only he could tell Cindy what he knew. . . .

Well, he couldn't.

He opened his eyes again, on a world still dark and full of night sounds: cicadas, coyote howls, the bark of foxes, the cry of owls—

And, far off, too far for human ears to hear—footsteps, trampling methodically through the grass.

Brother Joseph's perimeter guards were still on duty.

He called Andur with a thought; the elvensteed slipped out of the shadows of the trees like one more cloud shadow, ghosting across the fields of grass, chased by the night breeze.

Al didn't bother to climb back down the tree; he wasn't that far up. As Andur positioned himself under the branch, he simply dropped straight down onto the elvensteed's back, a move copied from late-night cowboy shows.

Then, in a heartbeat, they were away, retracing their path over the fences and out to the road.

Once again, Andur became a sleek, matte-black, Miata lookalike. Once again, Al was cradled in air-conditioned comfort. And yet it provided no real comfort to him.

He was restless and unhappy, and only too glad to leave the driving to Andur. For all that he had done, he had accomplished so little.

So damned little. . . .

He brooded all the way back to the track, by which time Andur had bleached to white and acquired headlights again. When he got out of the elvensteed, with a pat of gratitude, he remembered that Cindy had gone to sleep in Nineve, rather than the RV. In a way, that was something of a relief. It meant he didn't have to hide *what* he was, and it meant he could convert the RV into something like its usual glory—and comfort.

*Ah, well.* He sighed philosophically as he entered the door and locked it behind him. *Perhaps it's better this way. Bob always tells me that it is a human proverb not to mix business with pleasure—and she is business of a kind.*

He held perfectly still for a moment, standing in the narrow aisle between the stove and the propane furnace, and mustered a little more energy. It wasn't going to matter how keyed up he was; when he finished this, he was -going to be so exhausted there would be no chance insomnia would hold him wakeful.

He held out his hands in the glow of the tiny overhead lamp and whispered a cantrip.

Power drained from him like water running out of a sink.

And the RV rippled and flexed, like an out-of-focus movie—and changed.

Now there was a full bathroom with a whirlpool tub behind him; he stood beside a counter loaded with the delicacies of Underhill. Beyond him was his silk-draped bed and one of his construct servants, a lovely animated Alphonse Mucha odalisque, to massage his weary shoulders. Beyond that, where a set of curtains waved in a lazy breeze from the silent air-conditioner, was what had been the overhead bunk. Now it was Bob's cubby-bedroom, with a bed as comfortable as Al's own.

Al snatched a handful of grapes and a bottle of wine from the bounty beside him, and shed his uniform and cap by the simple expedient of ordering them elsewhere. With a nod to his servant, he headed for the bathroom and the whirlpool. Between the bath, the wine and the massage, he should sleep very well.

*My father, Joe Junior thought, has finally gone wacko.*

He stormed down the narrow, steel-covered passageway that only he and a select few knew about, fists clenched. Ready to explode. Motion detectors activated lights and deactivated them in his wake. The illuminations winked on and then off, as if seeing his sour mood and sulking back into the darkness to avoid him. His boots echoed hollowly on the damp, concrete surface, as he dodged the worst of the puddles and splashed angrily through the rest. He wanted to punch a hole in the wall, but to do that down here he would need a jackhammer. He contemplated finding one.

His anger continued to simmer, just below the surface, ready to blow at any moment, as he pushed himself further and further away from the others. And, especially, away from his father.

He recalled that when digging this tunnel they had come across a small water source of some kind, a seep or a spring, and had partially rerouted the tunnel to avoid it. But the attempt hadn't entirely worked. Ahead he heard the steady drip, drip of water that had no obvious source, hidden behind one of the walls. Periodically, workers had to bail the passageway out—from the look of things, they would have to

do it again soon. He remembered the fit of rage his father had when they were building the tunnel and couldn't get the drip to go completely away. *It's as if he thought he could control nature*, he thought, still furious with what he had seen at the Praise Meeting. *And it was betraying him by not doing exactly what he wanted*.

The boy was putting as much distance as he could between himself and the Praise Meeting, which by now was probably adjourning to smaller, special-interest groups. *Like the one dealing drugs*, he thought, biting his tongue against the anger. He was afraid to even think these treasonous thoughts around the others, in part because his body language often gave him away. In spite of the fine physique he'd been cultivating since before he could shave, he hadn't quite learned how to *control* his body, and often it revealed his emotions. A rigid stance, a certain frozen look in his face, had both conspired to betray his thoughts to his father and those close to him. He was hiding his body, at least temporarily, so that it wouldn't reveal what he was feeling *now*.

Then there was that *other* liability, the one he had been stifling since he was a little boy. It was something he tried to forget about but couldn't, because it went with him everywhere.

Everywhere, waking or sleeping. He heard what other people were thinking, whether or not he wanted to, *especially* when he, or they, were emotionally wrought up.

The ability had appeared at puberty, and for a while he was too busy sorting through his newfound raging hormones to properly assess it.

Then his thoughts began to intrude on his mother's; just a little at first, then with greater strength and clarity as he battled with the roller coaster of emotions any thirteen-year-old experiences.

He discovered to his mingled apprehension and delight that he could read his father's mind as well as his mother's. If father was angry, he knew it and could avoid him in time to save himself becoming the target of his father's frustration. That was useful; it made up in part for some of the other things he read. That his father thought about other women besides his wife was a little distressing, -especially since he was a preacher, but Joe began to form the opinion that half of what his father said in church was for show anyway.

That would have been enough, but a few weeks later came the next revelation. Not only could he read people's minds, he could decide more or less what their thoughts would be.

At first it was funny, to send thoughts into his father's head, get him stirred up and watch him make a fool of himself. After the first few trials, however, he began to feel a little sick about it. It didn't seem right, actually; as if he was using his physical strength to bully weaker people, and he stopped playing around with other people's heads—on purpose, anyway. And he began to wonder where this power came from, since his father preached that any "ESP" was the work of the devil.

Was he being influenced by Satan, or was his father just being paranoid?

Whatever the cause, Joe had learned through trial and error that whenever he was angry he ran the risk of -intruding his own thoughts on the minds of the people around him. These thoughts, especially when they were as treasonous as they were now, could get him into deep trouble. They would sound as if he had said something out loud, since emotion was behind them, rather than guile and stealth.

*If anyone is being influenced by Satan, it's my father*, he thought angrily as he came to the end of the tunnel. Here stood a tall metal door which looked something like a walk-in safe. Joe inserted a card with

embedded chip data, identifying him as Brother Joseph's son. The huge metal door swung open, allowing Joe entrance to the private health club. Here only the elite branch of the Sacred Heart of the Chosen Ones could enter.

It was empty, as usual. His father certainly never came here, and rarely did the officers of the Guard and Junior Guards. The others who came here, the first lieutenants and one of his father's personal body-guards, used the place occasionally, but that was generally before dawn, before his father had risen; while Brother Joseph was awake, they were always on duty. And during a Praise Meeting, and shortly afterwards, he was almost guaranteed solitude here.

Much of the new Universal and Nautilus equipment had been moved from their mansion in Atlanta. Other items had appeared recently, including one puzzling piece of equipment he'd never understood or seen used, which looked like something used to balance tires. The room was decorated with chrome-rimmed mirrors, red and black velvet wallpaper, and black velvet trim, reminding Joe of a funeral home.

Joe stripped out of his uniform. He peeled it off, quickly, handling it like a dirty surgical glove, now a little disgusted with what it represented. His glance fell briefly on the sloppy swastika he'd tattooed on his forearm while inspired by a fifth of Wild Turkey. *Wish I'd never done that*, he thought regretfully, now noting how the swastika had crept down his arm, almost to his wrist, as he'd grown to -maturity.

*Wasn't even sure what a swastika was, when I did it. Knew it had something to do with the war. Knew it had something to do with killing Jews. Daddy hated Jews, so I guess I thought it would be cool. Didn't even remember doing it until I saw it the next day. How old was I? Thirteen? No, I think I was twelve. Not a teenager yet.*

He threw on some tattered shorts, not bothering with a tank top. He needed dead weight, and lots of it, to vent his anger tonight.

The fifty-pound barbells were shiny chrome, reflecting halogen light in bright arcs as he lifted them high overhead in short, intense repetitions. The wall was one huge mirror, and he stared at his own snarling face, at the veins that bulged from his temples. Muscles swelled. Perspiration broke, beaded, dripped. He repeated the exercise, this time lying back on a bench, shifting weight, working different muscles.

*They warned me not to get attached to the little boy*, he seethed. *Even Father, after he'd managed to kidnap Jamie. He didn't seem to mind before! He wanted me to be friendly while the poor kid had a chance to get away—but now that he's ours—he's just another tool, another toy, another magic-trick for the crowd. I played right into it!*

Weights clanked angrily as he brought them together over his head, making a satisfyingly aggressive sound. Though this was normally not good form when doing reps, he clanked them again. The sound felt good, appropriate.

*Luke never liked it, the way I favored the boy*, Joe thought, remembering the reaction of one of the lieutenants, one of the first followers in the early days of their church. *He told me it was going to be a problem. He pretended to be my friend, but I know he went to my father. The first time I objected to the channeling, when Jamie was still new.* He winced when he remembered the crack of his father's riding crop, the liquid fire that poured across his naked back. He remembered his own screams exploding from his mouth, and the hoarse voice he spoke with for days afterwards. *Some of those welts never seemed completely healed*, he thought to himself, painfully aware of the ridges flexing and hurting even as he exercised. *Father said they should be a reminder.*

What he was thinking now would qualify him for such punishment again, but he guessed that next time, if it came to that, it would be more severe. If such a thing were possible.

*They can't do that to Jamie again,* he thought, his attention turning from himself to the boy. *I'd gladly take -another whipping if that would get Jamie away.*

Normally at a Praise Meeting he would have been on the stage, guarding the proceedings with the others. But not tonight. Apparently his father, at Luke's urging, had seen what a liability he had become when dealing with Jamie. Tonight he had been given "leave," to observe the channeling if he so desired, but not to participate in any way.

*Guess he figured I'd just get in the way.* Weights clanked. Joe counted. *Seventeen, eighteen. Guess he figured right .*

He exhaled explosively, as weights flopped out of his hands onto the padded floor with a muffled *thud* .

*He didn't starve Sarah like this. At least not for this long.* The boy had become visibly thinner over the past few days, and weaker, and his eyes had developed a vacant look. *Like someone on drugs* , he thought. *Only, I know he's not on drugs* . Jamie didn't smile now, except for a few moments when Joe greeted him. Then the smile faded quickly, like a candle's flame blown out by the wind.

Joe closed his eyes. *It's the guilt, isn't it?* he thought. *I'm not angry at my father. I'm angry at me. Jamie has looked up to me like a little brother, and I haven't done a thing but manipulate him. I'm the one who's lured him into this, told him it was all okay when I knew what was going to happen. And now he's starving to death. And worse, he's being used by that thing that Father thinks is God. I think he's wrong. It's not God, it's not even close.*

He crawled into the bicep curl machine, sitting on the short bench and reaching under the bar where the weights connected. No one had used it since he'd been there; no one else could pull eighty pounds. Luke certainly couldn't. But Joe used Luke's image to fuel his strength, using the anger to pull the bar up under his chin.

*Luke sure has risen in status in the past few weeks,* he observed cynically. Joe had always resented the man, even back when he was very little and Luke was still a newcomer. He had been around their family for as long as Joe could remember, being one of the few followers who remained faithful to his father, even when his ideology shifted from one political spectrum to the other. Not surprisingly, his loyalty had been repaid in high rank within the Chosen Ones hierarchy. Joe was beginning to see how much he really resented that. And how much power Luke's position had.

A year earlier, his father had suggested they form a special security division separate from the Guard, one that would oversee internal threats from within the United States and the Church itself. He had hinted, rather strongly, that Joe would be offered the position of security chief, as he would be eighteen by then and a man. As a member of Brother Joseph's immediate family, he would also presumably be trustworthy, more so than the any rank-and-file Chosen One. But Joe had learned recently that when such a division was formed, Luke would be in charge, not himself. He had yet to confront his father about this, and when he thought about it, he knew that he probably never would.

"He doesn't trust me anymore. If he ever did," he whispered aloud, and looked around in panic, to see if anyone heard. Of course, no one was in the club at the time, but he was still uneasy. Microphones were everywhere, and he wouldn't put it past them to put one here. *None of them trust me,* he said, this time



to himself.

But Joe had something on Luke, something that went way back, when he was only a child and still respected the older man. He had never used it—but the time might be coming when he had to, to save himself and Jamie.

Joe's parents had gone away to some tent revival in Oklahoma and Luke was put in charge of baby-sitting. Luke didn't like being left behind, he had wanted to stand at Brother Joseph's right hand and bask in reflected glory. But, being the faithful follower he was, he accepted the task cheerfully and without complaint. Joe liked it even less, as he'd wanted to get away to see a forbidden movie, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, with a friend.

Luke's presence, of course, screwed these plans up royally. But when Luke got into Brother Joseph's liquor cabinet and started to drink, putting a serious dent in the whiskey supply, Joe thought he might be able to get away if he drank himself to sleep. He'd seen Luke do that before, and there was a good chance he'd do it that night, too.

But this time was different; Luke became drunk and started talking, saying strange things. Then he started to make advances—sexual advances. At first Joe had no idea what he was doing until the man grabbed him when he stood up to go to the bathroom, groped him, and stumbled forward.

Joe just froze, then, unable to think.

Luke's thoughts poured through the booze and struck Joe's mind at full strength; the images were so strong, it had felt like a flame had just licked his brain. Joe jumped back, squirmed out of his grasp, and found temporary refuge in a corner. But it was only temporary; he knew he was trapped.

Joe hadn't thought about his other ability, that of making people think *whathe* wanted them to, for some time. It had a way of coming and going, and lately it was doing more going than anything else. But Luke's thoughts were so clear they seemed to be super-charged, and the lust that poured over Joe was a slimy thing that made him ill.

When their eyes met, Joe could see exactly what Luke wanted to do to him. The images were clear and well-defined. Joe had reached further into Luke's mind, more in a reflex than a conscious action, and saw that Luke had done this to other boys before.

It would hurt, he had realized. What Luke wanted to do to him would hurt *real* bad. He could already feel the pain, as if it was already happening; he began to whimper, like a dog, as he froze in fear and shock. Luke had stumbled forward, one hand on Joe's leg, the other on his own belt buckle.

Joe screamed—but not just with his voice.

The old man stumbled back for a moment, as if he'd been slapped, and Joe had screamed again, but only with his mind. Luke had crumpled to the floor.

Joe scrambled away and ran for his bedroom, which had a lock. Luke lay on the floor, yelling at Joe to come back, he wasn't *finished* yet. Joe locked the door and waited, afraid to even breathe. Soon Luke fell asleep, snoring loudly from a few feet outside the door, and Joe felt safe enough to cry himself to sleep, with a pillow muffling his sobs.

Or at least he had tried to. He didn't sleep much, and when he did he would jolt awake at any little noise

from where Luke was. The next morning when they woke up Luke said nothing about the incident and went about nursing a hangover. Joe was too mortified to bring it up and wondered if he would tell his parents when they got back.

That afternoon, Brother Joseph and his wife returned. Joe was watching them drive up the hill to the mansion when Luke had turned to him and said, soberly, “If you tell them about what happened last night, I’m gonna kill you. No questions asked.”

Joe believed him. So he didn’t tell them about Luke’s attack. Then, or any time since.

After that horrible experience he began stifling his ability to see into other people’s minds. What he saw coming at him from Luke’s drunken brain was something he never wanted to see again. The man hadn’t physically raped him, but after seeing the images of what Luke wanted to do—and had done before—Luke might as well have, since he lived through it all, every horror Luke had planned for him. He felt hollow and wooden after that night, and made a vow to himself to leave other people’s minds be. He told himself that most thoughts are better left alone.

And, he had to admit then, his special power could have been the work of Satan. It sure *felt* like it.

Over the years Luke had provided several more reasons to be hated, reasons that went far beyond what happened that night while his parents were away. The way he treated Jamie was one of them.

In fact, Luke was “guarding” Jamie now, he’d overheard at the meeting. *Guarding against people who might bring him some food. But then, I have privileges. I could take him somewhere. Fishing, or—*

His thoughts stopped there, when he remembered the *last* time they’d gone to the pond, or at least in its general direction. *I could have fed him then, he told himself. He hinted that we could eat fish there, and I ignored him .*

He wasn’t sure why, but the incident reminded him of Sarah and what his father had done to her. *He didn’t know I was watching, from a distance, when he did—that.* His arms grew a little weak and he paused, forcing the -image away from his mind. *I wasn’t supposed to see that. No one was suppose to see that!* He had been hiding and had been unable—or unwilling?—to betray himself by bursting out and coming to the girl’s rescue. He recalled with clarity the morbid fascination that had seized him, how he had watched his father grab the girl’s thin, delicate neck. The blue color her face turned. The sudden weakness that came over the girl, the absolute limpness of the body. The brief surprise of his father. The lack of remorse. Then, or now.

And remembered Jamie, withering in the isolation room.

Joe saw what he would have to do. Resolutely, he put the weight-bar back down and went back to the lockers. The scar tissue on his back throbbled in a strange sort of sympathy as he thought about whips.

*He’s not going to do that to Jamie, he thought as he pulled his hated uniform back on. I’ll never let him do that to Jamie.*

Joe hadn’t really considered how he was going to -approach this. In his pocket he carried a piece of beef jerky and some dried fruit, which in itself was not very substantial. But it was *something* , and it was easier to conceal than, say, a sandwich. As he came to the sector where the -isolation room was, his lack

of planning now added a new, frightening dimension to what he had in mind.

He had, however, thoughtfully left his sidearm in the health club. It was a .44 Magnum and its size was enough to raise the hackles of any gun enthusiast—as any Chosen One was likely to be. Once, that model had been considered the most powerful handgun in the world. That was before .577s with Glaser slugs, and the other toys around here. He'd left his Rambo knife with the gun. He had nothing but his hands and his body—

But that body was hard and lean, in itself a formidable weapon.

Especially when fueled by *anger* .

The place where they were keeping Jamie was a hodgepodge of interconnecting rooms that originally were to be used as warehouses, but to date had only partially served that purpose. One of those huge rooms was where they kept the drugs, but he was never privy to which one—or the times they were full. He had gathered that the storage was only temporary, usually only overnight, and changed from one room to another. The blueprint of the sector, and what was actually built, never completely jived either. There were formations of rock that were either too hard to chip away, or served as strategic supports for the upper strata, and had been left alone. Where possible the rooms were paneled with sheetmetal and were further divided with chain-link fencing. The entire sector had a cold, metallic atmosphere about it. But then, Joe reflected, so did the rest of the underground complex.

Joe peered around a corner at Luke and another guard, someone whose name he didn't immediately remember, standing in front of a double door with a padlock. This was probably where Jamie was, and he ran through his mental map of what adjoined this particular room.

*Back wall is solid rock; room would have been a little larger if they'd had the right equipment. Room itself is large, divided into storage bins with fencing. Jamie must be in one of the bins. Get in through the top?* Joe racked his brains for what was in the level above them, and came up with: *That's Father's private quarters up there. Well, scratch that* . Other rooms beside it had sheetmetal walls, and although cutting through would be possible with a saw, the *noise* would be prohibitive. Overall, a good, secure place to imprison someone.

*Time to deal with Luke and his partner*, he thought, and shivered with mingled apprehension and tension.

Luke was reading a Bible; his partner, a man Joe now recalled was known only as Billybob, was reading a weapons manual on the Colt AR-15. The gun itself was lying across his lap as he sat reading. Joe hadn't intended to sneak up on them, but his footsteps simply didn't make any noise. When they finally did see him, they jumped into action and had their weapons drawn on him, cocked and ready. Bible and weapon book fell to the ground, -forgotten.

"Oh Lord," Luke said, relaxing some. "It's *you* . Why you sneaking up on us like that?" He didn't seem at all pleased and continued to aim his gun at Joe.

Joe shrugged, feigning innocence. "Wasn't sneaking up on you." *You just weren't paying attention, you lazy puds*, he wanted to add, but chose diplomacy by default. "Just walk kinda quiet in these boots."

Now that the immediate crisis was over, Luke relaxed into his accustomed superior attitude. He was about forty years old with an immense potbelly that made him look like a giant lightbulb. Even after the brief excitement of being surprised, he was breathing with difficulty, and his face was flushed from the

exercise of getting suddenly to his feet. *Not surprised, after seeing what he eats for breakfast. A slab of greasy bacon the size of a brick, fried potatoes, scrambled eggs. Every single day. Gonna have a heart attack before too long. Too bad it's not right now.* He didn't seem to notice the bad effects of poor health, or the fact that he was woefully out of shape. Instead, Luke put on his normal, superior sneer, an expression more-or-less permanently carved into his fatty features. Buck teeth protruded prominently from his face, and he looked like a pig doing an Elvis imitation.

"Do you have any idea what time it is?" Luke asked, slowing his breathing with a visible effort.

"I dunno," Joe replied, intentionally sounding stupid. "Late, I guess."

"It's two a.m." Luke said, arrogantly. "Any idea why your father put me on duty here?"

Joe gazed blankly and shrugged.

"To keep people away from our little treasure in there," Luke said, jerking the barrel towards the room they were guarding. "Who, by the way, is sleeping. What do you want, anyway?"

"I wanted to see Jamie," he replied. "I kind of promised him a bedtime story. I was gonna tell him about Daniel in the lion's den."

"You know what your father said," Luke said, shifting the assault rifle in his arms. "He wants no one near the boy. That includes everybody. That includes *you*."

"He's real lonely." Joe said, but he knew how helpless that sounded. "You could—"

"No. *I couldn't*."

Luke advanced menacingly, quickly, as if he was considering shoving Joe away with his own massive weight. Joe stepped back automatically as his body began to go into defense-mode, automatically tensing some muscles while relaxing others, a well-honed response due to years of self-defense training. Training, in part, received from Luke, before he'd put on the weight.

And Luke saw it. "Go ahead. Try it. I have a witness. You don't. Your father will believe me, whatever you do."

Billybob made several snuffling noises that approximated laughter. Joe absently toed a rock with his right combat boot.

"That is, if you lived," Luke continued. "Why are you here, Joe? You don't mean to tell me you actually *feel* something for the little lump of shit we've got stashed away back there?"

"Well, no," he lied. Now he regretted not having a plan. *But this will only help me if it makes me look like a fool. Luke is less defensive if he thinks he's dealing with someone more stupid than he is.*

"I just wanted, you know, to study him. See what kind of effect food deprivation has on a person. Look, if we're going to be doing this we need to see how far we can push."

"Depri-what?" Luke asked, seriously confused. He -always did have trouble understanding words with more than two syllables.

“Meansstarving,” Billybob informed him.

“Oh,” he said, with a knowing look. But he frowned anyway while a rough, blistered thumb toyed with the safety. “Still don’t like it. Listen, you go get permission from Brother Joseph and I’ll let you see him. I mean, how am I supposed to know this isn’t a test and all?”

“You don’t. But I guess you’re right,” Joe said, knowing that to push now would only arouse more suspicion. “I’ll go talk to my dad now.”

Luke nodded. Billybob made more snuffling noises, this time sounding like a hog rooting for food, sounds that had no clear meaning.

“Where is he, then?” Joe asked, with a touch of anger.

Luke shrugged. “Back in his quarters, I guess.”

Joe saw an opening. “You mean you don’t know?”

The superior sneer faltered; Luke knew the rule as well as anyone else; *the first lieutenant must always know where the leader is, for security reasons*. Not knowing was a punishable offense. Luke stammered. “I—I—he must be in his quarters now. He is. Yes, he is. I know it.”

“That’s better,” Joe replied, privately delighted at the tiny victory. He turned to leave, effectively terminating the conversation.

*He’s a fool, if you know what buttons to push. No wonder he followed Father for so long. He glanced back, catching Luke as he stood there, mouth hanging open, apparently still trying to piece together what just transpired. You’d need a brain like a sponge to stay on with Brother Joseph all these years.*

Joe smiled—but only to himself.

*Luke qualifies.*

Out of range of the two idiots guarding Jamie, Joe’s thoughts turned dark. He was, after all, no closer to getting food to the boy. The giant piece of beef jerky jabbed him in his pocket, reminding him of his failure.

*I failed because I didn’t have a plan, he reminded himself. I can try again, but this time I’d better be smart.*

In the Guard, one was taught to use one’s assets to their fullest advantage. Being the son of the founder of the movement, he had barely scratched the surface of those assets. For example, he could go places where very few, even within the Guard, were permitted. He went to one of those places now.

Using the card again, he entered one of several remote security stations, small rooms paneled with heavy-gauge metal and stuffed to the rafters with high tech surveillance gear. Against one wall was a pickax, a firehose, and a set of bolt cutters behind a glass pane. Along the opposite wall, ten tiny black and white screens blinked back at him. This particular station, he knew, was redundant. These same

feeds were going to the main security station, which had a wall of screens that dwarfed this rig. This station served only this sector of the underground, whereas the main station had camera feeds to everything. The Guard monitored the main station, and at least one member would be there now. Eventually, when they had more manpower—women didn't count—all stations would be manned, giving redundant security everywhere. The small screens here had various views of the hallways and tunnels. Some angles, he saw to his surprise, were new. *Looks like they've put new cameras up. Gotta watch that. Must assume I'm -being watched at all times .*

Which prompted him to look up. *Good. No cameras here.* Every time he used his card, a record of where and when it was used was stored in the cult's computer, also located in the main station. *They'll know I was here. And they might want to know why.* He knew, however, that it would be at least a week before they ran the reports that showed security card usage. For the time being, anyway, he was off the hook. In a week, surely, he'd be able to come up with a plausible excuse.

He studied one screen, which gave the view right outside Jamie's isolation room. Luke and Billybob sat reading their respective books. The other nine screens didn't show anything particularly interesting: empty hallways and views of the storage rooms, and other things that weren't important. One screen was turned off. When Joe turned it on, a camera view from within the isolation room came to life.

Jamie was lying on a mattress, sleeping fitfully, having what appeared to be nightmares. Joe was stunned at first; he hadn't expected to find a camera inside the child's room, but when he thought about it, it made sense. Jamie was important. Jamie had to be watched. On the little black and white screen the boy seemed thinner than he'd been at the Praise Meeting. Joe remembered when, as a little boy, he'd found a kitten swimming frantically down a stream. He had plucked the animal from the water, and for several fascinated moments watched it stretch out and go to sleep in his palm. Wet, it had looked like a dying rat, its tiny lungs heaving against a frail rib cage. That was what Jamie looked like, lying on the mattress.

As pitiful as the boy looked, the sight only cemented Joe's resolve. *The question is, when am I going to be able to get in there without Luke knowing?* He debated over whether or not to wait until their shift changed over. They might even put Junior Guards down there, though this was unlikely. At any rate he might have more leverage with their replacements, being the son of the leader. Some members of the Chosen Ones held him in awe, prompting some enthusiastic followers to speculate out loud that Joe was the grandson of God.

He had never taken full advantage of these attentions, this being one of the assets he couldn't fully exploit while keeping a clear conscience. *Not that my conscience has been too clear lately anyway ,* he thought, remorsefully. *Taking advantage of those people who think I'm divine might be tempting. But that wouldn't make me no better than my father. God, what a prick he is! He manipulates them so well, especially when he uses Jamie to invoke that thing. If I start doing the same crap, what's to stop me from becoming just like him? Do I really believe in what he's doing?*

Which prompted another distinct stab of doubt. *Do I really have faith?*

As if on cue, the power failed briefly, then returned. Lights in the security room blinked. As one the ten screens went to static, as if switched to a dead channel. In the distance, Joe heard an alarm that he couldn't immediately identify. Water gurgled nearby, as if a pipe had ruptured behind one of the walls.

Down the hallway, someone shouted. Running footsteps followed the shout, came near, then retreated into the -distance.

Wide-eyed, Joe stood perfectly still, keenly aware of every sound around him. His faith in God, now,

was completely restored.

Four of the screens flickered to life. One of them displayed the view of the hallway outside Jamie's isolation room. Luke and Billybob had abandoned their positions, it seemed; their books lay idle on the empty chairs. The two guards were nowhere in sight. Frantically, Joe banged on the screen that had the interior view, getting no results. The screen continued to display snow, with an occasional horizontal line.

*He must still be in that room, he thought. They just ran off to see what the commotion was. Then, There was a reason for this to happen now.* Joe eyed the bolt cutters on the wall, saw what a perfect tool it was for dealing with padlocks. Joe found a rag, wrapped it around his hand, and punched out the pane of glass. After removing the major shards from the frame, he took down the pair of bolt cutters and made for the door.

The alarm was a little louder now and seemed to originate at the end of a long corridor. The shouts became more numerous and confused, and it sounded like whatever happened would keep the two guards, along with many others, busy for some time. It never really occurred to him that whatever the emergency was could be a danger to himself or Jamie. His only impulse was to move, and move now.

Abruptly, the power went off altogether. For several moments he stood in total darkness, unable then to see his hand in front of his face. In the security room -behind him, muffled by the thick steel door, several electronic gadgets whirred to a halt. The alarm cut off completely.

*Good Lord, Joe thought, taking a tentative step forward. What a time for this to happen.* During the early days of living in the underground, when all of the bugs in the electrical system hadn't yet been worked out, he had carried around a flashlight on his belt just for such emergencies. But it had been months since the last blackout, and since then everyone had become complacent about the power system, taking it for granted.

Then, further down the passageway, a light winked on. From the ceiling a thin finger of light touched the concrete floor below. *Emergency backup*, he remembered. *This is going to work even better.*

Somewhere in the underground, he heard someone shout "Fire!" followed by a scream and the blast of a fire extinguisher. Again, he felt strangely calm, although it occurred to him that maybe he should feel a little more alarmed. Since there wasn't much that was burnable in the underground caverns, not much attention had been paid to drills should a fire occur—

It didn't matter. What was important was to get a piece of beef jerky and dried fruit to a starving boy.

He knew the passageways from memory and was able to navigate back to where Jamie was being held. Emergency lights periodically illuminated the way. Still, there were sections of darkness that most people, unfamiliar with the floorplan, would have balked at. Presently he found himself in front of the unguarded double doors. Inside, Jamie whimpered.

"Jamie?" Joe said, careful to watch his volume. "It's Joe. Sit tight, I'll be inside in a minute."

In seconds he had clipped through the padlock with the bolt cutters and opened the twin doors.

Joe immediately saw by the light creeping in from -behind why the boy was crying; there was no emergency lighting inside, and he had been lying in total darkness. Before doing anything else, he reached up and turned off the security camera. The power wasn't on yet, but when it did come on he figured this would be one of the first rooms security would be most interested in -investigating.

“Here, partner,” Joe said, holding out the jerky. “Eat this. If you see them coming, hide it. Don’t let them know you have it.”

But Jamie was too busy hanging onto Joe’s knee to eat. “Where have you been?” the boy managed to blurt out.

The effort of sitting up and talking seemed to exhaust him. Jamie flopped back down on the mattress, sitting up on one elbow. Slowly, he took the jerky, regarded it for a moment, then started stuffing his face with it.

“Whoa!” Joe said, nearly grabbing the boy’s arm to keep him from wolfing down the gift. “Slow down. You’ll make yourself sick eating fast like that.”

“I’m already sick,” Jamie pointed out. “When did they decide to start feedin’ me?”

Joe stared at the boy until finally their eyes met. “They haven’t. I’m doing this on my own.”

Jamie gazed at him severely. “You’re gonna get your ass whipped for this.”

“Probably. But I don’t care. It ain’t right to be starving you like this. And then making you talk to that thing. . . .” Joe froze then, wondering if he should have mentioned it. Instead of the fear he expected to see in the boy’s face, he only saw blank incomprehension. *He either doesn’t remember, or he’s too tired to think straight now*, Joe speculated.

Jamie was paying attention to other things. “Is that fire?” he inquired innocently as he gnawed on the stick of jerky.

“It’s . . .” Joe said, momentarily confused. *That was a fire back there, and I wasn’t even paying attention. I was concentrating too damned hard on finding Jamie. If the place is on fire, then maybe I should get him out of here*, he thought stupidly.

Joe looked up and saw the thin film of smoke licking across the ceiling. He sniffed and smelled the smoke for the first time. But it wasn’t like any smoke he’d smelled before; this stench was laden with plastic and synthetic smells, sort of like when an alternator on a car is about to go out, or when a fuse box overloads.

*That’s easy. It’s an electrical fire*, he thought, frowning. This didn’t make the situation easier to handle.

*This room is no longer safe*, he declared. *I’m taking him out now and to hell with the consequences!* After all, this was what he wanted to do all along.

“Come on, buckaroo,” Joe said, scooping him up in his arms. He felt the difference in the boy’s weight immediately; ten, maybe twenty pounds. “We’re getting out of here.”

“Okay,” the boy replied calmly. “Got any more jerky?”

“Not with me,” Joe said. “Too much food will make you sick right now. Hang loose for a while.” He remembered reading about concentration camps in Nazi Germany, and the prisoners who, once liberated by the Allies, ate themselves to death. He wondered about this when he saw Jamie, but didn’t think he was that far gone. *A little food. No more. At least until I figure out what kind of condition he’s in.*



*And what I'm doing here, and how I'm going to get him out, and what I do then.*

Joe carried him out of the isolation room with a distinct feeling that he was being watched. *Paranoia*, he decided. *The power is off. The cameras are out. There's not enough light in here to see by if they weren't.*

The commotion at the end of the hall was still in progress, but now seemed farther away. From the melee he was able to pick Luke's voice out, an insistent, frantic wail trying in vain to seize control of the situation.

*What is going on up there?* Joe wondered, becoming a little more interested in the emergency Luke and Billybob ran off to tend to. *Soon I may just find out. Those two, they'll be back soon. I need to make this look innocent if they find me. No, when they find me. There's no way out of this place, even if I did try to make a run for it.* This last thought disturbed—and intrigued—him more than he thought it should. *Have I completely lost my mind?*

He took Jamie to another wing of storage units, where the lighting was still next to nonexistent. He found tall stacks of boxes piled on pallets, their contents unknown. *Probably food*, Joe thought. *But no more for Jamie. It could kill him.* They were well hidden here, and in the darkness he felt like it would be a less likely place for Luke to find them. *Luke is afraid of the dark. I remember that. Could be why he left Jamie and ran for the fire. The fire has light.* Had they gone further they would have walked into a highly traveled area; somewhere around here Joe remembered an access tunnel that would take them to the -garage, where he could take a truck and maybe even crash the gate. . . .

*There I go again. Thinking crazy thoughts. They'd shoot me and Jamie both, if I tried to get away. We'd be so shot full of holes there wouldn't be anything left.*

“Try to stand up,” Joe said, setting the child down on his feet. “How do you feel?”

“Sleepy,” Jamie said, yawning. “But I don't wanna go to sleep.” He looked up at Joe with brown, questioning eyes. “What's going on, Joe?” he asked. “Why won't they let me eat?”

Joe sat down on a bare pallet, which rocked a little as his weight settled down on it. Now they were on eye level, making it more difficult for Joe to talk to the boy. He wanted to shrink into a little ball now, the responsibility for this predicament pressing a little more firmly on his shoulders.

“I'm a little confused right now,” Joe admitted. Jamie's look became puzzled. “I don't know what they're trying to prove back there, making you talk to that thing like that, but it ain't right and it's not good for you. There are some things that just aren't meant to be messed with, and that thing that took control of you tonight is one of them.” *Jesus*, Joe thought. *Where are these words coming from?* He listened to his mouth rattle on, uncertain if it was him who was talking, or someone, or something, else.

“But I can tell you this,” Joe continued. “It's not right what they're doing. And I'm partway to blame for it. I don't know if I can get you out of here now, but I will someday. I promise you that.”

Jamie gazed at him solemnly, his lower lip curling out into a pout. Then the expression changed to anger. Eyebrows arched, his forehead wrinkled.

“Joe, *where is my momma?*”

Joe tried to gaze directly into his eyes, but his look wavered and glanced away. *He doesn't know what's up and what's down anymore. Everyone in authority has been feeding him lies, and now he knows it. He's looking to me for the answers. I've got to tell him the truth, or he'll never trust me again. And if he doesn't trust me, he doesn't have a chance in this place.*

"I don't know where your mother is," Joe said slowly. After saying it, it was a little easier to look up. "I never did. Look. The grownups around here, they haven't been telling you the truth."

Joe had expected tears; he got a dull resignation. "I guess that means she's not coming here. To the vacation place."

He uttered the sentence with such a total lack of emotion that Joe shivered a little. *It's almost like that thing was talking through him again. Like maybe a little bit of it stayed behind or managed to burn out some of his emotions. Or else that he's so used to disappointment that he doesn't care anymore.*

"That's right, Jamie," he said with effort. "She probably doesn't even know where you are." He looked up. "You stay here a second." Joe got up and peered out of the storage room, down the corridor. The sounds that echoed through the corridor indicated that the fire was gone, but that other things were keeping the guards busy. *We're safe for a little while longer*, he decided. *Better make the best use of this time I can. After this it will be impossible to get close to Jamie again.* When he returned, he continued. "Your mother didn't know you were being brought here. Your daddy, you see, he took you away from your school so she wouldn't know, and brought you here so that you could be with him."

Jamie looked confused. *Why shouldn't he be?* Joe thought, resisting an urge to pull his own hair out. *God, I hope I'm going about this right. This had better not be causing more damage than good.*

"But *why*?" was the logical response.

*A simple question with a damned difficult answer. It's too late to back out now, I'm already ass deep in this one.*

"Your ma and pa stopped getting along together. You're smart, even you could see that." Meekly, Jamie nodded. "And well, he heard about the Chosen Ones and started to come to meetings. And before long he was a believer, and a follower, of Brother Joseph."

"Your daddy."

Joe winced. *You could have gone all night without saying that*, he thought, cringing inwardly. *That's one thing I would really like to forget right now.*

"Yeah. My daddy," Joe said. It felt like he was admitting to a crime against humanity. "He needed someone who could talk to the Holy Fire. Someone young, and smart, like you. Do you remember the Holy Fire?"

"I remember," he said. If the memory was frightening, the boy concealed it well. "But it was okay. I had a friend to help me out."

"Good, that's good," Joe said condescendingly. *I had an imaginary friend, too, a funny fox. Sometimes, he was the only one I had to talk to, when one of Dad's flunkies wasn't around.* "When you're hungry, you can talk to the Holy Fire better. That's why Brother Joseph is doing this. He

wants to know things from the Holy Fire, things that will help the Chosen Ones.”

He had nearly said, “help us out,” but that didn’t feel right. He didn’t really feel like a Chosen One anymore. *If I’m not a Chosen One, then who am I?* came the thought, but he shelved it for later consideration.

“You don’t understand, do you?” he sighed, when Jamie didn’t react with anything but acceptance.

But Jamie shook his head. “Oh, I understand,” he said matter-of-factly. “Sarah explained everything to me.”

Joe felt the room get fifteen degrees colder. *Did he say—Sarah?*

He stared at the little boy, unsure what he should say, or what he could say; it didn’t help to ask him again. He heard the name right the first time. *He said Sarah. But it can’t be.*

“She’s dead,” Jamie supplied, with his head cocked to one side as if he was listening to two conversations at once. “She says not to worry, she doesn’t blame you for what happened. But she would like to know why you didn’t do anything to stop him. She says you were standing right there. When he did it.”

“I—” Joe said, but the sound came out a weak gurgle, the kind of sound someone would make when strangling. *Like the sound she made. Oh God, this can’t be happening! Is he talking to spirits? Spirits that can read my mind? Is this Satan’s work?*

He felt the walls of his father’s religion closing around him, warding off the fear of the unknown that this conversation was invoking. *I can’t go back to those beliefs, he wanted to scream. It’s all nonsense, I’ve already decided that, or why else would I go against him, take Jamie out of his prison and feed him. But this, with Sarah, this is what the demons do. It’s what the devil does! What else do I have to protect myself with, besides the Church?*

But—once again, his father had lied.

*He told me she went to heaven!*

She couldn’t have, not if she was talking to Jamie—

Or was she an angel, some kind of sword-wielding, avenging angel, cutting down anyone who had anything to do with her death?

Jamie continued the conversation, like he was on one end of a spiritual telephone. “Sarah says that the forces of darkness are what your daddy attracts, not what she is. She also says you aren’t in danger. At first she was mad at me for telling you about her, but now she says it will help all of us, letting you know she’s still around. You can help me, she says.” For the first time, Jamie showed some spark of interest. “How can you help me?” he demanded.

Joe had fallen off the pallet and was now on his knees, praying. He wasn’t even certain what he was saying, but he hoped the emotion of what he was feeling would convey his message.

Jamie peered down at him. “Joe, whatcha doin’ down there? You gettin’ sick?”

“He’s going to be a lot worse off than that,” a loud, booming voice shouted from somewhere behind him. Joe jumped up and turned around suddenly, habitually reaching for his sidearm, a .44 that wasn’t there.

*Luke. Oh good God.*

From the darkness came the *snick, snick* of a shell being pumped into a shotgun. Another, softer *snick* betrayed the presence of a pistol.

“I suggest that if you’ve rearmed yourself to drop it. But I don’t think you have. You’re not that smart.”

The large man’s weight shifted the pallet as he stepped on one of the bare wooden platforms. The pallet creaked, protesting loudly. More footsteps; one set no doubt -belonging to Billybob. A third person shined a bright spot in Joe’s face, panned back and forth between him and Jamie.

“Yep. That’s them. They’re both here,” Billybob said. It was the first coherent sentence Joe had heard the man utter.

“What the hell did you think you were trying to do?” Luke said, taking a few steps forward. The spotlight continued to shine, silhouetting the huge man. “How far did you think you were going to go with him?”

Joe glanced over at Jamie, who had—thank God—eaten everything he had given him. *If I play my cards right, I can get out of this one untouched. If.*

“Not sure what you mean, Luke,” Joe replied. “I was just getting the boy clear of the fire. That is what you abandoned your post to go tend to, isn’t it?”

Luke’s expression wavered slightly. A flicker of concession passed over his face and then was gone.

“Guess that’s what it was,” Billybob said. “Wasn’t sure.”

“Shut up!” Luke screamed. His intensity startled Joe. “What I want to know is what you were planning to do with this kid?”

Joe assumed an expression of surprise. “I wasn’t planning anything. What I did was take him to safety. It was pretty clear to me that he was in danger, and that you left him in danger.”

“Enough of this crap,” Luke said, cutting him off. “Billybob, you and Jimmy take the kid back to his room. I’ll deal with Joe.”

“But Luke—”

“But nothing. No arguments,” he replied, a little softer.

Joe didn’t like this one bit. It began to feel like a setup, and when he looked around at his surroundings, he had a creepy feeling he might not walk out of there alive. *This is the kind of place where people die*, he thought, trying hard not to let his fear show through.

Billybob hesitated, something Joe had never seen him do in Luke’s presence. Luke’s eyebrow raised in response.

“I said now,” he said, quietly.

“You’re not going to, are you?” Billybob asked, somewhat fearfully.

Joe could tell he was getting impatient. “Just take the kid back to the room now,” Luke ordered. “I’ll see about you later.”

That last statement had an ominous feel to it, and Billybob took the boy by the hand and led him away out of the darkness of the storage room. Joe couldn’t see Luke’s expression very well, as the light from the hallway emergency light came in behind him. Jimmy followed Billybob out, casting a glance behind him that turned his blood to ice.

*He’s going to kill me,* Joe thought. The realization left him feeling vaguely calm, in a detached sort of way. The fear he would have normally expected just wasn’t there. *He’s going to kill me, and it’s not going to make any difference. He’ll make up some story about how I tried to take the gun away from him.*

“You’ve gotten awfully uppity lately. Who do you think you are, anyway? Seems like you think you’re better than me these days.” Luke shifted his immense weight, cradling the shotgun carefully. The barrel never wavered.

“I know I’m not better than you,” Joe pleaded, trying hard not to grovel. “It’s just, things are happening so fast around here. The drugs and all, seems like something’s going on there all the time.”

“Why don’t we just talk about that,” Luke said. “Why don’t you help with the deliveries? Distribution? You think you’re a prince or somethin’?”

“I’m just busy with the Junior Guard,” Joe lied. “You know that’s what Brother Joseph wants me in. There’s no time for nothing else.” *If I keep him talking, maybe I can get out of this.*

Luke sneered. “I’ve been waiting for you to screw up for a long time. I knew you were trouble a long time ago. Knew you would never follow orders from your superiors. You know what I’m talking about, *don’t you?*”

He knew all too well. “I think so,” he replied, not wanting to get specific. *What is he leading up to?*

“The Chosen Ones will be purified by this,” Luke said, raising the shotgun to shoulder level, and taking careful aim at Joe’s midsection. “You just sit still, it’ll be over with before you . . .”

At that moment the power returned, at least partially, to the sector. Fluorescent lights flickered on overhead as something went *wuuuummmph* in the distance.

“Shit,” Luke whispered, looking around him furtively.

Above, located behind Luke, a remote camera whirred back to life. It panned back and forth, its red LED light blinking. Luke spotted it at the same time Joe did and dropped the shotgun to his side.

“There’s someone watching us,” Joe said. “If you killed me now there’d be witnesses.”

“I wasn’t going to kill nobody,” he said, forcing a smile. “Where’d you get that idea anyway, son?”

“Sure looked that way to me,” Joe said.

“What’s going to happen now,” Luke said, starting for the entrance of the storeroom, “is this. I’m going to -report to your father, see, about how you tried to kidnap Jamie and take him out of our little sanctuary here, into Pawnee. The whole story. I’ll just let you worry about that.”

Joe shrugged. “That’s fine with me,” he said, not sure where his cockiness was coming from. “But I’ll tell you one thing. And I’ll let you worry about this: my father is -going to find out about what you tried to do to me when I was a kid. Do you remember? Or should I refresh your memory?”

Luke froze in his tracks. “What are you talking about, boy?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. He might understand you fooling around with little girls, but littleboys ? And hisson ?”

Luke actually looked white. “He won’t believe you.”

Joe kept his eyes locked on the older man’s. “Are you real sure about that?”

Indecision tortured his face. Joe could almost see the gears turning, however slowly, behind the man’s eyes. *Brother Joseph might not believe his own son on something like that, but then he might, Joe imagined him thinking. Can I take that chance? As hot as things are around here? Brother Joseph, he likes to kill things when he’s under a lot of pressure. Like now .*

“I got a better idea,” Luke said, after long moments of consideration. “Why don’t we just forget this whole thing ever happened and pitch in and help with the mess we got going back there?”

Joe exhaled a breath he didn’t realize he was holding in.

“Yeah, Luke. Sure. Let’s go.”

*Prick.*

\* \* \*

Al couldn’t decide if it was the massage, the bath, or the wine that put him out, but whatever it was he slept like the dead. He barely woke as Bob got up and passed his couch, chuckling over something known only to the human; he thought he said something, but then went right back to sleep. He woke a little after that, with the realization that he had only an hour to track-time.

No matter. The rest had done him a world of good, completely restoring his energies.

After helping himself to bread and fruit from the sideboard, he ducked into the bathroom for a quick shower. Then, with a sigh of regret, he tapped into one of the local energy-foci, and transformed the interior of the RV back to its usual mundane appearance.

*Pity. But I can’t have someone walking in on this.*

He left his favorite servant, the Phaeton mascot, in animated form, however. He had his hands full with breakfast and a brush, and he needed one extra hand to hold the blow-dryer. The mascot provided that,

readily enough. She never tired and never got bored; she would hold the hair-dryer for him until the Trump of Doom if he asked it of her.

A quick peek out of the curtains showed the van was quiet and the Miata was gone; that meant that in all probability, Bob had taken Cindy somewhere before track-time. With her out of the way, it was safe enough to let this little evidence of his power remain active long enough to give him a little help.

But just as he thought that, the door opened.

Cindy had gotten up early, but even so, one of the racers had beaten her. The Miata was gone—although there was evidence by the slight motion of the RV that there was someone still inside.

She was glad now that she'd talked Bob into taking back his bed last night. Al was an attractive man; *too* darned attractive. It would be easy to fall right into bed with him. And she didn't want that—or rather, she did, but not right now. If she were to indulge herself—and that was the only phrase that described it—with Al right now, she would be betraying Jamie by taking away time and energy that could be used to search for him. The fantasy also had a slight edge of fear with the desire, which fluttered madly in her stomach; her ex-husband Jim had been her first and only bed partner. Just leaping into bed with someone she had recently met, who she wasn't even *in/love* with, grated against her upbringing. She could almost hear her mother lecturing her for even considering it.

But she wasn't a virgin, wasn't at home, and her mother was dead. Al seemed to be a very nice man, and he was definitely a hunk. She wasn't even married anymore—and she'd kept taking the Pill even after the divorce, as a kind of reflex. There was no reason not to—

No. No, that would only make her feel more guilt, and she had plenty of that right now; she didn't need any more.

The van had a kind of friendly feeling about it; a sheltering quality. Cozy, that was what it was, and welcoming. As if she'd spent the night in the arms of some kind of nurturing earth-mother. She hadn't slept so well or so dreamlessly since Jamie had been stolen.

But her stomach woke her, soon after dawn, reminding her that she hadn't had much lunch and only a salad for supper. Maybe Al had come back last night with a little more food. She'd even cook it for him, or rather, for them both.

*I wonder what he usually survives on: Gatorade and concession-stand hot dogs? I'd hate to see his cholesterol count.*

She pulled on her old jeans and another t-shirt, slid out of the van, opened the RV door, and stepped up.

She poked her head around a corner—and froze.

Al was stark naked, combing his wet hair with one hand, and eating with the other, while blow-drying his hair. Holding the blow-dryer was a little silver statue of a woman; an odd sort of prop, but if it worked—

*Dear God, he's a hunk*, she thought in one analytical corner of her mind. Al still hadn't noticed her; the noise of the blow-dryer must have covered the sound of her entering. She felt like a peeping Tom—

She'd seen professional body-builders with better -bodies—but not many. Did racing build muscles like that?

If that was what Gatorade and concession-stand hot dogs did, maybe she ought to change her diet.

Caught between embarrassment and an undeniable attraction, she started to back out and ran into the corner of the cabinet instead. "Excuse me!" she blurted, as Al suddenly looked up into the mirror and met her eyes.

She froze like a deer pinned in a car's headlights. The little silver statue was alive and moving. It turned to look calmly at her, still holding the blow-dryer. The dryer cord dangled straight down, and though the dryer was running, it wasn't plugged in.

The startled eyes that met hers in the mirror were emerald green and slitted like a cat's. And the ears, standing up through the wet hair, were pointed.

At first, as she took in the sight of Al's reflection, she felt calm. The strangeness of what she was seeing took several moments to sink in, as there was nothing in her experience, beyond cheap horror sci-fi movies, that she could relate this to. Her mind became a total blank and unable to assign this anywhere to the reality she knew.

Then it suddenly dawned on her: Al wasn't human.

She yelped and backpedaled into the Winnebago's -interior as Al swung around, grabbing wildly for—not his privates—but his ears, confirming her suspicion that he wasn't human. His elbow hit the blow-dryer and knocked it out of the little statue's hands as he lunged for Cindy; she found herself trapped against the sink, and she acted instinctively. She kned him, right where it counted, then froze again.

He might not be human, but the salient parts of male anatomy were in the same place. He gasped and folded, giving her a clear view of his ears. They*were* pointed.

In the bathroom, the tiny silver lady had picked up the blow-dryer and was calmly turning it off. Cindy's mouth was dry and her hands were shaking—and she was sure, now, that she had somehow gotten into some place that wasn't on earth. That, and she was finally losing her mind. Or—was this RV some kind of disguised flying saucer?

Al still had her blocked in, and the moment she broke her paralysis to shove past him, he moved like lightning, recovering much faster than any human could have.

He grabbed her arms and held her, this time pinning her legs as well, his strange eyes glaring at her with an anger that made them burn like twin green flames. He was angrier than anyone she had ever seen in her life. Even Brother Joseph hadn't frightened her this way.

She shrank back, so terrified she couldn't speak, her teeth chattering like castanets, wondering when, and how, he was going to kill her—

An expression of disgust passed over his face, and the glare of rage in his eyes dimmed. Suddenly, he pushed away from her, stalked into the bathroom, and pulled the vinyl curtain shut violently.



Before she could move, he jerked the curtain back again; now he was wearing pants, at least, and was pulling on a shirt. “You try my patience and my temper more than you know, human,” he snarled, his hair standing out like a lion’s mane. “If there were not a child involved—”

“Human?” she blurted. “What are you, a Vulcan?”

He stared at her a moment, shirt half on and half off—and began laughing. First it was a chuckle, then a full laugh, then loud roaring howls of laughter that reverberated in the RV.

Now Cindy was confused. Hell, if he was laughing, he couldn’t be a Vulcan. So much for Star Trek. She stared at him as he tried to collect himself. Was she being overly sensitive, or did the laughter have a strange hollow sound that just wasn’t human? At some point his eyes went back to being “normal,” but the ears remained the same. Al managed to get the shirt buttoned on, and when he looked down, it was one button off. He seemed to find this even funnier and began laughing more.

*I guess he isn’t going to kill me yet.* He rebuttoned his shirt, still chuckling, and she amended that. *Maybe he isn’t going to kill me at all .*

As some of the initial shock wore off, Cindy began to relax. But it seemed as if Al now found the situation—and her terror—quite amusing.

Cindy had been afraid, but that was shifting to anger. *She* didn’t think this was anything to laugh at.

“And what is so damned funny?” she finally said, fuming. Then something else occurred to her—and her anger faded as it occurred to her what she had sounded like.

There was a long silence as Cindy sat down at the table, and Al remained standing. The silence thickened, and neither of them could find a way to reach across it. *He sounds different now* , she thought. *He’s not coming across as the techie racing mechanic anymore. I can’t place his accent, but it’s not from North Carolina—he sounds like he was from that Robin Hood movie. What is he ?*

“Well,” Cindy finally said, after she couldn’t bear the lengthy pause anymore. “What are you then?”

“It would take a long time to explain,” Al said, then stopped. She had the feeling now that he really didn’t want to reveal anything to her, but that he didn’t have much choice.

“I’ve got all the time you need,” she said, and crossed her arms over her chest. *This should be very interesting* , she thought. “Go right ahead. Nothing you say is going to surprise me more than what I’ve already seen.”

“Perhaps. But an explanation has become necessary. I would have preferred to keep it a secret,” Al said, and shrugged. It appeared, at that moment, to be a very-*human* shrug. “But, as you say, the cat is out of the bag.”

Cindy waited for him to speak, patient as only the mother of a young boy could be in waiting for an explanation.

Al sighed and poured himself a Gatorade. “We go back many thousands of years, our folk. Your people call mine elves now.” He waited, as if assuming she’d laugh at the word. She only blinked.

*I suppose that makes as much sense as space aliens.*

“We have . . .”

“You don’t bake cookies, do you?”

Alinor glared. “No. We have known about your people from the beginning, and have always known we were a minority, and were in many ways physically inferior to humans. We have—weaknesses, vulnerabilities, that you do not have. But we have magic. We have always had magic. For a while that was a protection, and even made us superior.”

“And it isn’t anymore?” she asked, matter-of-factly.

He shook his head. “No, and now we are even more in the minority. As your human civilization grew, we isolated ourselves even more. Some of us were careless, were discovered. The humans quickly put them to death. We were never tolerated. We have learned the fine art of being invisible.”

Al gestured to the orange jug of Gatorade, offering. Cindy shook her head. The mechanic—or whatever—took a seat opposite her, his motions careful and precise, as if he was trying not to arouse any more fear. The act was reassuring. The tale he was telling, however, was not.

“We appear in mythology, folklore, fairy tales. Some of these we planted ourselves. Some, though these are few, are true accounts that have been distorted with time. We call ourselves elves because in your language there is no other suitable alternative. ‘Sidhe’ sounds just like ‘she,’ after all.”

As Cindy listened, she realized her mouth was hanging open.

“Are you sure you don’t want anything to drink?” Al asked, starting to sound concerned.

Again, she shook her head. “You mean all this time you and—? What about Bob? Is he one, too?” The prospect added another uncomfortable dimension to the situation.

“No, Cindy. He is as human as you are,” Al replied. “Which takes me to another aspect of our existence. The children.”

Cindy suppressed a shudder and tried to make her expression as bland as possible.

Al seemed to read her mind, which did nothing to put her at ease. “No, no. Nothing sinister. We have a low birth-rate, and we treasure little ones—perhaps more so than you humans do. We often step in to save them from a variety of fates, from drowning, from fires, from falling. We always have.” His expression darkened. “Sometimes we save them from their blood-parents. Sometimes we save them from other things, like Brother Joseph.”

Cindy relaxed a little. For some reason, she believed him. Well, why not? There was certainly no other reason for him to have come to her aid.

“Children are most precious to us,” Al explained, his compassion reaching her through her fog of confusion. “For reasons that extend beyond survival of the human race. Despite some ways we have been received, we need you.” He chuckled a little. “Children. You could say that it is the way we are hardwired. No one really knows why. The children we save do grow up, of course—and if it is their parents that we save them from, it is often to other parents, loving ones, that they are given. It is true, we

have human helpers, like Bob, who help us fit into society and also help keep us concealed—and some of those were human children who were so badly hurt that *we* were the only folk fit to raise them.”

“Hurt, how?” she asked. Fear began again. Would this creature save Jamie only to take him away again?

“Abuse—profound abuse. Physical, emotional—” He gave her a hard look. “Sexual. You might not believe some of the stories. You would not want to. For some children, there is no way that they will find healing in your world. For them, there is ours—a world from their fairy-tale books, a world where no harm from ‘the real world’ can intrude to touch them. A place where they can learn that there is such a thing as love and caring, and where they can learn to defend themselves so that the real world can never hurt them again.”

Cindy thought about one of the women who had shared the shelter with her—a woman with three young girls, and all four of them testing positive for syphilis. Only when the doctor had confirmed the fact—and confirmed that the children had been brutally, repeatedly, molested—did the woman believe what they had been trying to tell her about their father.

Their *father*. She had wanted to throw up. But—wasn’t that the same thing that Jim had allowed Brother Joseph to do to Jamie’s mind?

She swallowed. “All right,” she said, “But what about other kids? The ones who’ve got at least one good parent?”

“Like Jamie?” He looked at her solemnly. “We would have helped as soon as we realized there was a problem. Your husband: classic case of abusive alcoholism. That alone would have qualified your son for our help, if you are in any doubt. But this Brother Joseph thing, that goes *well* beyond what we would consider acceptable. I can only hope that when we retrieve Jamie, he will be able to forget what has happened to him. If he cannot forget, then we can help him deal with it intelligently. A child must never be underestimated.”

They regarded each other in silence for several moments, and the refrigerator started making sounds she hadn’t noticed before.

“You must believe me when I say that we only want to help your son, and to return him to you.” There was a distinct emphasis on that last that comforted her. “It is only a matter of time before I think we can accomplish this.”

Cindy slumped against the backrest. There it was. Things hadn’t changed that much. At least Al wasn’t something from another planet, or from hell. She still didn’t know how to handle the elf thing, though. . . .

Never mind. The important thing was Jamie.

As incredible as the story sounded, she knew, somehow, that it was all true. She’d seen the eyes, the ears—

The little silver lady sashayed across the floor towards Al and tapped his knee. He looked down and handed the creature a plastic cup filled with Gatorade. She took it, then hip-waggled her way to Cindy’s knee and offered it.

Trying not to drop her jaw, she accepted the cup, and the silver lady sauntered back into the bathroom,

hips swaying gently from side to side.

*Well, there's nothing wrong with his hormones, if that's what he keeps around instead of pinups. . .*

"Is that—" She faltered.

He raised an eyebrow. "Magic? Yes. It is."

She swallowed a large gulp of Gatorade.

*It could have been worse, she thought. He could have been a giant bug in a man-suit, or something. . . .*

She saw then that his eyes had gone back to the slit-pupiled green they had been when she barged in and sensed that Al was presenting himself now as exactly what he was, and that he was no longer holding back anything that would distort the true image of himself. She noted, idly, that his ears continued to protrude through his hair even as it dried straight, and remembered that she had interrupted his grooming.

"I should let you get back to what you were doing when I came in." Her eyes fell on his right ear. It was hard to resist. "You don't mind if I—?"

Al's eyes shifted momentarily, as if he was about to object. Then he smiled warmly.

"Go ahead. But don't *pull* on it. It's very sensitive."

Gently, she touched the tip of the pointed ear, relieved for some odd reason that it was, indeed, real. It sprang back, as soft and as warm as any human's. This simple act of touching the feature reassured her that she wasn't going mad after all.

"This is going to take some getting used to," she said. "I mean, it's not every day that I meet an elf."

He chuckled. "It's not every day that I get to acquaint a human with our species."

Cindy frowned. "You make it sound like you're from another planet or something. Really, now, you don't look that much different than a human." She blushed, seeing that she was flirting, although indirectly. *What is it about him, even with the pointed ears, that is so compelling? Christ, if we ever had children they would probably all look like little pink Yodas. But then, you know what they say about men with long, pointed ears . . . or was that noses?*

"You're being kind," Al said, and Cindy looked at him askance. *Is he reading my mind, too? No, that was to something I said earlier. But what if he can read minds?* "But there is a great deal of difference between our two races. It wouldn't be wise to introduce you to all of these things now, especially the things we can do. It has already been quite a shock, whether or not you realize it."

"Of course I realize it," she objected, but she knew her words were falling on deaf, if pointed, ears. Cindy couldn't help but notice her sudden calmness and the distinct feeling of somehow being manipulated into losing her fear.

But then her thoughts returned to Jamie, and the darkness came again, swooping over her like a raven that had been waiting in the shadows to rouse her depression. And for all of Al's self-assured words, his

*magic* , she couldn't see how she was going to find him, much less get him back.

*Are we really any closer to saving him from those crazies? Can little magic statues do anything besides hold blow-dryers? All that talk about saving children, and holding them in such esteem—that's nice, but if Jamie's in there, there's an army between us and him! How can this elf really help us when the county sheriff can't get inside that compound?*

"Well. Now that we've got *that* out of the way," Al said, though Cindy was not entirely certain what *that* was, "there are some things you could tell me that would help me locate your son. Unusual things. The things someone else might not believe."

"Like?" she asked.

Al waved a hand in the air. "Psychic experiences. Sleep walking. Talking in his sleep, especially if it seemed as if he was having a lucid conversation with someone. Anything at all?"

"You're talking about the Praise Meeting," she said in an accusatory tone she was trying not to use. "The weird stuff that happened there."

He shrugged. "That and, well, other things. Similar experiences that may have happened at home. But if you like, you can start with the Praise Meeting."

She sighed and straightened up, looking down at her hands while she gathered her thoughts. Though her first impulse was to reject the notion, she knew that, in a way that only Al would know, this was important. *He mentioned other abilities. Could that be why that monster wanted Jamie in the first place?* "Like I'd told you, I didn't want to go to that church thing at all."

Al shook his head. "No, not the first meeting you went to. I mean the time Brother Joseph did the channeling. You told me about it, but I don't know if you were there or not."

"I wasn't. That was the time—*he*—just took off with my son." She had difficulty mentioning her ex-husband by name, so she didn't. "When they got back, Jamie was terrified—"

Something suddenly occurred to her, a connection she might never have made if Al hadn't mentioned psychic phenomena and Jamie in the same breath. "That's really strange. Now that I think of it, that reminds me of a time a few months earlier, when Jamie had a high fever. He was having hallucinations, or something close to it, when his fever spiked. The doctor only recommended Tylenol and bed rest, so that's what we did. He was sick for a week, but during all that time there were a few—I don't know—incidents. And after that, after he got well, he kept having these experiences. In his sleep."

Al's interest sharpened visibly. "Could you tell me a little more about these?"

Cindy paused, suddenly realizing how much she had tried to forget what had happened, as if by forgetting them she could make them unhappen. If it hadn't been for the channeling and the whole sick mess with the Chosen Ones, she suspected she would have managed to dismiss them from her mind already.

She shrugged, unpleasantly aware that her hands were shaking. "His father wasn't—interested. He kept saying Jamie would grow out of it. But I would hear him at night, sometimes crying, sometimes singing to himself, or even talking to some imaginary person in the room. At least, I thought it was imaginary. Sometimes I could rouse him awake, but on most others, I just couldn't wake him. He would go on,

crying or singing or talking. This was after the fever, you see, so I was a little worried that there might have been brain damage or something, but the doctor said it would pass, it was just a part of growing up. And Jim said the doctor knew what he was doing and that I was being overprotective.”

“What was he saying?” Al said, leaning closer.

She shook her head, helplessly. “It was in a different language. French, sometimes. I think it was French. I don’t speak French, so I don’t know. Sometimes he sang things that sounded like hymns in some other language. Most of the time it just didn’t make any sense at all. When I asked him about it the next day, about the things he was dreaming, he would tell me the most frightening stories about dragons or lizards, and about castles and these huge mobs of people, women, children, knights, all marching endlessly across a wilderness. Going somewhere, except they never got there. I never understood the details. But then, dreams are like that, aren’t they? Just sort of vague and flowing, like someone is pulling what you want just out of reach.”

Al’s expression had changed, but she couldn’t put her finger on what it had changed *to*. It was a little creepy, seeing him staring like that, with those strange eyes—brilliant emerald green eyes.

“Anything else?” he asked, after a bit.

Cindy thought about it. The memory popped out of nowhere with the force of a blow, nearly hitting her -between the eyes.

“How could I have forgotten?” she cried out, with an intensity that made Al visibly start. “The day the school called me! Jim was at work, I guess, and so I had to go to the school. Jamie had gotten sick or something, they wouldn’t tell me exactly what had happened over the phone.” She shook her head and put the cup of Gatorade on the table; her hands were shaking too hard to hold it. “When I got to the nurse’s office, he was just sitting in a chair, staring straight ahead, not even noticing me, it looked like. The principal, he was there, and first thing he said was he thought Jamie was on drugs or something. I told him that was ridiculous, that Jamie would never have done something like that. I told him we never had anything in the house stronger than aspirin—the principal just gave me this look, but he gave up, since he didn’t have any proof anyway. But the way Jamie acted, I could see why he would think that. He was just staring off into the distance, like one of those little kids I’d seen on TV that was in one of the houses that got hit by SCUDs in Israel, like he’d seen something and was too afraid to talk about it.”

As she babbled on, Cindy wondered why in the world she had forgotten *that*. The incident had scared the life out of her, and she’d taken Jamie straight to the doctor. The doctor hadn’t been able to find anything, either—he’d said something about “juvenile epilepsy” and that Jamie would probably never have a fit like that again. . . .

It was almost as if something had come in and taken the memory away, and it was only just now returning, bit by bit. Was it coming back only because Al had asked her for details?

*Was I trying to hide it from myself, and trying not to remember it? Or is it that something else didn’t want me to?* She wasn’t being paranoid—not after elves and magic statues, and God only knew what was being done to Jamie. This wasn’t the Twilight Zone. Or even if it was, she was *in* it, and she’d better start handling it.

“How long ago was that?” Al asked, piercing the silence that had fallen between them.

“Last year,” Cindy said automatically, though on a conscious level she wasn’t sure when it was. “I can’t

remember if it was before or after he got sick. Do you think it's important?"

"Any information is important," the elf replied. "It sounds like he went into a sort of trance." He began to say something, but visibly held back. Realizing he was probably withholding information about her son, she felt a little prickle of anger rise up her spine.

The more Cindy talked, the more concerned Al became about the whole situation. Her recollections of what Jamie had said and done were too similar to his own experiences—hundreds of years ago—to write off to coincidence.

*The boy is a medium. Has been, probably all his life. Perhaps Brother Joseph, who has no real ability of his own, didn't actually select him. Maybe he was only a middleman. Perhaps something selected him, as a pipeline to a medium.*

*And those dreams about what could have been the -Crusades . . . what must have been the Peasant's -Crusade. . . .*

## CHAPTER NINE

In perfect formation, the First Battalion of the Junior Guard stood at attention, their assault weapons held rigidly at their sides, eyes forward, chests out. The tension was like a piano wire pulled taut, threading through the boys' tense muscles, waiting to break. Only moments -before, just as they did at this time every day, the battalion of boys had scurried onto the sand-covered drill area in their underground bunker, adjacent to the firing range.

It was the same battalion, the same uniforms, the same weapons as yesterday. Only Joe was different. And he felt the difference, coursing through his veins, pulsing even at the ends of his fingers. He wondered that they didn't see it, but there was no indication that any of the boys -noticed anything at all.

This was a routine drill, one they did every day. Joe had been in charge of training the boys for months now, drilling them every moment they weren't in the Junior Guard School, learning the non-physical skills they would need in the world of the New Order. His drilling had paid off, and they had become a well-oiled fighting machine, with a discipline that rivaled the Guard itself. For weeks now Joe's battalion had been the center of his life and the source of his pride—

And even after he began to doubt, at least the Junior Guard had been a diversion from the insanity that surrounded Jamie. Now, with his new vision of the way things were, they were a source of personal embarrassment.

But since it appeared that none of the boys was going to run out and denounce him, he did not dare change so much as a single lift of an eyebrow. Eyes were on him; Luke's for one. Probably others. Watching for the least sign of difference, of dissension.

Of treachery? That was how they would see things.

"Who are we?" Joe screamed into the silence.

“The Junior Guard!” the battalion screamed back, with voices that cracked with puberty, voices that were deepening, and voices that were still high and tinny with childhood. But the response became a single sound, shaking the walls, reverberating down the concrete tunnels.

“Who do we protect?”

“God and Country!”

“Who else?”

“Brother Joseph!”

“Who from?”

“The Jew Pig Commie Enemy!”

“What do we train for?”

“Armageddon!”

“WHEN’S THAT GONNA HAPPEN?”

“REAL SOON!”

The ritual followed the same script they had all memorized on their first day in the Guard. They learned the routine while half asleep and stumbling into formation during “surprise” drills in the middle of the night. Joe remembered the faint puzzlement on the boys’ faces the first few times they repeated the litany, as if they were shouting slogans they didn’t really grasp for reasons they didn’t fully understand. But now, Joe could see as he surveyed his creation, they understood it all too well. The hate had become real. They believed it. They lived for it. And it was all they lived for; before friends, future, or family.

Brainwash complete, sir.

Today’s drill took them outside, to the recently completed obstacle course. The course itself was disguised and camouflaged from the air. The ever-present guards watched for aircraft, in particular a small plane belonging to the Oklahoma Highway Patrol. When the guards spotted anything in the air, even an innocuous ultra-light, someone would blow a signal whistle and the battalion would go into hiding, concealing themselves in oil barrels and fox holes. Normally Joe would be keenly aware of anything that might be flying around in the air, right down to the ever-present turkey vultures, but today he just didn’t care. The daily drill was a responsibility, nothing more. Meaningless. *Less* than meaningless. The enemy, he now knew, existed only in someone’s fevered imagination.

His father’s.

He hadn’t slept last night, either. This wasn’t terribly unusual, since he had to be up for the late-night surprise drills, and after the drills it would often be late enough that he wouldn’t bother going back to bed, instead filling his time with five-kilometer runs and weightlifting. He had found a way to summon a second wind out of habit, but he was glad *he* wasn’t required to run the course.

Joe watched the boys crawl under barbed wire, climb up ropes and over walls, run through tires and



snake through conduit. And none of it made any sense anymore. *We're doing this for nothing*, he thought in disgust that sat in the back of his throat and made every swallow a bitter one.

Out of the corner of his eyes he saw a familiar shape. *Luke*.

He stood at the corner of the obstacle course, and all evidence showed that he had only recently awakened; he yawned frequently and had the rumped, disgruntled look he generally had until lunch. *Father must have given him time to sleep*, Joe mused. *He never sleeps when Father is awake*. He found it disturbing, though, that Luke was here watching the Junior Guard. *He letting me know that he's watching me?*

The more he considered this, the more it made sense. Joe caught him making furtive glances in his direction, which Luke quickly diverted when their eyes made accidental contact. Then Joe saw him nod towards one of the guards in the tower. The guard returned the nod, then began scrutinizing the area where Joe was.

*He's having them keep an eye on me, too*, Joe realized.

Dismaying, but not, after all, surprising. Unless—

For a paranoid moment the boy considered the possibility that his *father* could be reading his mind. After all, the “gift” had to come from somewhere! What if his -father had known, all this time—

He mentally ran through everything that had happened so far, and his panic subsided. *They were only reading the signs*, he finally decided. *There was nothing supernatural about it. My father is still a fake*.

Still, it was unnerving to be watched so blatantly. He had hoped to be able to sneak away and get more food to Jamie, but as he stood there, watching the watchers, the flaws in that half-formed plan became evident. For one thing, it would not solve the overall problem. Jamie was a tool, one his father was going to use until it broke; and the boy seemed well on his way to breaking. He might be able to get him some more food today, but what about the next day, next week? How long before every opportunity, every chance was cut off? Not long, with Luke in charge.

And that didn't solve the real problem, because meanwhile his father was using him to talk with that godawful thing, *whatever* it was.

That wasn't the last of his problems, either. The drug dealing had also begun tugging at his attention, and he found that he could no longer look the other way and still have anything like a conscience. He taught the Junior Guard that drugs were poison—and meanwhile, his father sold the stuff to kids no older than these.

But with all of these eyes following him now, there wasn't much he could do about the drug ring, or Jamie.

As a child, he had toyed with the idea of running away. That had been when his father first began taking notice of his son, attempting to mold him into a little miniature version of himself. He resisted, at first—after all, so much of what the public schoolteachers taught him ran against everything his father preached—but obeying his father was just too much a part of him to resist. Finally he accepted his father's word completely, and whatever urge he'd had to run away seemed like the most treasonous insanity.

That had been many years ago, when he was a child of fourteen or fifteen. *When I didn't know any better.* But now he was an adult, responsible for his own actions. He couldn't hide behind "my father said" and "my father told me to" any longer. And there was another person involved, a kid, an innocent; someone who was going to die, perhaps even the same way Sarah died. That, he knew after last night, was something he could never live with.

If he could not summon the strength or the means to help Jamie from within the camp, he would have to go outside for the help. He knew enough about the outside world to realize that, once he had gone to the government, there would be no turning back. With the drugs involved, he suspected they would be all too willing to help rescue the boy in trade for busting the drug ring.

Maybe he could strike a deal.

He blinked, and for a moment his sight blurred. *Too little, too late?* he wondered. *Still, if I don't do something now, there won't be a chance to do anything at all. Luke's ready to get rid of me. It won't be long before he succeeds. And then where will Jamie be?*

Then came another horrible thought. *What will happen to him if I can't get him help? I don't have any real evidence to show anyone—just what I can tell them. That little bit of food I brought him was the first thing he'd eaten in a long time, and if I'm gone no one else will be here to help him.*

Meanwhile, the Junior Guard ran through their paces like perfect little robot soldiers. When the exercise was complete, Joe summoned then dismissed the First Battalion. For a brief but oddly sad moment, he wondered if this really was the last time he would ever lead them in exercises. If he did leave, these boys which he had helped convert into fighting and hating machines would have to come to their own conclusions about the Chosen Ones, their beliefs, Brother Joseph. Perhaps, he hoped, it wasn't too late for them to change. Would the defection of their leader make them think—or make them decide that -Satan had corrupted him and vow that the Evil One would never touch them—closing their minds off forever?

As the battalion filed back towards the bunkers, shouting a cadence his mother would have taken extreme exception to, Luke gestured for him to *come here*. The gesture seemed calculated to annoy him. It was as if Luke was ordering a dog.

Joe knew he was tired and tried to get beyond his own foul mood when he walked up to Luke. *Don't let him get to you,* he told himself. *You're tired, you're hungry, and it'd be easy for him to make you say something stupid. And he knows it. He's trying to get your goat, you know he is.*

But as he came closer, he sensed something different about the man. The sneer was a little more pronounced, smug. Luke stood in a particularly haughty pose, and there was dark laughter in his eyes.

*Something happened,* Joe thought. *He's talked with -Father about last night, must have. Maybe it's too late for me to do anything about Jamie.* He wanted to blame the weakness he felt in his knees just then on his lack of sleep, but it was fear, and he knew it.

"Brother Joseph wants to speak with you right now," Luke said, and it sounded like he was suppressing laughter. With great difficulty. "Boy, kid, you sure have screwed up."

"Where is he?" Joe replied, completely deadpan, as if Luke's words hadn't made any impression on him.

“In his office,” Luke said—a trap, since Joe knew “the office” could have meant any of three separate places.

So he asked the right question instead of charging off by himself. “Which one?” he asked. “The one near the meeting hall, the security booth, or the conservatory?”

“Near the security booth,” Luke said brightly. “He knows everything.”

“No,” Joe corrected, meeting Luke’s eyes directly. “He doesn’t. At least not yet. That can always change. Remember, I was only thirteen at the time. A littleboy .”

This last statement actually seemed to frighten the man, as if it was a blow that had been completely unexpected. Luke blinked once, then stepped backwards. *As if he -forgot all about last night* , Joe thought. *I’ll bet this isn’t as bad as he’s making it out to be.*

It was, however, an effort to keep from shaking. He had been called before Brother Joseph often, as he was a high ranking officer as well as his son, in that order. Each time in the past it had always been an experience with varying degrees of unpleasantness. But today—well, he’d rather have faced a root canal.

*What did Luke say to him?*

Joe realized that Luke was accompanying him. “Did he say to escort me?”

“Why, no,” Luke sneered. “We’re just one big happy family. Got something to hide?”

“No, I don’t. But *you are* a soldier of the Chosen Ones.” He gave Luke a level stare and felt a brief flush of success when the man couldn’t meet his eyes for more than a second. “Seems to me you have duties. I just thought you might have more important things to do, like see to Jamie. Who do you have guarding him now?”

“That’s got nuthin’ to do with you no more,” Luke said. “You’ll see.”

Joe shrugged and walked on, pushing the pace, not looking to see if Luke kept up. Short and stocky, the older man had to walk nearly double-time to keep up with him. They entered the dimness of the complex, accompanied by the familiar *whirr, whirr* of cameras panning across them as they passed. *He’s watching me* , Joe thought, with certainty. *They all are* .

They came to the main security station, the mother of the smaller one Joe had operated the evening before. *Do they know I was there?* he wondered, but he had no time to fabricate an excuse. Or—did he?

They entered a room full of video screens much larger and more numerous than the little ones he’d used at the backup station. Along one wall was a variety of radio equipment, through which senior members of the Guard monitored police, emergency and aircraft transmissions. One officer was listening to a short-wave broadcast from Russia, another monitoring what sounded like an African station. Since neither of these were in English, Joe wondered why they had it piped through. No one in the Chosen Ones spoke a foreign language, or at least admitted to it, for fear of being labeled a spy or a witch.

His father was standing in the middle of the room, arms crossed, eyes narrowed. He appeared to be displeased with everything around him, but then as far as Joe knew, he always looked that way.

“Good afternoon, sir,” Joe said, his voice cracking. The fear he was trying to hide came through anyway. *He likes it when I’m scared*, he reasoned. *That way he knows I’m still under his thumb.*

Brother Joseph did not respond. He seemed to feign an interest in the screens, which displayed nothing particularly unusual; empty hallways, views of the grounds above. One showed the elementary school class, though Joe had no idea why. He cautiously looked for a screen with Jamie and saw none, although some were turned off. The silence continued, and Joe waited patiently for his father to acknowledge his presence.

In his own time, he did. He picked up a computer printout, turned it around, and held it up to Joe.

“This says you were in the auxiliary security station south this morning around two a.m. Care to tell me why, soldier?”

Joe stared at the report that he hadn’t expected for days, and at first could think of absolutely nothing to say. What was I doing in there at two a.m.? You see, Dad, I was just trying to liberate Jamie, see, and take him to the cops and tell them everything. No problem, okay? His eyes blurred momentarily. After that, I was helping put a fire out, he thought, and he seized upon that as an inspiration. His father couldn’t possibly know the exact timing of everything that had happened last night. If he just rearranged events a little—

“First, I had checked the storage area nearby because there were lights on down there, which there shouldn’t have been at that hour. It was Luke and Billybob; they said they were guarding Jamie, so I started to leave, but there was a disturbance, and I smelled fire,” Joe said calmly. “I was near the station. I entered it to examine the security cameras, to see if the detectors had picked up anything or if it was just someone sneaking a smoke. Once I was in there, I saw that there was a fire -somewhere in the quadrant—and even more important, I saw that Jamie had been left unguarded, since Luke and Billybob had gone to neutralize the fire. It seemed to me that the fire might move into his room. In order to preserve our assets I took it upon myself to break him free and move him clear of the area, to somewhere secure and safe, where we could be found easily or get out if the fire started to spread.”

His father stared at him for a long time. His expression then was totally unreadable.

After what seemed like an eternity he cleared his throat. “That’s what Luke here tells me. I just wanted to hear it from you first. Remember next time, that whenever you enter a security station, you must fill out a report describing why you had to enter the station. File it promptly with the watch commander.”

“Yes, sir.” Joe waited for something else to drop, but soon it became evident that nothing would. Other things seemed to be on Brother Joseph’s mind, and Joe glanced over at Luke, who appeared to be disappointed.

“I’ve been thinking about our new security branch,” Brother Joseph finally said. “For some time now we have been lacking in some means to protect our organization from internal threats. I know, our admission standards are quite high, but there’s no way to tell when Satan might infiltrate and sway one of our own. It’s happened before. It will be an internal affairs matter, investigating and prosecuting those who veer from the one true path.”

Joe sighed inwardly. Now that he had escaped the trap Luke had set for him, all he could feel was—tired. *Fine. He brought me all the way into the security booth to tell me that the position he once promised me is going to Luke. Swell. Anything else you’d care to rub into my face while I’m*

*here? It'll save time and trouble to go ahead and get it over with now.*

“And it’s been a tough decision, but I’ve narrowed it down to one.” His eyes softened a bit and looked at Joe with what appeared to be admiration. “Son, how would you like to take the post? I’ve had you in mind all along, but I wanted to be fair to the rest of the officers. Luke here was a close second, but after hearing what you did last night, and the smart snap decisions you made, I’ve decided to make you the next head of Internal Security.”

Joe was speechless. From Luke, who was standing off to his right, he heard gurgling sounds. Then the noises turned to grunts, which further articulated to: “But—But—But—”

Brother Joseph nodded with something approaching sympathy. “I know, Luke, this is a real disappointment. But I know you’ll take this graciously. Like a man! You’re still important. You’re still in charge of that other little project we talked about.”

*Other little project, Joe thought briefly, but he was still too flabbergasted for it to really register. He’s going to make me the head of Internal Security after all Luke must have been telling him. Does this mean he trusts me after all, or is this just another elaborate test? Look at him. He’s handing me the post in front of witnesses, and if this is a trick, Luke doesn’t know about it. Sounds like he’s about to piss his pants!*

“But—” Luke said again, but Joe’s father didn’t seem to hear him.

“Another thing,” Brother Joseph said. “Any idea what caused all that ruckus last night? That little fire wasn’t the only disturbance, as I’m sure you know.”

“No, I don’t. Perhaps it was the work of Satan,” Joe responded automatically, not certain if he believed the words or not. “From what I saw in the security room, it all seemed to happen at once, power failures, cameras going out, pipes breaking, fires—I was concerned with Jamie’s well-being and safety. Maybe—I don’t know, maybe Satan wants to get at him so we can’t channel the Sacred Fire anymore.”

His father gave him a funny look at that. “Perhaps. Perhaps you’re pushing that part of your responsibility a little too far there.” He smiled benignly. “Since you are now a senior officer, let me show you your new quarters.”

Joe had little to say as they walked a long corridor to the adjacent quadrant, then went up one floor to a wide, carpeted hallway that announced, with flamboyance and no subtlety at all, *rank*. At the end of the hallway was a set of flags, one American, the other, a little larger and taller, of the Sacred Heart. Not *the* Flag, that one stayed in the Meeting Hall; this was a copy. Brother Joseph unlocked a huge oak door, one of several along the hallway. Slowly, majestically, it swung open, like the gate to a castle.

Joe realized, on entering, that he hadn’t really known how well the officers of the Guard lived. Now he did, and he was amazed at the luxury and opulence he saw here. Carpeting, track lighting, a computer terminal, presumably one directly linked to the main computer, and a big screen TV stood against one wall. In the corner was a small kitchen, with every modern convenience including a micro-wave. The place looked and smelled newly -remodeled.

Luke was standing in the doorway. “But you promised me this one!” he wailed, but his words apparently went unheard.

“In here you have an added feature that the others don’t,” Brother Joseph said, leading him to the

bathroom. Or that's what he thought it would be; when he turned the lights on, it looked like something out of ancient Rome. "A Jacuzzi, just a bit smaller than my own." And indeed it was, rising out of the middle of the room on a pedestal, surrounded by plants and Roman columns. "But no hanky panky," his father said, winking. "This is for you alone. After a long day of drill, it's good for your muscles. It'll help you keep in shape."

They walked back into the bedroom, where they found a huge antique bed with a canopy. "This was your bed in Atlanta, father," Joe protested, but his objections were a bit feeble. He couldn't deny that he had wanted digs like these all along, but never thought his father would consider him worthy enough. Within a few minutes, all that had changed.

"I will have a few privates in the Guard help you move," Brother Joseph said, watching him with an odd expression on his face. As if even this gave him power over his son.

That *wastoo* much. "No, please, father. Let me get some help from my Junior Guard battalion. . . ."

"You will not do that," Brother Joseph said fiercely. "They are no longer your responsibility. You are an officer now, with full rank of lieutenant."

"Lieutenant?" Joe said, confused. That was jumping rank, something that just didn't happen. "But why?"

"Because you are my son," his father replied. "And you will be treated as such. Provided, of course, you remember where you stand in the organization." He turned to leave the room, then said, as much to Luke as to Joe, "I have the power to appoint and promote whomever I wish. The Chosen Ones belong to me first, and God second. Do not ever forget that. That applies to both of you." He hesitated at the doorway, then said, "There's something else I must show you. Come."

As Brother Joseph led them to yet another surprise, somewhere deep within the bowels of the underground, Joe tried to cope with his world turning upside down. He didn't think much about where they were being led. All his attention was taken up by these latest changes—not only unexpected, but unprecedented.

*What got into him? Shoot. An hour ago I was thinking about running away, but with all this, who could? Head of Internal Security . . .*

Now that he thought about it, he wasn't even qualified for something like that. He was just a foot soldier. It was so unlikely that it roused his suspicions. . . .

But his father had said that it would be an easy post, more figurehead than anything, unless a situation came up that would need his special attention. Maybe it wasn't so unlikely. After all, Brother Joseph *was* going to put Luke in charge, and Luke didn't know shit from -shampoo.

Nevertheless, figurehead or not, this new job meant rank. It meant being promoted over Luke's head. *And the room! It's amazing!* Joe's present room was little more than a cubicle in a dormitory, with a simple bed on an unfinished wooden floor, a table, a lamp and a dresser. A little more than most of the Chosen Ones had, but still pretty basic. *I think I could get used to this. . . .*

But Jamie—

He tried to keep Jamie, and Jamie's danger, in the front of his mind, but with the sudden change in his status, it was becoming more difficult. He had a taste of the things that only the elite enjoyed. For a moment he was dismayed at how easily he had been manipulated—

But it was a short-lived dismay.

*Now I can help Jamie more, if I can sneak behind around my father's back. That makes more sense than running off. It would be different if he hadn't promoted me, but that changes everything.* And the more he thought about it, he knew he couldn't run away. What would he have on the outside? Nothing. He didn't even have a high school -diploma, at least not one this state would consider valid. There were no assurances that anyone would even listen to him out there, and given the Chosen Ones' secur-ity, he knew he wouldn't be able to change his mind once he defected. They would know, immediately, what he had done. In fact, they would probably assign someone to "eliminate" him. They had done it before, killing a former member who knew too much about the organization. And the man they'd killed wasn't even an officer.

*Shoot, they killed Sarah's parents, just 'cause they tried to run off. I wouldn't have a chance.*

He would have to contend with Luke as best he could. It would be easier to evade Luke than the entire army. Besides, with this new and unexpected change in status, he doubted Luke would come near him now.

In fact, Luke wasn't even a real threat—no matter what he'd promised before. In order to rationalize killing him, Luke had depended on proving some questionable, if not treasonous, behavior. Now that Joe was head of Internal Security, that would be more difficult, if not impossible, to do. The game had turned completely around, this time in Joe's favor.

*Why screw everything up by running away?*

As he thought these things over, he had paid little atten-tion to where his father was leading them, or what Luke was doing. Now Joe glanced over at him, walking a few feet behind his father, and saw the characteristic smug grin on the man's face. Whatever was up now, it was going to be nasty enough to revive Luke's spirits -entirely.

*Now what?* Joe thought, but had no time to puzzle over his expression. They had apparently arrived at their destination.

His father turned toward him with a sanctimoniously sober expression. "What you're about to see, Joe, is -going to be hard to take. But just remember, it's God's will. To interfere with God's will is to do the will of Satan. And that *wecannot* have."

Then, from behind a set of double doors, he heard the whimpering of a child in terrible fear.

*Jamie?*

The doors opened, as if by themselves. Then he saw a disheveled, drunken man holding the door open by a -crossbar.

"It's been nearly thirty minutes," the man said, visibly swaying as he struggled to stand up. Joe recognized him as Jamie's father. "Should we let him out now?"

Joe could barely see into the darkness of the room, which he now saw was a large storage facility, one of the newer ones. He smelled the damp odor of the fresh plaster and caulking. He hesitated before stepping inside, knowing that *hereally* wasn't going to like what he saw. If Brother Joseph had warned him—it was going to be bad, real bad.

Behind him, Luke laughed. Brother Joseph stood in the doorway and beckoned all of them to enter.

The room was dark, except for a few Coleman lanterns sitting on the floor, illuminating two regular Guards who stood at attention. Something that appeared to be a huge box was standing in the middle of the large storeroom. But there was a dark object in the box, and when the *whimpering* came from it, he knew who it was.

“Jamie?” Joe asked, but he was more confused than afraid, since he couldn't quite see the boy or what was happening to him. Then his eyes adjusted, and the darkness retreated.

Jamie lay in the box—or at least, Joe figured he was lying in the box, though all he could see was part of the boy's head. Just the mouth and nose. The rest was covered with an enormous helmet. And the kid's body, from the neck down, was buried in some kind of white substance that looked soft.

Held this way, Jamie could breath, but he couldn't hear, see, or feel anything. If they'd blocked his nostrils with nose-plugs, and they might well have, he wouldn't be able to smell anything, either.

A sensory deprivation box—Joe recognized it from a PBS documentary. It was cruder than the one he'd seen; this one used foam or something, rather than gel or warm water. It didn't look cruel—but it was. Grownups had trouble in the sensory deprivation box. How could a little kid cope with it?

Joe immediately went for the box, but the two Guards stood in his way, holding him back with their assault weapons, denying passage.

Joe shook his head violently. This didn't make sense! Why were they doing this to the kid?

“It was God's wish,” Brother Joseph said simply, walking closer, staring down at the suffering child the way anyone else would look at a tree that needed pruning. “I wouldn't worry. God will take care of him, if that is His will.”

“His will?” Joe said stupidly.

“God has asked me to do this in order to make the boy even more malleable to His will. He has been resisting of late. I heard the word of the Lord,” Brother Joseph said, casting his eyes up in false piety. “So I obeyed. ‘The Lord moves in mysterious ways.’ I'm certain the reason will become clearer, but until then I must carry out the order he has given me, and only me.”

Jamie whimpered again; in that helmet, his ears filled with white noise, he wouldn't even be able to hear himself crying. Joe remembered what Jamie's father said. *Thirty minutes? How long do they plan on keeping him in there?*

Joe turned and faced his father. “May I respectfully ask how this could possibly help us? He was already communicating with the . . . Holy Fire,” he said, with an effort. “The latest channeling was the most successful of all. Might this push him over the edge? He is still mortal, Father. Might this overstep the bounds of mortality?” When he finished the sentence, he found he was shaking. His voice, too, betrayed some of his revulsion.



Luke had moved closer to Brother Joseph. Silhouetted in the light of the hallway, the two bore a striking resemblance to an evil Laurel and Hardy. Even though Brother Joseph's face was difficult to see in the dim light, Joe could sense his father's frowning. "I detect a note of protest to this situation, young man. Perhaps you had better rephrase the question."

Joe wiped sweat that had beaded on his forehead. Luke shuffled, coughed, and crossed his arms, as if trying to look important. James, the boy's father, stumbled over to a chair, where a bottle of whiskey was waiting.

"Is this deprivation supposed to help him in any way?" Joe asked carefully. *As if Jamie could take any more abuse, he thought. Starved till he's sick, and now this—*

"Perhaps. If the Lord wants to take him, this would be the time to do it. But I think not." Brother Joseph was looking down again at the child in the box, but his eyes were curiously unfocused. "Soon we will have another channeling, and Jamie is again to be the tool. This is, I suppose, a way to make him more receptive to the Holy Fire."

As his father replied, speaking with vague boredom, Joe realized that he had no intentions of letting Jamie out any time soon. *He's doing this because he enjoys it. He likes the fact that Jamie's scared half to death. God didn't tell him to do it, his own insanity did.*

It was going to happen all over again, the same thing that happened to Sarah, though perhaps in a slightly different form. But the end would be the same. A short struggle, then an unmarked grave in the sandy soil. Joe glanced again at Jamie, although he knew the child couldn't see him.

In his mind, their eyes met.

The boy squirmed, as if fighting the restraints. But the movement was so slight, and lacking in energy, that it was barely noticeable. Then he opened his mouth to speak, and what came out was not a whimper of pain but a whisper.

*"Help me."*

"You'll receive all the help you'll need, little one," Brother Joseph said, with mock gentleness. "Joshua, take him out now. You, son, come with me."

Joe hesitated as he watched the guards moving towards the tank, reaching for the straps on the helmet.

"Come with me now!" Brother Joseph ordered. Joe flinched and followed his father out of the room. "Luke, you stay with them, make sure Jamie is returned to his new room. Remember, you're still in charge of him. Don't let anyone else near him. That includes our new head of Internal Security."

"Yes, sir," Luke said, snapping off a salute with a toothy, mindless grin. "And thank you, sir. I won't let you down."

"I certainly hope not," Brother Joseph said. The statement, uttered without emotion, had an ominous feel to it.

In shock, Joe followed his father out. After Brother Joseph closed the door behind them, he grabbed Joe by the shoulder and spun him around with surprising force.

“Now you listen to me, you little*shit*, and you listen good,” Brother Joseph said, his face only a few inches from his son’s. “I will not tolerate this attitude in any of my men, especially from my son! You are of my flesh and blood and you will obey me or suffer. It is clear to me that you disapprove of my treatment of Jamie. Am I right?”

Weakly, Joe shook his head.

His father slapped him once, hard. Joe’s face snapped back at the impact. “Don’t lie to me! You disapprove and I know it. That’s why Luke is in charge of Jamie. You are now in charge of Internal Affairs, and that relieves you of*any* responsibility to the boy, do you understand me? You will have nothing to do with Jamie. You will not even look at Jamie. You will not be permitted at any channeling, and the only Praise Meeting you will be permitted to attend will be one in which *Jamie is somewhere else!* You made the right decisions last night, when we had the fire, but after that little exhibition of insubordination, I wonder if you really had my best interests in mind. If you are caught trying to communicate or assist Jamie in any way, you will be stripped of all rank and the privileges you now enjoy. There is nothing to discuss. My word is final. If you disobey, contradict or embarrass me in any way as a ranking officer of the Chosen Ones, you will be court-martialed!”

Joe stared at his father, too numb with shock to feel anything.

“*Do you understand me?*” Brother Joseph shouted, spraying spittle in his son’s face.

Joe did not know what to say, what to do, what to think. He felt as if he was frozen in a block of ice; he felt as if he was teetering on the brink of disaster, as if merely breathing would violate some unspoken law. Any answer could easily annoy his father further, so he said nothing. Then, slowly, he reached up and wiped the spit from his cheek.

His father seemed willing to wait forever for an answer. Several long moments passed before Joe summoned the courage to respond.

“Yes, I understand, sir,” he said simply.

A faint, sardonic smile creased Brother Joseph’s face. He seemed, at last, satisfied. “Good. Then you are dismissed.”

Joe turned to leave, and had gone a few steps when his father said, just loud enough to make him jump a little, “Remember, son, you are now in a high profile position. And you represent me, both as my officer and as my son. I keep tabs on all of my officers, in particular the ones recently promoted. This is common knowledge. You will be watched. *Closely*. Do not embarrass me!”

*Cindy*, Al decided, as Andur crept into his usual spot near the Chosen Ones’ hideout, *is beginning to suspect something*.

It had been an uneventful day; for much of it, Cindy had seemed content to watch him, as if by watching she could comprehend him. Coping with the revelation that elves were real, Al had learned from past experience, could take some time. She had spent some time at the pay-phones, calling different law enforcement agencies, using a tattered calling card that looked ready to disintegrate at any moment. Nothing had turned up, and she had returned to the Winnie in a depressed and subdued state, where she

scrubbed the countertops again, obviously trying to keep herself occupied. It was all he could do to keep from telling her of his own progress.

*It would complicate things, he decided. As much as I want to ease her mind and tell her what I'm up to, to do so would probably attract attention I just don't want now. This situation is more volatile than anything I've handled before. The last thing I want is for the Salamander to notice us!* He felt a twinge of hurt pride; the Salamander couldn't know such things, could it? He was just flinching from an imagined attack, scared. No way for an elven noble to act. Right?

She was getting wise to him. Earlier today was proof of that. He'd thought he was going to be able to get away from the racetrack in his elvensteed without her seeing. Around the track Andur continued to be a Miata, although there was a chance that by now Cindy had guessed the truth about the beast. After all, there were several hundred other people here at any given time, and there was no point in breaking his cover now just because *one* of them knew what he was! But as he was trying to pull out of the parking lot, Cindy stood in his path, keeping him from leaving.

"You're not going anywhere until you tell me where you're going, buster," she announced sternly, though Al detected a hint of nervousness. "Do you have a harem of elf women somewhere to tickle your ears?"

Al sighed and Andur's motor idled down. "Don't I wish," he replied, trying to keep the mood light.

She continued to block his path.

"You know, you are making quite a scene here," he said conversationally. "People are going to notice."

"Let them notice," Cindy said, coming alongside the Miata and sitting presumptuously on the driver's door, looking down at Al. "They'll just think this is a lover's quarrel. The word all over the track is that we've been seen shacking up in that so-called 'Winnie.'"

"Well, you've got me there," Al said uncertainly, unable to ignore the burning he felt in the tips of his ears.

"I do believe you're getting embarrassed," Cindy noted with a hint of morose humor. "So. These little trips you've been making at night have really piqued my interest. You want to tell me where you're going, or should *I really* start making a scene?"

"Ah, no, don't do that," he said. He looked into her determined face and felt something inside him surrender. "All right. You win."

Cindy smiled in victory, her eyebrows raised in question marks.

"I'm meeting with other elves," he lied smoothly. "It's like I'm going deep, deep, *deep* undercover, meeting other agents, you see? We're following leads. Nothing on Jamie yet. Nothing solid."

"Hmm," she said. She didn't sound convinced. "Why don't they meet you here?"

"Are you kidding?" he replied, slapping his forehead for effect. "With all this metal? You forget what an anomaly I am. Most elves shy away from human settlements, even ones like this that are easy to blend into. There's too much iron and steel around here. Their magic doesn't work. We've got to meet secretly in the woods and have conferences in the shadows of tall oaks." He folded his arms resolutely and glanced stubbornly away. "It's an elf thing."

“I see,” she said, but it wasn’t really clear that she did. Or that she really believed him. She stood, her expression still suspicious, that tiny touch of humor quite gone. “I don’t suppose I’m going to get more out of you than that,” she said. “It’s better than nothing. You let me know when you find out where Jamie is, okay?”

“I will,” Al said, with more confidence. *I’m not lying. I don’t know where he is . . . exactly.*

He drove off, but he was aware of her eyes following him until he was out of sight. And he wasn’t at all comfortable.

*Her determination is disturbing. She’s getting desperate, as any mother would. She suspects I’m being less than honest with her—*

*Well, she’s right. I’m hiding things from her. She doesn’t trust me. Not that I blame her. Not only am I a stranger, I’m a strange stranger.*

Though it was not quite dark yet, he left Andur in his hiding place and started through the woods towards the Chosen Ones. *A thing as evil as the Salamander will be weakest at twilight, when the world of light crosses the world of darkness, and all creatures of the Earth are somewhat befuddled. At least, that’s the theory. This Salamander could be one of twilight, in which case my elven behind is nailed but good.*

There weren’t many guards this time of night, Al noted with interest as he assumed his position in the boughs of a great oak. His agenda included studying the layout again, analyzing the damage he created the last time he was there, and fishing for clues to Jamie’s precise whereabouts.

*All this, and without the Salamander seeing me. Tricky stuff. Perhaps if I had to I could disguise my magics as something other than what they are.* He remembered the girl-spirit he had seen before, during the Praise Meeting. *The child certainly was busy. If she hadn’t been distracted during that out-of-body choreography she might have seen me. Let’s see. Is there a meeting tonight?*

He probed the surfaces of the Chosen Ones’ buildings, finding a strange absence of activity. *Not much going on. No meeting, that’s for certain. The hall they met in is deserted.* He probed further, finding a few guards posted here and there through the complex. He wondered if the entire lot had just vanished, when he traced one of the power lines to the huge dining room where nearly all of the Chosen Ones had congregated. A swift scan of the people failed to turn up Jamie. But then, he remembered, the boy was being kept elsewhere, probably in isolation.

Al pulled back and thought this over. *They seem to have only a skeleton force of security during mealtime, which appears to be around dusk. If we were to go in and get the boy, a time like now would be perfect.* He froze as a guard strolled beneath the tree, and Alinor cursed himself for not throwing up another spell to help conceal him. As soon as the soldier passed, Al replaced the earlier night’s spell of unnoticeability.

He reached into the complex again, this time probing a bit deeper into the complex of tunnels and rooms, a little surprised to find areas he had missed previously. *This place is enormous,* he thought. *It could hold twice as many as it does now, and with room to spare.*

Al sent his mind following electrical lines down one of the heavily modified areas and suddenly touched a sensitive mind. Now he had eyes and ears! He firmed his contact, and his elven blood chilled when he

discovered that the person was one of two walking with Brother -Joseph towards one of the huge storage rooms. The other man besides Joseph was overweight and radiated a strong sense of low intelligence, but the one whose mind he had touched was much younger and brighter.

And the younger one was very receptive to his probe. Enough so that Al could ride along in his mind, an unseen, unguessed passenger, eavesdropping on everything.

As he listened to the conversation, he caught the younger one's identity with a shock of surprise.

*That's Brother Joseph's son. And he doesn't seem too comfortable here.*

They paused before a reinforced door—and when the doors opened up, he could hardly believe what was inside.

If it had been hard for him to keep from flying to Jamie's rescue before, it was doubly hard now. His blood heated with rage, and he bit at the tree limb he clutched like one of the old berserkers, to keep from flinging himself down and taking them all on in single-handed combat. He fought a silent battle with himself just to keep his arms and -armor from manifesting, a battle that he came within a hair of losing.

Through Joe's eyes he saw the boy buried in a sensory deprivation tank, a torture so barbaric he could hardly believe the truth of his own senses.

He had to do something. *Now* .

His heart ached as he left Joe's mind and probed the boy's mind for injuries. It was not as bad as he had feared. The child was incredibly resilient; he had suffered no ill-effects from the hallucinations he experienced. Oddly enough, it was the dull gnawing of unrelenting starvation that had helped keep him sane. It was the one constant that the boy could cling to that he knew was real. There was some bruising from beatings—but not as much as he'd feared. Evidently Brother Joseph had come to the conclusion early on that physical punishment would get him nowhere with this child.

*I can send a healing to him, Al thought, grimly. It won't do much for the starvation, but it will help with his other problems.*

The elf reached into the life-web all around him, summoning the power needed to reach the child and heal him, when he became aware of something. Something that flickered like a black fire, stirring from its sleep. At first it was only at the periphery of his powers, emerging from the darkness of its slumber, and he couldn't quite identify it. But then, as it became fully awake, he had no doubt as to what it was.

*If I send a healing to the boy, it will light me up like a fireworks display to the Salamander's Sight!* he thought in dismay. *Even now, with this simple contact, it might see me. If it attacks me now—*

He withdrew quickly, before the Salamander could sense him—he hoped. If he attracted its attention he could easily become history, of no help to the boy or his mother. Alinor withdrew entirely into himself, letting no betraying spark of Power leak past his shields. He made himself as dark and invisible as the night that had formed around him.

*Hiding again. You'd better redeem yourself, Alinor, or your long life will be miserable indeed. . . .*

He checked the area—with non-magical senses. A few more guards had taken up positions nearby, but

all had the lethargic auras of men who have recently overeaten. *Something else to note. The next shift isn't very alert. Another time a move to liberate Jamie might be most successful.*

He sent a tendril of energy beyond his shields, just enough to see if the Salamander was there, but not enough to give him away. The evil creature was out there, but wasn't directing any energy his way; it seemed more inter-ested in the suffering child—and, oddly enough, the drunken man who was watching him.

But there was something else moving within the confines of the compound, a bright and energetic something that instantly seized his attention. No, not something—someone. And he had seen her before.

*The girl.*

He turned his attention from the “real” world to the other world: the halfworld. There she was; a glimmer of energy, of spirit, that was quietly, diligently *watching* him. He had no doubts that she had spotted him long before he sensed her, had seen him sitting there in his precarious position in the tree in spite of the “expert” shieldings he had put up.

And she knew when he'd seen her, too.

*:Who are you?:* she asked, impudently. *:A munchkin?:*

Al didn't respond at once. He wanted to be certain that their conversation was a private one. She drew closer, to the edge of his shields, but no closer.

*The nearer you are,* he thought, without actually sending the thought, *the less likely that thing will overhear us.*

As if reading his mind, she dropped a portion of her own shields and stepped inside the safety of his.

*:Stay away from the monster,:* she warned, casting a look in the direction of the Salamander. *:It doesn't see me, and I don't want it to.:*

*:I don't either,:* Al said, and relaxed. *:Hey, you're pretty smart. What's your name?:*

Although she was only a few feet away, she was still a spirit hovering on the edge of the real world, and her image wavered from translucent to almost solid. She still appeared to be leery of him, a healthy caution.

Then again, to operate as a spirit in such close proximity to the Salamander, and to remain undetected, would -require a long habit of caution. *She's been smart and -cautious, or she wouldn't be here talking to me. She would already have been consumed, drained to nothing and sent to drift off until someone pulled her across to the Summerlands.*

“Sarah,” she said. The reply was closer to speech now than the thought-message she had been sending; with such beings, Al knew, this usually meant a bridge of trust had been established. She looked down now, a little sad, perhaps embarrassed. Al was uncertain what her next move would be as her features became fluid, mistlike. She pointed down towards the Chosen Ones buildings. “I used to live down there.”

*She's a ghost, and she knows it,* Al thought, careful to keep his thoughts to himself. *This is the spirit*

*who was helping Jamie through the channeling. I need to get her to work with me if I can manage it.*

“What are you?” she repeated. “You can see me but you’re sitting there in that tree. You’re solid.” Her tone became accusatory. “You’re alive. But not like most people.”

“I’m not,” Al supplied. “Remember hearing about elves when you were a . . . well, do you remember hearing stories about elves?”

She stared at him for a long moment. “Naaaw,” she finally said. “Those were just fairy tales. You can’t be.”

“Yes, I am,” he said, then glanced down at a guard, who was walking beneath the tree. The Chosen One didn’t look up, but his nearness still made Al nervous. Silently, he held a finger to his lips. Why, he wasn’t sure; only he could see, or hear, the ghost.

She looked at him with unmistakable derision. “So which one are you? Sneezzy, Sleepy, Stupid . . .”

Al shook his head. “Those are *dwarves*, not elves. Anyway, those are make-believe. I’m the real thing.” He smiled, feebly. “You can call me Al.”

“Huh. An elf named *Al*? Am I s’posed to believe that? What are you doing sitting in the tree? Are you one of *them*?” she continued in an accusatory tone, indicating the guards below.

“No. No, I’m here for another reason,” he said, trying to conceal an aching heart from the girl. Just a child. And now—

*She said she was from down there. Was she a Chosen One once? She must have been, so how did she die?*

Jamie—had she been his predecessor? She knew about the Salamander—had she learned through first-hand -experience?

How could he possibly ask her that?

“You a spy?” she suddenly said, and Al could sense a sudden surge of interest. “Like James Bond? Like in the movies?”

*Whatever happened to her, the Chosen Ones must be her enemies,* he thought, remembering the bizarre Praise Meeting and the careful way she had shielded Jamie from the worst the Salamander could do to him. *She was aiding Jamie during that channeling. She’s good, too, because the Salamander didn’t move against her. Shall I take a chance with this?*

*Do I have a choice?*

“Kind of. I’m here to spy on the group down there,” he said. “You know, Brother Joseph’s church. Did you say you used to belong down there?”

He would have asked her more, but the wash of terror that spread from her to him stopped him cold. “Brother Joseph?” she quavered. “What do you want with him?”

“He took—stole—the son of a friend away from us. I think he’s doing something with the little boy, but I’m having a hard time finding out anything.” At the unmistakable quickening of interest he felt, he continued. “His mother is here, looking for him. He’s from Atlanta, and he came here with his father, but his father is not a nice man. He kidnaped Jamie away from his mother, and I think he gave Jamie to Brother Joseph.”

“You’re looking for *Jamie*?” she asked, and the question seemed filled with hope. “Jamie’s down there. You saw him, didn’t you?”

“I saw him.” He let his voice harden. “I didn’t like what I saw.” He took a brief moment to break away from the contact with Sarah to seek Jamie out, worming a tiny tendril of awareness through the complex maze. He was gone; at least he was no longer in the deprivation box.

Al returned his attention to Sarah, a little relieved. “I’ve got to figure a way to get him out of there. I’m not like you. Their guns can still hurt me.” He hesitated. Had he said too much? Did she really *know* what she was? But it was too late to take his words back now. “I can’t get through the other things, like fences and doors. But *I can* talk to you, and right now I think we need each other’s help if we’re going to help Jamie.” He paused and tried to sense if she had been hurt or frightened by his words. “You know—you’re not the way you used to be, don’t you?”

She shrugged; a ripple in the mist. “It’s okay, Al. I know I’m a ghost. Sometimes I don’t like it, I want to go on through to the other side, but I feel like I have to help Jamie. Brother Joseph killed me.” She solidified for a moment, and there was a look of implacable hatred on her face that turned it into a terrible parody of a little girl’s. “I’ve got to do what I can to keep him from doing it again. That’s why I’m still here, helping Jamie.”

Then she changed, lightning-like, to an attitude of childlike enthusiasm. “So what do we do now?”

Al considered his options. *From Earthplane to Spirit to . . .*

*Hmm . . . well, the next logical step would be Earthplane again, to someone alive and breathing. Perhaps someone who is disgruntled or unhappy. Someone who can physically help us inside the compound. Maybe even someone who could carry Jamie out of there, when the time is right.*

“I think I have an idea, Sarah. Here’s what I’d like you to do . . .”

*:Jamie?:* he heard Sarah say from somewhere in the darkness. *:Where are you?:*

His eyes had been closed, but when she spoke the words were like light, breaking through the pain.

He had been dreaming about being tied to a big tree and left there for dead, when a big bony vulture in a pale suit walked in with Joe and just stood there, watching him. Joe didn’t do anything to help, and he couldn’t understand why, since he had done everything before to make him safe in this horrible world called the “vacation place.” He trusted Joe in all things; Joe even brought him food when no one else would. But this must have been a dream, because otherwise Joe would have taken him down out of the tree or at least blown away the vulture with his assault rifle.

Jamie felt hot and knew he must be running a temperature. Otherwise he wouldn’t be so sweaty all the time. And he felt *sosick*. He could hardly move, he was so weak. He didn’t know where the restroom



was, and he couldn't get up anyway, so he just went, like a baby. He didn't like it, and he felt a vague discomfort from somewhere deep in the darkness, but he didn't know what else to do about it.

His whole body had felt funny, heavy and light at the same time, while he was hanging there in the tree, but now it felt like everything was going back to normal. When he tried to open his eyes, it took a minute to realize that he had, since the room had no light.

*:Sarah, Jamie thought, his mind forming the words when his mouth and vocal cords could not.: What are they doing to me?:*

*:Take it easy, Sarah said, but the words came uneasily, as if she really didn't believe what she was saying. Jamie didn't like that.: You can go a lot longer like this.:*

*:No, I can't! Jamie protested.: They're never going to let me see my mom again. They all lied to me. Joe's the only one who told me the truth. They're hiding me from her, Joe said, and they won't let her see me even if she knew I was here.: He felt tears burning down the side of his face.: I haven't eaten in I don't know how long. Sometimes the hunger goes away for a while, but it always comes back. Then I have to wet myself and that's something little babies do. What will they do next, put diapers on me?:*

He listened to the silence, knowing somehow that she was still there.

*:I'm hungry so much my arms are getting thin. If they don't give me food soon I'm going to just disappear!:*

*:No, you are not, Sarah said, sounding like a grownup just then.: Hold on. Help is on the way.:*

As hope flared, Jamie summoned the strength to sit up precariously on a bony elbow, and looked into the darkness. At first he thought the light that became brighter just then was Sarah, then he saw they were just dizzy-stars.

*:Help? Who's coming to help? Joe?:*

*:Sort of. There will be others. Just hang on a little longer.:*

*:Sarah? Are you still there?:*

The lights faded, and Sarah's presence faded into the darkness.

*:Where are you?:*

The more Joe thought about it, the more certain he was that the two regular Guard soldiers who were helping him move into his new digs were spies, working directly for his father. They were older than he was by a few years and had been around the Sacred Heart for as long as Joe could remember, and should have been promoted to captain long before now. If there was any resentment in them about Joe's new rank, they didn't show it. They paid the proper respect and subservience in his presence, and what little Joe overheard when they weren't directly under his eye did not betray feelings to the contrary.

They performed the tasks set them without a flaw, like robots, or well-oiled cogs in the machine Joe's

father had built. Before, he would have been proud of his father's accomplishment. But seeing their lack of emotion, their total implied commitment to Joe and his father, made his skin crawl. If he told them to march into the pond, he had no doubt in his mind that they would do just that.

He began to doubt their facade, however, when he caught them glancing in his direction a few times as if they were trying to make certain whether he was watching them. Then, once, he saw them communicating with some sort of obscure hand signals that he didn't recognize. When he saw that, Joe turned cold. *Spies. For father, and Luke too, no doubt. Figures.*

That he was now head of Internal Security and should investigate, or at least question, such behavior, was never a consideration. For the time being, anyway, he just didn't care. After seeing Jamie that afternoon, he'd felt numb all over, incapable then of feeling much of anything.

Within the first half-hour of moving into the new apartment, he noticed two tiny microphones, each about the size of a fly, inserted into the ceiling. He wondered if there were miniature video cameras, which would have been the size of a pencil eraser, somewhere in his new place. -Until he learned otherwise, he would have to assume there were. And act accordingly. In fact, he wouldn't be at all surprised if a view of his new living room was being presented to the main security station on one of the little monitors on the wall. Perhaps he should wave.

*That would only let them know I know, and I don't think I want that yet,* he thought, as he made a point of acting as normally as possible. *It's late afternoon now. Dinner will be served soon. I'll most definitely have to put in an appearance there. Even if I'm not very hungry, after what I saw today.*

*Jamie. Locked in a box like a lab rat. Already a skeleton from starvation.* The haunting memory of the boy's eyes back when he'd tried to get him free—they'd looked at each other for the briefest moment, but that moment was stamped into his memory and wouldn't let him go. It pulled at a place in the middle of his chest, stabbed at his heart with surgical precision. *He trusted me. And now look at what's happened.*

He began to wonder if he had indeed waited too long, that Jamie was doomed even if he acted now to save him. *Sooner or later Father is going to kill him. And why? For what? When Jamie dies, Father is going to lose his precious channeller. It can't have anything to do with reason. My father is simply being sadistic.*

At this, Joe frowned. *Why does that surprise me?* The answer to that was not immediately clear. *Because all along I've been denying the truth. When he raised me, he smothered me with deceit that I'm still peeling away, like the plastic wrap on a choice piece of meat. But I have to face facts. My father is doing this because he enjoys seeing others suffer. He likes knowing he has the power of life and death over people. It makes him feel good and serves his own enormous ego.*

An ego that will never completely be satisfied. . . .

*What a prick.*

He looked around at his new place, reluctantly admiring the wealth that surrounded him, and realized that he had been waiting for years to have a place like this. To himself. The rank of lieutenant was also something he had dreamed of, but he had thought it would be years away, as there were so many more qualified soldiers in front of him. Now both had been handed to him, by his father, on a silver platter. Although the soldiers who had helped him move in gave no hint that they were jealous, he knew they had

to be, on a certain level. *But then, all of Father's wealth has been taken without regard to right or wrong. It's pretty typical for him to hand his son all this stuff, the title, the job, the apartment, without bothering to justify it. He's God's own, right? He doesn't have to justify anything.*

He realized the hour was late and began getting ready for dinner. In the bathroom he regarded the enormous bath with mild curiosity, saw immediately that it was empty. With no obvious means to fill it. Well, it didn't matter.

He stripped and climbed into the shower.

As the hot water washed over his body, he tried to put Jamie out of his mind. But the more he tried, the more solid the memory became. *What did I see in those eyes?* he wondered at the recollection. *He was begging me, but was he accusing me, as well? He might as well have; I'm as guilty as my father.* That he was taking a hot shower in luxury brought on enough guilt; poor Jamie, he knew, was probably lying on a mattress somewhere, too weak to go to the john. *And I can't get food to him. Father made that clear. I'd be drawn, quartered and hung out to dry if I was caught near him. With all the cameras and security in this place, I'll be lucky to be able to use the bathroom without someone watching me.*

At that thought, he glanced up at the ceiling, half--expecting to find a camera staring down at him. *They'd do it, too. Especially Luke. He'd probably have a camera put in here just so he could see me without any clothes.*

Joe put on a clean dress uniform that had just arrived from the laundry and was surprised to find the lieutenant's insignia already attached to it. *Guess Father decided to dispense with the ceremony,* he thought, in a way glad that it had been done this way. The ceremony, at best, would have been awkward. He shrugged and put the uniform on with the new insignia, in spite of the fact he didn't feel he deserved it.

As he donned the uniform, a voice from deep within him reminded him of a poignant fact:

*If you don't do anything to help Jamie, the boy will die.*

He stopped in the middle of combing his short, blond hair in the mirror and looked himself in the eye. He couldn't remember when he had last performed this simple act of self-searching, and he found it difficult, especially when he was wearing the Chosen Ones' uniform. He felt like a monster. The uniform seemed to be alive; he thought he felt it crawling on his body, like some sort of parasite. He didn't belong in it, and he knew it.

*I've got to get out of here, contact the authorities, with or without the evidence. Who knows, maybe there's a missing person's file somewhere with Jamie's name on it. If his mother is looking for him, then there would have to be. But to let anyone know about Jamie, I've got to figure out a way to escape this complex without anyone knowing, at least until I'm well clear. If they come after me, well, I'll just have to spot them before they spot me.*

After making his decision, again, he felt a little bit better about himself. In the shiny new uniform, he walked straight, with his head up, strengthened by the knowledge he would soon be ridding himself of it.

\* \* \*

Dinner was a strange affair. Rather pointedly, Brother Joseph reminded him that he no longer had to eat with the "grunts," that he could now eat in the senior officers' hall which adjoined the central dining hall.

He was still not invited to eat with his father, who dined separately from everyone, but that still suited Joe just fine. *The farther away I am from him, the better. What I'm thinking about here is treason, and my body language will give me away for sure if I don't watch out.*

The senior officers said little after saying grace, just a few bland comments about the quality of the food, which he had to admit was excellent and far superior to what the rest of the Chosen Ones ate. Each of them had been served an individual Cornish game hen, real potatoes au gratin and pasta salad, all delicacies and not at all what he was used to. The meal was served on china, with real silver utensils, and the dining room was furnished plushly, like his own quarters; the contrast between this room and the main dining hall was startling.

He couldn't help noticing as he ate that the atmosphere was definitely strained. No one said much of anything, and Joe had the feeling this was due in part to his presence. The ten officers were men in their forties, and as the meal progressed he felt progressively more and more uneasy. There were five captains, four other lieutenants and General Plunket, Commander of the Guard, who was an old man in his seventies who had actually served in World War II—ancient history to Joe. The general said little as he ate, and became slightly drunk on the carafe of wine as the meal proceeded, which seemed to be typical for dinner, as none of the other men seemed to notice.

“That certainly is a smart outfit you've trained there, sir,” one of the lieutenants said, with a suddenness that made Joe jump. The man, Lieutenant Fisher, had been his teacher in a few bomb-making courses. More Junior Guard training, information which he had promptly forgotten. Right now if Fisher had asked him how to make the simplest black-powder pipe bomb, Joe would have had to admit that he couldn't remember. Joe regarded him cautiously, expecting his politeness to be a veil for something sarcastic, but he saw only sincerity in the man's face.

Fisher cleared his throat and continued. “I think you will make a fine addition to the senior staff.”

“Thank you, sir,” Joe said, almost saluting there at the table. He stopped himself in time. *Looks like I'm gonna have to feel my way around how to treat these guys.* “I'm looking forward to serving as your Internal Security head.”

Fisher nodded in agreement but said nothing.

“Damned Nazis, they had the right idea!” Plunket roared from the head of the table, a response to a murmured question from one of the other men. “Train the youths. They had millions of their young 'uns trained to step in at a moment's notice. Had them running the government, the utilities, the post office. We came in through a town of about twelve thousand and all we found were teen-agers and old people too feeble to walk, and the kids were running everything! Their fathers had already been conscripted, years before. He had the right idea, Hitler did. Kill the Jew pigs, and make sure the next generation understands why it had to be done!”

He pounded the table for emphasis. Silverware and glasses hopped momentarily. Joe wished he were somewhere, anywhere, else.

“Thank you, sir,” he said, because he felt like he had to. “I'm certain the Junior Guard will become true fighting men when they are old enough.”

“Here, here,” one of the captains murmured. General Plunket muttered something else that was unintelligible. The wine appeared to be catching up to him.

Joe wanted to disappear. *I'm starting to like the compliments, he realized. This whole dinner is making me feel proud of them all over again. And I want out!*

One of the officers poured wine, what was left, into Joe's empty glass. "Here, have a drink," he said. Joe accepted without a word, although he didn't like the taste of alcohol, or its effects. *Even Father has a glass now and then. Said it had something to do with making the men feel more comfortable.*

But he had a lot of reasons for not liking what alcohol did to him, and one of them had to do with the walls he had carefully constructed, barriers which he maintained to keep his gift of reading thoughts a secret. *I lose control of it when I drink, he told himself. Then, But just one glass shouldn't hurt.* He took a sip and briefly resisted the urge to spit it out. This was a very dry and bitter wine, which he didn't care for at all. He would have preferred straight shots of Listerine to this.

"What exactly does your new position entail?" Plunket asked, looking as if he was struggling to get the words out clearly. "'Internal Security.' What does that mean?"

At first Joe was a bit alarmed. *Didn't Father brief him on the new office? Plunket is, after all, in charge of the army. And my superior. Damn him!*

But the one gulp of wine had loosened him up some, and the words came tumbling out.

"Brother Joseph says that it's something we've needed for some time," Joe began. "'Internal Security' is exactly what it says. There are threats from within this organization as well as the obvious ones without. There could be spies. There could be infiltrators. Why, even some of our own trusted men could turn out to be FBI agents or even worse, liberals."

He took another sip of the wine, not quite realizing until he set the glass down that a deathly silence had fallen over the table. Gone were conversation and the clink of silverware; everyone had frozen in place. A sickening feeling of somehow screwing up came over him; his right hand, still holding a fork, began to shake. They were all staring at him, silently.

"What I mean is, I don't think anyone in the Guard is suspect. New recruits—"

"I think," General Plunket said, with horrible clarity, "that you have said quite enough, young man. I will take this up with our leader. It would appear that you have been misguided in this endeavor."

Joe nodded, not even having the strength to speak. He felt suddenly lightheaded, partially due to the wine, but mostly to his embarrassment.

*Why did I have to open my mouth? He wanted to scream. I should have known all this crap would have been a secret even from the other officers. God, what a fool I am!*

It was then he realized that he was going to throw up. He felt his gorge rising, and uneasiness somewhere deep in his stomach, so he had time to leave to room before it came up. *Get out of here, he thought. Before I puke my guts out all over this table.*

He stood and politely excused himself. Amid silent stares, which he could feel burning holes in his back, Joe left the officers' dining hall and began searching desperately for a restroom.

Moments later, after retching none too quietly into a toilet, Joe contemplated flushing himself down the sewer as well. *It would make the perfect end to this day, he moaned, catching his breath in the stall. If I*

*were just a little smaller than I feel right now, it would probably work. Good-bye cruel world. Flush.*

In the washbasin he cleaned up some, still a little queasy but feeling better now that the wine was out of his system. He was contemplating a roundabout route back to his new room, so that he wouldn't have to see anybody, when he became aware that he was no longer alone in the -bathroom.

He knew immediately that it wasn't someone or something that had been there when he entered, and couldn't see how anyone could have come in without his hearing them. He turned slowly, expecting to find another adult sneering at him. Instead, he saw a little girl, standing in the corner.

*She must have already been here, he thought, though he couldn't see how. What's she doing in the men's room anyway?*

They regarded each other in silence for several -moments; Joe still felt dizzy from being ill, and it wasn't until his eyes had focused completely that he thought he had seen her somewhere before.

"What are you doing in here?" he asked, trying not to sound harsh. "This is the men's room. Little girls aren't supposed to be in here."

"I'm not a little girl anymore," she said, and vanished.

A light rose from where she stood, a vague, glowing mist of something that came towards him quickly before he could step back. It touched him; it felt like a child's breath brushing across his face. Then it was gone.

Joe was too stunned to react. *What in God's name was that?* he thought.

But a moment later, he decided that what he had just seen was a hallucination, brought about by the bad wine he'd swallowed at dinner. *Time to go to bed. I'm starting to see things.*

As much as he wanted to put the disturbing vision behind him, he couldn't. On his way back to his new room, he couldn't shake the feeling that he had seen that particular girl before. It wasn't until he reached his front door and turned the key that he knew, with the suddenness of a revelation, who the little girl was. And why she vanished as dramatically as she did.

*No, it can't be, he thought, horrified at the prospect of dealing with a ghost. I am seeing things. I must be.*

He opened his door in a daze of confused shock. And there was his father, Brother Joseph, sitting in an easy chair reading one of his son's books. He looked up as Joe entered and smiled a predatory smile.

"I've been waiting for you," he said calmly. "Please, come in. We have a few things to talk about."

## CHAPTER TEN

"Father," Joe said weakly. "I wasn't expecting you."

Brother Joseph shifted in the chair, holding the book carefully between his two bony hands, as if it were something that might contaminate him. Joe stood frozen in the doorway, afraid to leave or enter.

“That much is obvious,” he replied acidly. “Or you would have seen fit to at least conceal this work of the devil. As it is, anyone could have seen this misrepresentation of my ideals. Come. Sit. Let’s talk.”

Joe cautiously closed the door behind him, expecting a serious explosion to happen at any moment. His father had that sedate look about him that he had come to associate with the calm before the storm. He took a few tentative steps into the room, towards his father, then saw which book he was referring to.

For one moment, relief flooded him. “Father, that’s only a novel,” he protested, unable to think of anything else to say. He knew it was a mistake, but he had no idea how serious a mistake it was, until his father’s face darkened with rage.

“*Only a novel?*” he spat. “Only? My own eyes have seen empires fall on the strength of a novel!”

Joe stood silently, trying hard not to fidget. The book in question, *Interview with the Vampire* by Anne Rice, had been a paperback he’d picked up in Atlanta, before they had even relocated the Church in Oklahoma. At the time he hadn’t thought twice about it. Then, later, he realized how unwise it would be to let anyone in the church see it. Vampires meant the occult, the occult meant Satanism, Satanism meant hell and damnation and evil. Even in fiction. Apparently, in the move to his new digs, some of his things had become jostled. At this point, he wasn’t even sure if he’d hidden the book before moving, as insignificant as it seemed to him. It would appear that the two guardsmen who “helped” him move had seen the book and reported it directly to his father.

“Forgive me, Father,” he said, with as much meekness as he could summon. “I intended no insult to the church. It never occurred to me that a book of fiction could be dangerous—that anything in it could be taken seriously. Thank you for correcting me.”

“Very well,” Brother Joseph said, flinging the book into an unoccupied corner of the room. It flapped like a wounded butterfly. *Paperbacks just aren’t aerodynamic.*

The bathroom was beyond his father, and the illuminated doorway framed him with a soft white glow. The lighting in the room itself was subdued, mostly because the furniture hadn’t been arranged yet, and many of the lamps were still unplugged. Joe thought he saw something move in the bathroom, but wasn’t certain. His father continued, oblivious to everything but the opportunity to make a speech, even though his audience consisted of one.

“Vampires are creatures of the occult. Anything occult is the work of the devil. Novels in general foster mischief. Fiction by definition is a lie—something that isn’t real and isn’t true. There is no reason to read a lie. I would suggest you limit your reading to the Chosen Ones’ Reading List.”

“Yes, sir,” Joe said humbly. Even sitting in the chair, Brother Joseph still managed to look down on him.

Brother Joseph gazed on him sternly before continuing. “You must understand, Joe, that as my son you represent me. I can’t have you reading this fictional garbage, this so-called literature. It weakens the mind and poisons the soul. I suggest that you cull out any unauthorized books from your possession, or I will have it done for you.”

Again there was the flicker of movement, this time a little more prolonged, from the bathroom. It was obvious this time that there was something there, that it wasn’t just some aftereffect of the wine. Brother

Joseph looked away, as if pondering some philosophical concept. When Joe felt it was safe to divert his attention to the motion in the room, he glanced over to the side, to the bright doorway.

The corner of the luxurious hot tub was barely visible. Sitting on the edge of the hot tub was the little girl, the same one that had shown up in the men's room moments before. She watched him, calculatedly, with coldly adult eyes. Joe gulped and found himself steadying his weight against a chair.

"Son, are you feeling ill?" Brother Joseph asked, and Joe was surprised at the level of concern in his voice. "You've become very pale. Why don't you have a seat?"

Gratefully, Joe did as was suggested, sitting uncomfortably on a box.

*That can't be who I think it is, Joe thought frantically. What's she doing here? Why is she sitting in my bathroom, watching me? How'd she get there? He felt his world turning cartwheels. That's not a little girl. She couldn't have gotten in here . . . who am I trying to kid, anyway? That's a ghost. That's Sarah!*

The girl opened her mouth to speak, but when her lips moved he heard her voice in his mind.

*:You've got that right, she said.: Very clever, Joe. Now, get rid of your father. We've got a few things to talk about.:*

"Plunket said you were acting a bit odd tonight," Brother Joseph continued, unperturbed. "How was the meal?"

Joe thought he was going to faint, or even get ill again, but he had nothing left to throw up.

*As if reading his mind, Sarah continued.: Emptied your stomach already? Now you have an idea what Jamie feels like. Only by now it's much worse for him.:*

He wanted to scream. He wanted to defend himself, tell her that he was doing everything he could to help Jamie, but there were too many obstacles—one of which was in the room with them.

His stomach writhed. If he were to become ill again, he would have to go past Sarah, this ghost, to get to the toilet. *I'd rather choke on it*, he decided.

His father was staring at him, his lips pursed. The concern had changed to something else—calculation. Joe was one of his pawns—but a valuable one. Worth caring for.

"Perhaps you should lie down," he said. "I have to admit, I did become concerned when our general, Plunket, took me aside in the hallway and said you were acting very strange. And asked me about a few things that he felt needed clarifying. Security matters. Most notably, the role of your new office."

Sarah stood up, tossing her head angrily, her little hands on her hips. It was a stance he remembered, when she was defying his father during those last horrible days. She opened her mouth.

*:Jamie's going to die! she shouted into his mind.*

He couldn't take any more of it. Telling her that it wasn't his fault became the most important thing to him just then. But he had to do it in a way that wouldn't attract his father's attention. *I'll have to reach down and use that . . . gift*, he thought, but the prospect felt as horrifying as facing Luke had last night. *I*



*swore I'd never use the gift again. Not since Luke tried to rape me. Never. . . . Jamie, I'm doing my best for him but—oh Lord, please help me through this.*

Then, incredibly, he watched her take a few steps -toward them, into the room.

*:DON'T COME IN HERE!:*he screamed at her, but the words were silent, sent by his mind alone. One corner of his mouth twitched, that was all his father saw. That, and probably the fact that he went even paler, for he could feel the blood draining from his face.

The power inside him seemed to burst out, like a spotlight, like the sudden bellow of a bullhorn.*:Don't let him see you. You don't know what will happen,:* he continued, closing his eyes and feeling a cold sweat breaking out all over his body.*:Please.:*

She hesitated a moment, as if considering the request. He thought she'd never make up her mind. He hoped she'd take forever. He wished he could die, then and there, and get it over with.

*:Oh, all right,:*she said, petulantly.*:Just get rid of him. I just wanted you to talk to me, after all.:*

He wiped sweat off his forehead, considering his words carefully.*:It might take a while. Don't rush me.:*

“It wasn't my intention to reveal the exact nature of your new position until later,” Brother Joseph continued, ostentatiously ignoring the fact that Joe was staring past his shoulder, into the bathroom. Or maybe he simply interpreted Joe's fixed stare as another symptom of his illness. “Until now it has been a secret, more or less. At least, as far as the senior officers were concerned.”

“Huh?” Joe said, knowing he just missed something important. “I'm sorry, Father, you were right, I'm not feeling well tonight. What was that you said?”

His father fixed him with the same fierce glare that a snake would fasten on a mouse it didn't care to eat—yet. “Son, pay attention to me. I don't care if you're sick. You want to know why I don't care? Because the enemy won't care. They could attack us at any moment and it won't matter if you're sick or not. The Jew Commie pigs would probably be glad if we were all sick. You'll have to learn how to do your duty awake or asleep, sick or healthy, and you might as well start right now. Now listen up. This is official business.”

Joe sat up and tried to look healthy.

“Do I have your attention?” Brother Joseph did not even try to rein in his sarcasm.

He nodded and tried to sit as straight as he stood on the drill field.

His father snorted. “Good. Show some spine, boy. Show that you come of good blood,*my* blood, that you've inher-ited a little stamina!”

“Yes, sir,” he said, faintly. “Stamina, sir.”

His father snorted. “*As*I was saying earlier, your new job as the head of Internal Security was supposed to be cloaked somewhat in secrecy. There are those who think that maybe we don't need an internal office of any kind, that our screening of newcomers is as thorough and efficient as it can be. But it's not enough. You want to know why?”

He blinked and tried to keep his expression attentive and humble. “Why, of course, Father.”

Brother Joseph continued, but Joe got the feeling that he would have done so no matter what Joe’s response had been. “Good. It’s simple. The Evil One works in perverted and mysterious ways. We can’t deceive ourselves into thinking that we’re immune because of our holiness and purity. He can invade and attack us from within, working on the little hidden weaknesses, the tiny sins people think aren’t important enough to confess and do penance for. The Holy Fire keeps this thing away for the most part, but it has told me that the devil is busy at work in our little community. That ruckus a few nights back, the flooding, the electrical problems, none of which were ever explained. That was the devil. That was Satan. And he didn’t need permission from nobody to invade our sacred ground!”

Joe took a deep breath, preparing himself, to the best of his ability, for a long sermon. He glanced up to see Sarah had seated herself on top of the counter, patiently waiting for his father to finish whatever nonsense he was spouting.

His father stood up and began rocking back and forth, as if he *was* giving a sermon. “In retrospect, I believe that I’m glad your meeting with Plunket went as it did. I wanted that element of surprise. And believe you me, he was surprised. He’s a good, experienced man, and I’m glad he’s on our side. But he’s one of these who believe that we are immune to Satan. His faith in my abilities to lead, govern and protect isn’t misguided. I do these things well, as no other can do them. But I know better than to think that I can’t be thwarted. Satan has fouled up my plans more than once. If he gets the chance he’ll do it again.”

“I understand, Father,” Joe said, summoning as much strength as he could, trying to look as attentive as possible. But it wasn’t easy.

*:I’m getting tired of waiting,:* Sarah said.

*:I can’t rush him,:* he replied in alarm.

*:Well, then maybe I can,:* she said, with just enough mischief in her words to further alarm him.

She came into the room, so swiftly he didn’t actually see her move. He froze as she walked past Brother Joseph; his father continued his tirade on the wiles of Satan with a line of reasoning his son wasn’t paying any attention to. Sarah took a seat on a box a few feet away from them, crossed her legs in a ladylike fashion and stared at him.

*:Well,:* she said. *:Are you going to do something, or am I?:*

His father, evidently, didn’t see a thing. Joe did notice a transparency to her appearance now, which hadn’t been obvious when she was in the bathroom. He could see through her, as though she was constructed of an elaborate pattern of faintly colored fog.

*:Surprise. I forgot to tell you,:* Sarah said. *:Right now I’m only visible to you.:*

Joe exhaled a breath he’d been holding in for a while. Meanwhile, his father continued to rant away, as if he was speaking before a full audience. Maybe he was practicing.

His father frowned down at him, playing the judgmental God instead of the vengeful version. “I just wanted you to know that you handled things, well, I’d say average. You’ll have to stand up a little more

to the officers than that. Don't disobey. But be firm. And remember who's really in control of the army." He winked and stood up, looking directly at Sarah. Or, at least, where she was sitting. The little girl stuck her tongue out at him. Joe winced, praying for it all to be over.

His father waited for him to say something, and he couldn't bear to. He held his peace, and Brother Joseph watched him in frustration and puzzlement.

Finally, after several moments of silence, he gave up waiting for a response. "I suppose I'll leave you to picking up this room," he said.

He moved towards the door—then sniffed the air with a puzzled expression.

"Do you smell something?" he asked, with one hand on the knob. "Smells like, oh, electricity in the air?"

Joe smelled it, too. He looked at Sarah, who shrugged.

*:Make something up, she said.*

"Uh, maybe there's a thunderstorm on the way," he supplied, praying his father would just go.

Brother Joseph hesitated at the door. "Perhaps. Maybe I should have someone check out the breakers in this quadrant. It reminds me too much of what happened the other night." He frowned, shaking his head. "There's something else. Like perfume, maybe. Or flowers. Something sweet."

He wrinkled his brow, as if troubled with unvoiced thoughts. His eyes looked odd, as if thinking seemed to be taking greater effort than normal for him this evening. Or as if he almost—but not quite—sensed Sarah's presence, and it bothered him so much he was having trouble concentrating.

*Yeah. Like I'm not?*

Brother Joseph seemed to be growing more and more uncomfortable as well. Finally he said the words his son had been longing for and dreading all at the same time.

"Good night," his father said, and opened the door quickly, shutting it behind him. His exit seemed—rushed. As if something had alarmed him and he was determined not to show it.

Joe waited until he heard his father's footsteps descend the flight of stairs at the end of the great hallway. Even then, he wasn't able to look at the ghost sitting on his left. Now they were alone.

Alone, with a ghost. Or a hallucination? He only wished he could believe that.

*:Okay, Joe, it's time to talk, she said abruptly. Things are going to start shaking up around here real soon. I want your complete attention, as Miss Agatha would say.*

Joe picked up a book at random and looked up at her covertly over the top of it. From the viewpoint of the spy camera, it would look as if he was reading it. Fortunately it was on the approved list.

Much as he dreaded using it, he was going to have to make use of that gift of his to talk to her. If he were caught talking out loud to empty air—well, his father would surely think him possessed. There was no "insanity" among the Chosen Ones after all—it was either "sane and holy" or "possessed by the devil."

*:What kind of things? What do you mean, shaking up?:*

*:That's not important to you. Jamie needs your help. Remember what he looked like last time you saw him?:*

Joe shuddered. He suddenly wished she would just go away. *:You know, I don't need this! I was just fine until you came along. I was going to defect. Squeal to the police. Things my father would have me shot for. And probably will, if he has a chance. I can't help the kid by myself; I have to get outside and tell the police what's going on here. It's the only thing that will keep Jamie alive.:*

Her expression remained hard and firm. *:That's not the attitude I was picking up back there at the dinner table.:* she informed him. *:You were starting to feel a little too comfortable, if you ask me. Proud of your "men"! They look more like boys to me. And you trained them to hate as well as fight.:*

Joe could feel himself withering under her gaze. *:Don't remind me.:* he said. *:I know what I did. But I can't help the way I was raised.:*

She had no mercy on him whatsoever. *:Were you raised to kill innocent people?:*

Like Jamie, did she mean? Or—herself? *:No, but—:*

She glared at him, her eyes full of accusation. *:You stood there and watched him kill me. Don't you remember that? What did I ever do? Was I a Communist? Was I even a Jew? Would it have been right even if I was? How old was I? Ten? You've gotten to live eight more years than I did!:*

He flung the book across the room and huddled inside his arms, away from her angry gaze. *:Shut up!:* he screamed inside, resisting the urge to jump to his feet. *:I know what happened! I know what I did and didn't do! I couldn't help it! You can't possibly know what it's like to have him as a father!:*

The words came tumbling out, like rocks cascading down a hill in an avalanche. Then the words ran out, and he buried his face in his arms, sobbing. That he was talking to a ghost no longer mattered to him, and somewhere in the back of his mind was the suspicion that he had gone certifiably crazy. *:You're right, I was going back on my decision to leave, to help Jamie. But how can you know what it's like? For me or for him?:*

She shifted to a place right above him, where he had to look up to see her. *:How do I know? Do you really want an answer to that?:*

Did he? But her attitude demanded an answer, and irked the hell out of him. Who did she think she was, anyway? Who put her in judgment over him? *:Yes, I do. What are you, a mind reader or something?:*

Joe wasn't sure if it was a frown or a smirk that passed across her childish features; at this warped angle, her misty composition made her expression especially difficult to read. It also became difficult to tell if he was really talking to a child, or a very angry adult.

*:Okay, smarty-pants.:* she said. *:Here's how I know.:*

She drifted across the room before he could make a move to stop her—though he hadn't any idea how he could possibly manage that. Reaching down, she touched him on the forehead.

The room dissolved rapidly around him, burning away in an instant, and all that was left was black space. He felt the space in his mind expand outwards, and he could no longer feel his body. His emotions of grief, confusion and fear all fell from him; broken glass, discarded shards, leaving a neutral vacuum in their place. All was air and non-light; he floated in nothingness. The strangeness of it, of what he understood or couldn't even begin to grasp, triggered the deepest level of fear he had ever experienced. He sensed a loss of bladder control, but his bladder and the plumbing connected to it was nowhere to be seen or felt. He wanted to scream, but couldn't.

*Where am I? Where's my body?* The thought formed from the purest distillation of fear. *What did she do to me?*

Sarah was invisible in the blackness, but suddenly Joe knew she was nearby, watching, orchestrating this strange dance in the spirit world. Then gradually, the pinpoints of pain from a tormented soul entered his senses, and he felt himself unfolding into a tiny, frail body. A body that wasn't his own.

The pain increased, gnawing at his belly, as if there was a monster trying to eat its way out of his stomach. He was aware of another being, reminding him the body he was in touch with was not his own but belonging to -another. Like a parasite, he saw and felt the torment, but at a distance.

His arms were encased in something soft that held them completely, he felt, as two eyes struggled to open. It felt like a nightmare, but he knew it wasn't. The eyes that weren't tried to see and saw only darkness. Finally, another kind of eye opened and looked *through* his head, seeing people who were standing above him; a man he recognized as Jim Chase, Luke, Brother Joseph, and . . .

. . . himself.

*Help me out of here,* Jamie was trying to say. *My tummy is hurting. I can't see and I can't hear.* But he just didn't have the strength. The Joe standing above him seemed so capable, so strong, yet so helpless. His objections meant nothing to the ones around him, the ones really in charge. The thoughts blazed through Joe-from-beyond and burned away all pretenses.

Joe watched himself protest—feebly, it seemed from down here—to his father. He could have easily over-powered all of them right then, and he knew it; from Jamie's perspective, it seemed the only thing to do. Consequences didn't seem to matter in this state of starvation and agony; that he was conscious at all was a small miracle.

*:No!:* Joe screamed, from somewhere beyond himself he couldn't locate just then. *:Sarah, no more of this! Please!:*

*:You had to see what Jamie was feeling,:* she said without a hint of emotion. *:You had to, for you to understand. You do understand now, don't you? Or do I need to show you what I went through?:*

Joe considered this, wondered briefly what it would be like to be the victim of a strangling. And for a moment, he could actually contemplate the idea in a strangely detached mood, temporarily barren of fear.

But that moment passed.

He felt the tightness around his neck, of his own father's hands crushing his windpipe, of the futile gasps after air, the struggle to get free—felt his lungs burning for air they would never have—his throat collapsing—his eyes bulging—

He wanted to scream and couldn't. She released him before the moment of her death.

He floated in the blackness, numb with overload. *Too much, too much,* he heard himself thinking. *I can't go through any more with her. Sarah, let me out of this place!*

The silence was maddening. Had she forgotten him? Had she abandoned him to this?

Then—*When you leave the church,* she said, *go to Pawnee and talk to a county sheriff named Frank Casey. He'll help you. And tell him about Jamie!*

Then Sarah was silent. He sensed that she was gone now, leaving him alone in this place that he could only describe as hell. He was all alone with what his father had done to him, his righteous father who was so convinced that he was right all the time.

He felt Sarah's absence now, though he wasn't certain how he had felt her presence.

He lost it, then, control, sanity, everything—he thrashed wildly against nothing until he was exhausted and consciousness slipped away from him.

*Jamie can't hold on much longer,* was his last, exhausted thought, *I don't have much time*— Then he slipped into oblivion.

When Joe woke he was laying on his back in the middle of his new living room, spread-eagled like a sacrifice. He sat up suddenly, expecting to see Sarah sitting there, wearing that sly, adult look she had used to wither him.

Sarah was nowhere to be seen. He was completely alone in the new place, and this felt more unsettling than sitting with the ghost.

When he struggled to his feet, the memory of Jamie and his experience in the tank came rushing into him like the wind of a hurricane. The sudden movement, and the recollection, instantly unsettled his stomach, and he had to dash to the toilet, where he heaved into the porcelain god until his stomach and lungs ached.

"Please help me through this," he whispered to no one in particular, as the porcelain cooled his forehead. "Help get me out of this place."

He stripped and got into an icy shower, which helped his queasy stomach. It wasn't until he reached for the soap, dropped it, and had trouble retrieving it, that he realized he was shaking.

*I've got to get out of here tonight,* he thought, the certainty of it now so absolute that it felt branded on his mind.

*Question is, how?*

Several plans came to mind, most of which he rejected because they would probably result in several pounds of lead perforating his flesh. He considered just walking out, flashing his new rank if anyone gave him any hassles. But—no, not a good idea. That would be reported right away, and someone would

come after him, and he would have nowhere to hide except the forest—that was a dubious haven at best. No, he needed a way out of the place that would not be visible to anyone, or to cameras.

*This place is designed to keep people out, not in, he thought frantically. There has to be a way .*

He toweled himself dry and then thought of one idea that might delay things. He went out into the room and turned off all the lights, as if he was going to bed. Hopefully the tears—and the collapse—would be put down to his sickness. He went to his bureau drawers in the dark, felt for certain textures, then began putting clothes on—street clothes, not the new uniform or the undress “uniforms” of camo-clothing. The jeans were worn, a little too tight, and had holes in the knees, but were clean, as were the plain white t-shirt and old battered combat boots he pulled on. He packed a few essential items, things he couldn’t leave without. The small backpack was easily overlooked; if he walked out with a suitcase, however stealthily, he knew he would be asking for trouble.

While he packed, he put together a plan to get out. The trash collector came around three a.m. every morning and emptied three dumpsters the Chosen Ones had leased from the refuse company. The dumpsters were inside the perimeter of the complex, but beyond the buildings, so he wouldn’t have to attempt an escape -either through the gate or over the fence, both of which were risky propositions. The trucks were rear-loaders, if memory served him correctly. Perhaps he could sneak onto the truck somehow, in that rear compartment, as it pulled away. It was the only way out he could think of that stood a chance of -working.

The hour was already late, and the hallway lighting was subdued. No one was in sight as he silently closed the door behind him and made his way down the grand flight of stairs. Instead of going down the well-traveled corridor, which was monitored by cameras, he turned right and entered a maintenance hallway. There were few of these tunnels, because of the expense of blasting the rock, but this section had been dug out of the red Oklahoma dirt. Maintenance tunnels, though they varied in size, all interconnected. And one of them surfaced near the road which would take him to the dumpsters.

The exit was located at the top of a ladder set into the wall. The door opened up, like a storm shelter. He opened it a crack and peeked through the slit, studying the night. A thunderstorm was brewing on the horizon, licking the clouds with snake-tongues of light, giving the air a wet smell.

*There should be a guard down—yeah. There he is. If I’m careful, he won’t see me. And there are the dumpsters.*

The large cubes of metal were very nearby, at the edge of a gravel parking lot, which had a few trucks and earth-moving equipment. When he could see the guard looking the other way, he scurried out of his hole, carefully letting the door close behind him, and sprinted for a large dump truck.

Joe concealed himself in the wheel well of the huge beast and began a long wait.

As the minutes ticked by, he considered his decision and knew it to be a good one. But he was scared, and knew it. He was leaving behind everything he had known for a complete unknown. *They might not even believe me, he thought. But what choice do I have? I’ve gotta go through with this. If Jamie dies, and I don’t do anything to help him, I’m just as guilty as my father.*

He wasn’t sure if he had dozed off or not. All he knew was that he snapped to attention, his senses sharpened with fear, at the sound of the garbage truck trundling up the way. As it backed up to one of the units, he was dizzily relieved to see only one man working it tonight. It would make it all the easier to hop into the back undetected.

Once the last of the three dumpsters was empty, the refuse man put the truck in gear and began the slow drive to the gate. Joe wondered, fleetingly, if the truck would be searched going out. But this caused only the slightest hesitation; he was already running for the retreating truck, the tag-light giving him a reference.

Like a cat, he hopped into the foul-smelling cavity where the day's garbage had been deposited and pushed into the deeper recess of the truck. He lay down, pulling stray refuse over him for cover. And prayed.

What began as a simple test drive of Cindy's battered Toyota Celica turned into an expedition into Cleveland for supplies.

Cindy commented to Bob after Al left—over microwaved dinners—that her '82 car had been running a little rough, and before she could bat an eye Bob had grabbed a toolbox and had the hood open.

“Eyah, I see the problem here,” he commented in the waning daylight, pointing to a thingie that looked obviously loose. “Mind if I have a look to see if anything else is wrong?”

Of course, she didn't mind at all. In fact, she was a bit taken by his offer, which made her blush. One of her fears in buying the car was that she would get all the way out here in God's country and the thing would quit running. When she drove it into Hallet, what seemed like an eternity ago, it sounded ready to do just that. With her limited money, she had little to spare for a mechanic. This offer, like all the help Al and Bob had extended, was a blessing she could ill afford to turn down. Besides, there had been something about Bob's demeanor, which was often cold and icy, that suggested he was thawing a bit.

*Was there a hint of, well, softness in his voice?* she had wondered, but if there was it was so subtle as to be questionable. Bob was twenty, but a mature twenty, so his age wouldn't necessarily eliminate the possibility of involvement.

*But . . . Bob?*

It was a concept that almost made her laugh. *It would feel like incest*, she thought. He had seemed like a younger brother in many ways—

Until tonight. Now he was out working on the car. She hated to admit it, but he was reminding her of Jim, -before he'd gone bonkers. She couldn't leave him out there on his own—it didn't seem fair. She joined him, holding the light, passing him tools, bringing him rags or something to drink. There was a bond forming between them tonight, reminding her even more of Jim, especially when he started explaining what he was doing.

But it wasn't painful. It was a reminder of the old Jim—a man who might have done something kind, considerate—who would have done something like fix the car of a lady whose resources were wearing thin.

As she watched him, she became aware of a curious current running between them—and her thoughts turned serious. *Would Jamie like this man?* The answer to that was yes, she decided without a moment's hesitation.

When Al returned from his mysterious journey and she turned in that night, Bob was still clanking away



under the hood, with a determined, almost robotic tenacity. He looked like an exotic, half-human plant that had sprouted from the car's motor.

"How long does he plan to stay up doing that?" Cindy asked, before retreating to the van.

Al had sighed in response. "As long as it takes," was all he said, and shrugged.

The next morning Bob suggested she take a drive. "Be careful," he warned. "It has a bit more power now than it did."

Then he smiled shyly, handed her the keys as if he was handing her a rose, and ambled off towards the racetrack without saying another word.

Al suggested they go into Cleveland and pick up some odds and ends they all needed. Groceries, toiletries, and the like. Cindy offered to contribute, but Al would have none of that. "Save your money," he ordered as they got into her car. "We've got plenty. Fairgrove's paying for this."

As they drove to Cleveland—strange to see a sign for Cleveland, *Oklahoma*—she couldn't help but notice the new power the car had. She had to consciously drive slower than what she was used to, as the Celica seemed to have a life of its own now.

"Migod—this car cango ," she commented to Al, who just nodded. "You didn't do anything with your . . . abilities, did you?"

"Oh, no," Al said calmly. "This is all Bob's doing. No elven magic here. Not this time. Just good old mechanical ability. Bob's a natural." He gave her one of those obtuse looks she had trouble reading. "He's not very good with words, but when he likes someone, he tends to do things for them. He'll appreciate it a lot if you tell him how impressed you are with his work."

*A natural—something Jamie would admire,* she found herself thinking, uncertain why.

But the mention of his elven origins brought back the fears she was trying desperately to deal with, or to at least bury. *Just give it time—sooner or later you'll get used to the whole thing, like being around someone from another country who might seem a little weird at first. Like that guy I met from Iraq, that James used to work with. He didn't change. I guess I did.*

She cast a wary glance at Al, and at the vague outline of the pointed ears in his long, blond hair. *Somehow, with this one, I don't think it will be the same as getting used to an Iraqi. They're human. Al isn't. Though he comes close.*

Remembering the view she had of his sculptured body made her shudder. *Real close.* Somehow, by contrast, Bob seemed more attractive, not less. Al's perfection wastoo much. A reminder of how inhuman he was. Bob on the other hand, wasvery human. Very . . . attractive. . . .

They stopped at the Quic Pic for a badly needed tank of unleaded and proceeded into Cleveland, dropping well below the speed limit in the busy afternoon traffic. "You know, Al, it occurred to me that maybe some of these people have seen Jamie. While we're here, I'd like to show the picture to a few people."

"Sure," Al said pleasantly, but it sounded to Cindy as if he thought the effort would be wasted. *As if he knew exactly where he is, but isn't telling me,* she thought suspiciously. He shifted in his seat when she

thought that, raising another uncomfortable question.

*Does he know what I'm thinking?*

If Al was reading her thoughts, he gave no indication of it. He was gazing absently out the passenger window, apparently with a few thoughts of his own occupying his time.

“Any suggestions on where to stop?” she asked, seeing nothing on the main street that looked even remotely like a supermarket.

“Keep going all the way through Broadway. There'll be a large store on the right, I think.” For a moment he lost some of that smug self-assurance, became a little less perfect. “Bob always came along on these trips. He always seemed to know where all the stores were, and what to get.”

Cindy suppressed a snicker. *If it weren't for Bob, Al, you wouldn't know how to tie your shoes.* This was a thought she hoped he could pick up.

“I hope you have a list,” she said, and Al held up a scrap of paper.

Presently they found the Super H discount market on the other side of the business district, as predicted. As they entered the supermarket, Cindy noted that Al blended right in with the crowd. His clothing and demeanor, which was that of a simple mechanic, made him virtually transparent. But as she observed him, there was more than that; she caught a faint glimmer of something surrounding him, something that nobody else noticed. In fact, nobody seemed to notice him at all. Natives walking toward them in the aisles didn't even look up, but smiled warmly at Cindy when she passed. Instead of walking straight into him, however, people walked around him. His movements were fluid, and without any apparent effort he wove through the crowded market, unnoticed. And, she was beginning to speculate, unseen. She'd have to ask him about that later.

Soon the cart was full, stocked with everything from motor oil to Gatorade. Al seemed to know where everything was in this store, so Cindy was content to let him lead the way. Occasionally she dawdled over this or that item, as Al patiently waited for her to come along. In the check-out line she saw a tabloid newsrag with the headlines proudly proclaiming “Phantom Elves Invade White House; Bush Scared.” This apparently caught Al's attention, and he winked at her as he dropped a copy into the cart. Cindy rolled her eyes in response.

As they were wheeling the bagged groceries into the parking lot, Cindy looked up to the street, where a line of five cars and trucks were waiting for a Volvo to turn. Something about the sight disturbed her, but nothing -really registered as she pulled the cart up next to the car and began handing Al bags.

After the third bag, though, she looked up again. There was the pickup truck, the same one she remembered.

The truck. Their truck.

*Jim.*

Sure enough, a haggard James Chase was at the wheel. She couldn't quite see his expression at that distance, but his posture suggested exhaustion. Or a hangover?

“Cindy?” she was vaguely aware of Al saying. “What are you looking at?”

“It’s him,” she said, but it came out a whisper. “Look. Over there. That’s our truck! That’s Jim!”

Without making any conscious effort, she found her feet moving her in the direction of the truck. *Jamie, where’s Jamie? If he’s in the truck with Jim, I wouldn’t see him unless he sits forward or stands up and looks out the back window like he always does. Please, let him be in that truck!* The Volvo evidently found the gap it was looking for and sped into the parking lot. The truck began edging forward, merging with the traffic.

“No!” she heard someone screaming, not knowing the scream came from herself. “No! Jim, you *getback* here, dammit!”

The truck drove on, with Jim probably unaware of the frantic woman running through the parking lot, trying to catch up with him. “Stop, you sonuvabitch! Where’s Jamie? *Where’s my son?*”

The next thing she remembered was dropping to her knees on a little strip of grass, a block or so away from the supermarket, sobbing loudly. The truck was nowhere in sight. *He didn’t even see me*, she thought, through tears of frustration. *He’s going to pay for this!* Cars slowed, and moved on. Nobody seemed willing to get involved.

“Cindy!” Al said from behind her. “What in the seven hells has gotten into you?”

Al’s anger seemed to dissolve instantly when their eyes met. “Let’s get the car,” she said weakly. “Let’s go after them.” But even as she said the words, she knew it would be futile. The truck was nowhere in sight, and it could have gone in any number of directions.

“After who?” Al asked, helping her. Then realization seemed to dawn on his face. “You mean you saw Jamie?”

“Not Jamie. My husband. He was driving our truck.”

They started walking back to the car. Al’s expression, however, did not suggest that he was convinced. “Are you sure?”

“Hell, yes, I’m sure!” she said, unleashing all of her frustration and anger on him. “I was there when we *bought* the damn thing. I was *married* to him. We could have gone after him! Where were you, anyway? They could be in Kansas by now!”

Al said nothing. The silence weighed heavier with every passing second, until it became uncomfortable. She began to feel ashamed for her response when Al finally said, “Sorry. I was chasing you.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I know. Don’t be sorry. I’m the one who should be apologizing. It’s just that I was so close to confronting that bastard!”

Alinor put the cart into the corral, and they both climbed into the Toyota. He acted like he wanted to say something, then changed his mind.

She prompted him. “What were you about to say?”

Al turned the ignition. She wasn’t aware when they had decided he would drive, but somehow it seemed to be the thing to do just then. Her knees were still shaking.

“That might not be such a good idea at this point,” Al said as they turned onto Broadway. “To let them know we’re in the neighborhood, I mean.”

She was about to ask, when she saw why. *They’ll just disappear again*, she realized. *Then I may never know where they went.*

“At least we know for certain he’s in that crazy place,” she observed. “We do. Don’t we?”

“We should probably leave this to the sheriff,” he -replied, without really answering her. “Let’s put away the groceries and take a trip out to Pawnee. Let Frank know what we saw.”

They drove in silence. Cindy stared out her window, her heart leaping whenever she saw a pickup truck. Then it would turn out to be someone else’s, and she would sink back into herself, doing everything she could to keep from bawling.

*The last thing Al needs is a crying, hysterical woman to deal with*, she thought wretchedly.

But by the time they reached the Cleveland city limits, that’s exactly what Al had.

Comforting crying women wasn’t one of Alinor’s favorite duties, but he seemed to be doing a lot of it lately. And truth to be told, he was beginning to prefer the company of his constructed servants to Cindy. At least they knew how to smile and look pleasant no matter how unpleasant the circumstances. The human seemed to spend most of her time wrapped in gloom or in tears.

Bob was at the RV when they arrived at the track, and when they told him who Cindy had seen in Cleveland, he insisted on going with them to Pawnee to talk to the deputy sheriff, Frank Casey. “Work at the track is done,” he said, not expanding on that, in spite of Al’s questioning gaze. They were putting away groceries in what Al would later realize to be record time. “This sounds more important, anyway. Did you go after him?”

Al gave him an ugly look. “She only saw Jim Chase, not Jamie. Do you really think that would have been a good idea?”

“I see. So Jamie wasn’t with him. No telling what would have happened there.” Bob seemed to shrink away from the discussion. “Do you want me to go with you, or would you rather I stay here?”

“No. You come with us,” Cindy said resolutely, taking Bob’s arm and escorting him out of the RV. “You’ve been cooped up here long enough.”

Al lingered in the RV’s kitchen, a bit perplexed. The action of taking Bob by the arm and leading him out as if he were some kind of date was a little confusing. *Cindy and Bob?* Al thought, trying to imagine the two together, and promptly shook his head against the thought. *No way.* Al laughed at himself as he locked up the RV, trying to figure out why something so ridiculous and improbable would annoy him.

Somehow Al ended up sitting in the back, with Bob and Cindy in the front. He hated sitting in rear seats—they never had enough leg room for him—but he kept his complaints to himself. Few words were exchanged between the two, though Al did observe a sort of silent communion. They seemed content to ride in quiet, without the need to fill the void with meaningless talk.

Frank was in the building somewhere, the receptionist told them when they arrived in the Pawnee County Courthouse. She led them back to his office and told them he would be with them soon.

It was tempting to lean over and study what was on the desk, as intriguing as all the maps and charts were—and how much they excited his curiosity. He would have to content himself to studying the maps at a distance. Not all that difficult, after all. . . .

One of the maps was the same one he had memorized and used to find the Chosen Ones' hideout earlier. The other ones were different, but seemed to represent the same area. He couldn't immediately see what all the lines and diagrams represented, and why they were drawn the way they were. Then he saw it:*he's working up a strategy to raid the Chosen Ones!*

Al held his face expressionless, no mean feat when considering how much this disturbed him.*If they go in it could be a massacre*, he thought.*All those children. It wouldn't be the first time a religious cult had held their people as hostages, and down in those bunkers, they would be in a perfect position to hold out until everyone was dead. It's what they've been training for! All the food and supplies they need are down there.* He frowned as the whole picture, with all its frightening details, clicked into place. It would take no great leap of thinking to turn those people against law enforcement agencies. As it was, they perceived themselves as acting beyond the law anyway. The government of the United States was not truly *their* government. Brother Joseph had the One Answer given to the congregation. What the sheep didn't know was that it was an answer from a hideous monster, through the deteriorating body and soul of a young child. They were beyond the law; they were divine.

*They're looking for an imaginary enemy. First opposition to come along will do.*

"Hi, folks," Frank said amiably as he entered. His great size still caused Al to look twice. The big deputy toted a coffee cup, tiny in his hand, and yet another map, partially unrolled. "Didn't know you were coming or I would have been here sooner. What's up?"

"I saw James, my ex," Cindy blurted. "In Cleveland this afternoon."

Frank scooped up the maps and diagrams lying on his desk. The only purpose Al saw in this was to conceal the documents from them, confirming his suspicions that the law enforcement agencies involved in this would act -secretly and tell them about the results later.

*The question is, when are they going in?*

"Is that so?" Frank said, but he didn't really sound surprised. "We had already concluded that he was with them, but I'm glad we have a sighting. Cleveland, you say?"

"In front of the supermarket. Discount H or something, wasn't it?" she asked, turning to Al.

"That's where we were," Al said, nodding.

She turned away and stared at Frank Casey with accusation in her eyes. "So when are you going to get a search warrant and go in and get him?" Cindy asked. "Don't you have enough evidence now?"

"You saw him in Cleveland, Miss Chase," Frank said, soothingly. "That's a long way from the Sacred Heart property. I doubt I could convince a judge to issue a warrant on the basis of that sighting. Especially this judge. I told you I thought something odd was going on there. To be blunt, the judge

doesn't want to help.”

“Why not?” Cindy cried, losing her hold on her temper and her emotions. She was shaking in her chair now, wiping away tears. Bob touched her arm; Cindy recoiled from him.

“Am I to understand that you're not making any plans to raid that place?” Al asked, unsure if it was a good idea to show this particular card just yet. “I had the impression, from odds and ends lying around in this office, that you have precisely that in mind.”

Frank looked directly at Al, apparently trying to look unruffled and doing a reasonably good job. “Don't know where you got that idea,” Frank said. “Such an operation would require information and evidence that Pawnee County doesn't have.”

Bob's chin firmed, and it was his turn to turn accusing eyes on the deputy. “But what if the State of Oklahoma has evidence? Or the FBI?”

“Nobody said they were involved,” Frank said coolly. “Perhaps you should examine your source of information a bit closer.”

Al raised an equally cool eyebrow. “I didn't want to seem nosy, looking closer at what was on your desk. It was difficult not to notice the maps.”

Frank sighed. He didn't seem the least bit angry, just tired. Tired and restless, as if something big was going down, and he was running low on the energy needed to bring it off.

“Look,” the big man said, leaning forward over his desk. “I'm in a very delicate situation here. Other people have been contacted regarding this cult, individuals we are going to be needing to testify. You are one of these people, Miss Chase. This is a police matter and will be handled by police *only*. I don't want civilians fooling around with this cult. They are lunatics with a cause, and they are all well armed. *All*. I'm not saying that we're going in to get your son, but I am saying that I might not be at liberty to discuss it if we were.”

Cindy sniffled and looked at the floor. This was, obviously, not what she wanted to hear.

“Do you understand what I'm saying?” Frank said softly. “I'm trying to juggle ten different things at once here. Please don't make this any harder for me.”

“Okay,” Cindy said, however reluctantly. “You win. You said other people. What other people? Who are they? Are they parents looking for their children, too? Can I talk to them?”

Frank threw up his arms, his palms outward. “I can't discuss it. Sorry, Miss Chase. Please be more patient. For a little while longer, anyway.” Frank got to his feet, a signal which they all followed. “For a few days longer, at least.”

*A few days, Al thought, alarmed. Whatever's going to happen will happen in a few days. I need more time!*

From the grim determination he saw on the deputy's face, he saw that he wasn't about to get it.

For the second time that week, Frank Casey watched the sad trio leave his office empty-handed. He wished that he could tell them everything, including the plan to bring in the FBI SWAT teams, and get it over with. Every time he had to dance around the facts like this, he felt disturbed and guilty. Particularly when a mother and child were -involved.

But he was under strict orders to keep the operation a secret. Not that the orders were necessary; he understood the wisdom in keeping a lid on any pending raid. When information like that got out in advance, to the public or press, cops died.

A plan as big as this would surely involve casualties. The question was, how many and on whose side.

He wasn't getting enough sleep, and he knew it. It was already noon, and he had spent the entire night on the phone with FBI SWAT leaders, coordinating logistics. Fortunately the bulk of the army they were assembling was going to hole up at a National Guard depot in Tulsa, so as not to alert the Chosen Ones. They would begin moving in under cover of darkness and strike a few hours before dawn, when armies were traditionally the most vulnerable. He hoped the plan would work. But given the apparent luck of the lunatic cult lately, he had his doubts.

*If I'm going to be worth a flip during this thing, I'd better get some rest. It will either happen two or three days from now. If I'm going to sleep, this will be about the last chance I'll have.*

Frank was on his way out the door to take care of exactly that when the phone rang.

"I'm not here," he said to the secretary. "I'm going home."

He was halfway to his squad car when he realized he'd left his keys on his desk. When he went back into the office, the secretary frantically waved at him, the phone pressed to her ear.

Frank groaned. I knew I shouldn't have come back in here. It would have been better to just curl up in the backseat and go to sleep. Better yet, in the trunk. No one could see me there.

"Who is it?" he asked. "I hope it's important."

"I'm not sure," she hissed. "He says he's from that camp of crazies over there at that church. Chosen Ones, I think he said. You wanna talk to him?"

Frank stared at her. His exhaustion was temporarily forgotten as he went into his office.

"Line four," she said, and he picked up the phone.

"Yes?" Frank said. "This is Deputy Casey."

There was a pause, just long enough for Frank to think it was a crank call after all. He was about to hang the receiver up when a young-sounding male said, in a trembling voice, "Are you Frank Casey?"

"That's me," he replied. "What's on your mind?"

The gulp on the other end of the line was audible. "Everything. I'm an officer of the Sacred Heart of the Chosen Ones. I want to leave the group, but I need your protection."

"Is that right?" Frank said conversationally. *Good Christ, this is a kid I'm talking to!* "For what

purpose?”

“My father is crazy,” the unknown said. “He’s going to end up killing someone.”

*Father? Crazy? Who am I talking to?* He broke into a cold sweat, but managed to maintain his casual tone. “Oh? And who is your father?”

“Brother Joseph.”

Frank sat up in the chair, rubbed the sleepiness from eyes. *Did I hear that right?* he thought. *Or is the sleep deprivation making me hallucinate?*

“Are you still there?” the boy asked.

He took a deep breath and rubbed sweaty palms on his pants. “Oh, I’m here. I know who you’re talking about. You said you need protection. Why?”

The boy sounded desperate enough to be authentic. “Because they’ll come after me. They’ll come after me and kill me. I’m not joking.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Frank said, not entirely sure he was believing this conversation. “How do I know this isn’t some sort of a trick?”

It was the other’s turn for a long pause. “Well, I guess you don’t know. You’ll just have to take my word for it.”

“I’m afraid that’s not good enough,” Frank said evenly. “We can get you the protection,” he said, thinking, *Yeah, the jail cell is a pretty safe place. Iron bars. Concrete walls. Reasonable rates.* “What are you willing to give us?”

“Anything you want,” the boy said without hesitation. “I know everything there is about the Chosen Ones.”

“I suppose you would,” Frank said, “if this man is your father.” *If this is true, this boy can tell us what to expect. Layout of the bunkers. Who’s there. Or, it could be a trick. Do I take a chance?*

*What would it cost me? Another few hours of sleep?*

“So tell me,” he continued, “what do I call you?”

“Joe,” he said. “That’s short for Joseph. Junior.”

“Of course it is,” he replied inanely. “What would you like to do about this, Joe? Could you come down to the station—”

“No!” was the immediate reply. Then, “I mean, they’ll be watching for me there. Too risky. I meant it when I said they would try to kill me. They should know by now that I’m gone, and they’ll be looking for me. Do you have any extra bulletproof jackets?”

Frank considered this a moment. “Perhaps. Do you really think that’s necessary?”



There was no hesitation in the answer. “Yes. I do.”

In the silence that followed, Frank decided the boy was serious. *The risk might not be real, but he certainly thinks it is. What I’ve seen of that bunch, though, it wouldn’t surprise me to see them hunt down and kill one of their own. Especially if he’s serious about squealing on the whole rat’s nest.*

He sighed. “Okay, then. I can’t promise a vest because I don’t know who has them checked out. There isn’t -exactly a lot of call for them around here. But I will meet you someplace. You name it.”

A moment’s pause. “There’s a steakhouse out here. Called Granny’s something. You know it?”

“Granny’s Kitchen?” Frank asked. “Out on Highway 64. Would you like me to pick you up?”

A sigh. Of relief? “No. That’s all right. I can see the place from here. Granny’s Kitchen it is.”

Frank did a quick mental calculation. “I’ll be there in ten minutes.”

*With bells on.*

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

In spite of the fact that *he* wasn’t sure about taking the kid’s paranoia seriously, Frank found himself calling in a few tags, some out of state, on vehicles he didn’t immediately recognize. He told himself that he did have to admit he’d seen more strange faces lately. But there were always a certain number of strangers around, especially around race-time down at Hallet. He’d never made any connection with the Chosen Ones—if that was really who they were. What surveillance the PCSO had done indicated this group pretty much stayed on their own land, with only a few of them going out for supplies.

While he’d been trying to dig up information, he’d even questioned the trash collection agency that went out there and turned up nothing. One or two men went in with a single truck at night when the place was dark, passed a guard on the way in and out, and that was it. The guys on the truck never saw anything but a parking lot, the guard and the dumpsters. He’d come to the conclusion a while back that if anything suspicious was going on, it was -either kept out of sight of watchers from the edge of the area and from above, or it was happening down below, in the bunkers.

Every tag he called was clean, but that didn’t do much to calm his jitters. Shoot, now *he* was getting paranoid! Too much coffee, Frank diagnosed. *Too much coffee and not enough sleep. It’s enough to make any man jumpy.*

He pulled in the parking lot of Granny’s Kitchen, a quaint little restaurant he remembered fondly, though he hadn’t been there in some time. *I’ve been with the department now for what, ten years? Where has all the time gone?*

Nothing that he’d ever been through or been trained for had prepared him for what waited for him inside. *What am I walking into here? Trap—or hoax—or the break he’d prayed for?*

The diner was exactly as he remembered it; not a stick of furniture had been moved. The old formica

and vinyl booths still lined the walls, each with their own remote-jukebox selector dating back to 1957. The floor was worn through to the concrete foundation in places; the scent was of home-cooking, with an aftertaste of Lysol. The cash register sat atop a wood and glass case, which enclosed candy and cheap, locally made trinkets.

The place was oddly silent for the time of day. From the kitchen came the sounds of an ancient Hobart dishwasher, the *tinkle-clank* of glasses and coffee cups being placed in racks, plates being stacked, silverware being sorted.

On duty at the open grill, Old George flipped ham-burgers; when he saw Frank he smiled a toothless grin and waved, a greeting that hadn't altered since the deputy was fifteen.

And there was someone else on duty who knew him almost as well as Old George.

"Good God, you look like hell," Peggy said, putting an order pad away in the pocket of an immaculate bleached apron. The waitress looked like she'd walked off the cover of a 1955 issue of *Life*, complete with blond bouffant. Like the diner, she hadn't changed since the fifties.

Frank had dated her briefly in high school, but the romance never advanced past petting, and Peggy had married a real estate agent the same month Frank went into the academy.

*She's the kind of girl who can be your best friend*, Frank had once observed. *Too damn few of them around.*

She frowned at him, hand on one hip. "Don't you -believe in sleep anymore? Or are you too busy catting around at night?"

"Have pity on me, Peggy. It's been one helluva long week," he said awkwardly, glancing around the diner to see who else was there. Two high school girls, one of the locals, named Russ, and a National Guardsman he didn't immediately identify. But no young man. He took a seat at his usual booth. "Coffee, please. For now."

*Maybe the kid's waiting outside*, he thought, hoping this wasn't a wild-goose chase.

"You looking for someone?" Peggy asked, pouring a cup of coffee, and dropping a plastic-covered menu on the formica table beside him.

He decided to play it cautious. No point in setting himself up to look like a fool to more people than just himself. "Not sure yet. Have you seen a boy—a teen-ager—hanging around here lately? Not one of the local kids, a stranger." Peggy knew every kid that hung around here—and their parents and home phone numbers. God help them if they acted up when she was on shift. Mom and Dad would hear about it before they cleared the door.

She pursed her lips. "Well, yes I have. Early this morning. Saw him walking along the road. Just thought he was passing through, but he showed up again and made a phone call over at that pay-phone." Peggy pointed to a gas station with a phone booth, across the highway. "He looks kind of like a runaway. That who you're looking for?"

"It likely is," Frank said. *Has to be.* "What did he look like?"

"Blond, looked like a jock. About eighteen, nineteen. Holes in his jeans, wearing a white t-shirt. If it

weren't for the military haircut he'd look pretty scruffy. Like you did when you were that age." She grinned. "Or can you remember that far back?"

Old George yelled, "Order up." Peggy winked mischievously and trotted off to the counter, pink uniform skirt swishing.

*Military haircut. Could be, though most of those guys were shaved bald. I'll have to ask him about that. If it's him. If he shows.*

The door opened, jingling the little bell fixed to it. Frank looked up as he took his first sip of coffee.

*Son-of-a-gun. Looks like I've got my chance now.*

He came into the restaurant slowly, a predator moving into new territory, feeling his way with all senses alert for trouble. Coolly, professionally, he scanned the patrons sitting at the booths, apparently deciding after a cursory examination that they were not a threat. And *that* they were not who he was looking for.

His eyes alighted on Frank. Frank nodded, warily, and the boy returned the nod. Just as warily.

"You must be Frank," the boy said, walking over to the booth. "I'm Joe. We spoke on the phone just now?"

The boy kept his voice low, just barely audible. Frank followed his example. "Yes, son. Have a seat."

Joe carefully set his pack down on the bench and -deposited himself opposite Frank. They regarded each other uncomfortably for a moment before the deputy suggested, "Would you like something to eat? I'm buying."

Indecision passed over the young face, as if the boy was afraid to ask for a handout. "No thanks. I'm not hungry," he replied, in a tone that wasn't very convincing. Then suddenly the boy's stomach growled, loudly; people in the booth next to them gave them a sideways glance.

Frank couldn't suppress a grin of amusement. "Are you *sure*?"

The youngster shifted, uncomfortably. "Well, sir, I am hungry, but I don't want any handouts. I was raised funny that way."

*No handouts? If his father really is Brother Joseph, why would that be a problem? That's how the entire circus over there was financed. But then, the boy probably has a pretty distorted viewpoint.*

Frank shrugged. "Consider it a loan, then. We can work it out, somehow."

Relief washed over the youngster's face. "Okay then," he said, reaching eagerly for a menu. As Joe studied the selection, Frank was impressed with the boy's fine physique. It took work and dedication to get a body built up that way. Muscles bulged from under the tight shirt, with thick, meaty arms that suggested years of free weight training. Frank's eyebrows raised when he saw the crude swastika tattooed on Joe's forearm, though the boy was deep in the menu and didn't notice. From the symbol's location on the youngster's arm, though, Frank had a shrewd idea that it had been done a few years earlier, before a rapid spurt of growth.

For the rest, Joe was shaving, but just barely. A fine blond stubble was visible on his upper lip and chin,

but nowhere else. He was dirty and smelled, and looked like someone on the run, right enough. But this was no teeny-bopper runaway; for all Joe's apparent youth, this was a full-grown man. And one who, from the dark circles under his eyes, was having a serious crisis.

Peggy appeared with two glasses of ice water, raising an eyebrow at Frank. A silent response from his eyes asked her to save her questions for later. She nodded knowingly and said only, "What will you have, sugar?"

Joe looked up at her and licked his lips, his hunger showing. "How 'bout the chicken fried steak with fries, a hamburger—you got a chef salad? Yeah, I'll take the salad with a side of cole slaw, a large milk. . ."

"You have quite an appetite," Peggy noted with a grin, continuing the order on another ticket. "How about you, Frank?"

"Just a hamburger and a ginger ale," he replied. "Put it on one ticket. I'll pick it up."

Peggy left with the order. Joe drained his ice water in one gulp. Frank edged his glass over. "Have it. I'm not thirsty. When was the last time you ate, anyway?"

"Yesterday—yesterday morning, actually," Joe replied. "I've been moving ever since this morning around four."

Interesting. Either the Chosen Ones were keeping their folks on short rations, or something had happened to kill the kid's appetite for a while. Maybe the same thing that had caused his defection? "You waited a while before calling the office. You almost missed me."

Joe toyed with the glass of ice water. "I had to lay low today. I knew they were going to be out looking for me as soon as they knew I was gone—by breakfast at the latest. There's always an early Praise Meeting around noon, so I figured now would be the best time to get in touch." He looked up, under eyebrows drawn together in a frown. "I wasn't kidding when I said they were going to kill me."

"Don't worry, you're safe here," Frank said placatingly, still not altogether certain there was anything to really worry about from the Chosen Ones. So far all he had evidence for was an overactive imagination. "Would you like to tell me what this is all about?"

Joe took a deep breath, let it go. "Not sure where to start."

"Why don't we start with your father," Frank urged.

"Yeah. My father." He made a face, as if the words tasted bitter. "It took a while to figure him out."

*I bet it did.* "So tell me about it. And just for the record, how old are you?"

Joe sighed. "I just turned eighteen. I've been training in paramilitary since I could walk, it seems. Guess what I need to do now is go into the army or something."

Frank nodded, slowly. "Not a lotta call for Pizza Hut delivery guys that handle AK-47s." That was a test, to see by the youngster's response—or lack of it—if what Cindy Chase and her backup band had told him was true.

The kid didn't even flinch, and that made him one very unhappy cop.

"I guess so." He sighed again. "But there are some things I need to take care of first. Will you give me the protection I need?"

"Of course we will," Frank said smoothly. "We've got assault weapons, too."

The deputy let that last statement dangle in the air, like bait. *The question was, would he take it?*

"Yeah I bet you do," Joe replied levelly. "But not as much as what we've got down there."

Frank was now a profoundly unhappy cop. "Would you care to expand on that?"

Joe shook his head, but not in denial. "I guess it's not 'we' anymore. I don't know, it's just that a lot of weird stuff has been happening to me lately. Things you wouldn't believe. Things I'm not sure I believe."

"Start from the beginning," Frank advised.

Joe nodded. "As long as I can remember, Daddy was a preacher. He kept talking about the second coming of Christ, the Armageddon, the Sword of God—and this direct phone line he had to God Almighty. Like a Heavenly Hotline or something. Only thing is, he never told me why he could hear God, and I couldn't."

"Well, I'm not too surprised about that," Frank said cautiously. "We gotta lot of guys like that out here in the Bible Belt. Not real big on explanations."

Joe grimaced. "Yeah. I just took it for granted that he was right and I was wrong, as usual, and the only right thing I could possibly do was to obey him and serve whatever church he had created that day. I didn't dare contradict him, even when the contradictions were so obvious that any fool could see he was making this stuff up as he went along. I kinda got to the point where it didn't matter, you know? Like as long as he was handing down the line, I'd swallow it and not even think about it. Then he started the Sacred Heart. Sacred Heart of the Chosen Ones, he called it. God's chosen people. And the only chosen people."

Peggy showed up with a pitcher of water and filled both empty glasses.

Joe emptied his for the third time. "Hot day. Nothing to drink, either," he offered.

Frank let him take his time. It was obvious that this wasn't comfortable for him.

Joe took up the thread again, in a softer voice now. "Funny. From the time I was thirteen I dreamed of -being Rambo. I only saw *First Blood* one time, but I remember every line in the movie. I worshipped Rambo, I guess. I kind of felt like I knew where he was at, because I was an outcast, too. But I never told Father that, since I was only allowed to worship two people, him and his Jesus. So when he sent me to a military academy, I was happy. The other kids, they saw the academy as some kind of punishment. Not me. I thought it was great. Like summer camp, training for the Olympics and getting to join the army all in one. I did pretty good, too, until one day they just pulled me out of class and sent me home. Father had a disagreement with the dean over the religious part of our training, wasn't to his liking or something, so I went back to Atlanta."

That much could be checked. Frank nodded, and Joe took that as encouragement to continue.

“I got a big surprise, though. After only six months, the Chosen Ones had grown. There were ten congregations in the south and east, instead of just the one I remembered. And everybody had started wearing guns everywhere.” He grinned, disarmingly. “I started thinking that coming back to Atlanta wasn’t that bad a deal after all.”

“So you could play Rambo?” Frank said cynically. Joe flushed, but nodded.

“Father changed some time while I was gone. He was always crazy and weird anyway, but now it looked like something else was pulling his strings.” The kid leaned forward, earnestly. “He would talk to himself when he didn’t think anyone could hear him, and he would have these *conversations* with something, only it was like overhearing someone on the phone. You only heard one side of the conversation. He started calling this other thing the ‘Holy Fire,’ and he said it was telling him the direction the church would go. Like, it told him to begin all the other congregations. It told him to begin the Guard, and then it told him to start training for the war of all wars. Armageddon, with the forces of God toting assault rifles, you know?”

“Excuse me,” Frank interrupted. “The Guard? Is that what you call your army?”

“The Guard of the Sacred Heart,” Joe supplemented. “Then there’s the Junior Guard, which I used to be in charge of.”

“Tell me a little more about that,” Frank said. “The Guard, the Junior Guard. I’m curious. How many are there? What kind of weapons do you have back there?”

For a moment Frank was afraid pushing for that kind of information might have been premature, but apparently Joe had warmed up enough to be willing to talk. *Poor kid*, Frank found himself thinking. *All these years, and he never really had someone to talk to. Already he feels comfortable enough around me to unload.*

It surprised him to feel pity for the boy. It surprised him more that he wanted to.

Joe frowned, absently, his lips moving a little as if he was adding up numbers in his head. “There’s around two hundred fifty foot soldiers. Everyone has an AK-47; -Father and General Plunket like them a lot. We have stockpiles of ammo, fourteen thousand rounds per rifle last I counted. Grenades, launchers, AR-15s, M2A2s, six .50-cals.”

Frank couldn’t help but utter a low whistle. “You’re not pulling my leg, are you? That’s an army down there.”

“You bet it is,” Joe replied brightly, but the sudden pride in the Guard seemed to embarrass him. “But—it’s bad. I know that now. I don’t hold with any of it anymore. Ever since . . .”

The boy looked away, evidently struggling with what he had to say. “Ever since my father killed Sarah. She was just a little girl.”

*Killed a little girl? Jesus*—Frank waited in stunned silence for him to continue. When Joe didn’t, he prompted, “What little girl?” *Let him be wrong. Let this be hearsay, God, please. . . .*

Joe swallowed and turned pale. “I—I saw him do it. I helped bury her.”

*Well, so much for it being hearsay.*

“It had to do with that Holy Fire thing. It told him to do it, I think. Her parents were part of the church. They disappeared, and I don’t know what ever happened to them.”

*They’re probably dead, too,* Frank thought, still in shock, but he didn’t say anything. Likely the boy knew it, but was just hoping it wasn’t true. *Look, you’ve dealt with murders before. People die. People kill. It happens. The important thing now is to get the damn evidence that’ll put this bastard away.*

Joe shook his head and traced patterns on the formica with the water that had run down the side of his glass. “The church began to center around that Holy Fire thing more and more. It began calling the shots. First we’d train ten men to use a gun, then it would tell us to train fifty. And when that was done we’d get the orders to train a -hundred.”

Frank didn’t like any of this. It sounded like some kind of carnival sideshow—except that people with high-powered firearms were taking it seriously. “And you never actually saw this ‘thing,’ did you?”

Joe shook his head again, emphatically. “It all came through Father. But then the thing wanted to talk to us directly. The little girl, Sarah. She was used to talk to it at first, and what came out of her would scare anyone. Ugly sounds. Grunts. Then it would talk. Like something out of a movie.”

Frank nodded, wondering where reality ended and fantasy began. He had to act as if he was taking it seriously, or he’d lose the boy. He sure thought it was real. *We should be getting this on tape,* he thought. *There’s time for depositions later, but I wish I had a recorder going now. This Brother Joseph guy must be one hell of a con artist to convince a little girl to play along with this little parlor show, not to mention the rest of this group. There must be hundreds more down there. And they’re all under his thumb.*

*Correction. All except his son, now. I’ve never seen anyone spill their guts like this. He sings like a cage full of canaries. Or like someone with a guilty conscious.*

Joe raised his eyes to Frank’s again, and the earnestness on his face could not be mistaken. “This wasn’t just my father playing like a ventriloquist or something, you’ve gotta believe me. This *thing*, this Holy Fire, it’s the real thing! It ain’t—isn’t—anything I’ve ever seen before. But it’s real, real as you or me. . . .”

Frank nodded, but his skepticism must have shown a little. The boy frowned.

“I bet you’d like to know where we get our money, right? The Holy Fire, it would give us information on the horse races and the bingo games in Tulsa. And the information *would always be right*. But we couldn’t attract attention by scoring big every time we went out there, so the ‘luck’ was sort of spread around.” He swallowed, hard. Frank tensed. Something big was coming. “That wasn’t where the real money came from. That was just seed money.”

*Here we go. Time for the nitty-gritty.*

“Drugs. That’s where the real money comes from. I never got involved in the sales, but I knew what they were doing. They used the money from the horse races and stuff to buy coke from the big guys in South America. It got delivered at night about three times a week. Then they would have to move it the next day, out into the street.”

Frank cleared his throat. “What kind of large quantities? How much are we talking about here?”

“Oh, three, four hundred kilos a shot,” Joe said casually. “Comes in by private plane, mostly. There’s a landing strip and camo-nets out on the land. Or when the plane can’t make it, they bring it in by truck.”

*Christ almighty, Frank thought. All that coke, right under our noses. If what he’s saying is true, it’s hard to believe that we didn’t get a line on any of this. He might be exaggerating the amount. But even if it’s one ounce, we can bust them but good.*

Joe caught his attention again. “Now *listen* for a minute. They never got busted, not even once, because of what the Holy Fire would say right before we went out. Like the other night, it told us about the Oaktree Apartments. That there was going to be a bust, and when. *Exactly.*”

Frank squirmed. Which, for a man of his size, was not an action easily concealed. “Oaktree Apartments. In Cleveland?” He had been involved in that stakeout. And the resulting raid had produced zilch.

Every residence on their warrants had been sanitized. Not a shred of evidence, not a dust speck of coke. Nothing. And no explanation. One day before the bust, the place was red-hot. Day of the bust, nothing but empty rooms.

“Cleveland? I guess. But there’s more, the reason why nobody ever gets busted. The Holy Fire warned us about the police. There was something about a blue Mustang.”

Frank knew about the Mustang; he’d driven it once. The Tulsa County sheriff’s office had loaned it to Pawnee last winter for a drug bust related to one on their turf. *But how in the world did that quack know about it?*

The first thought was that there had to be an informant working from within the department or even the state’s attorney’s office—

But how could someone cover county cops and Tulsa City stuff? And *state* busts?

Someone who had access to warrant information right across the state? But that was coming out of a dozen different offices—oh, it could be done, but only after the busts were over and the warrants filed—

More than one informant. It was the only explanation.

And it was the least believable. *When a cop goes bad, it’s generally an isolated event. A statewide coordinated effort of counter-informers—run from the sticks?—that was too much to believe.*

*They knew somehow,* he thought in shock. *There’s no denying that.* For one moment, he wondered if it was possible this Holy Fire thing was real—

No. It couldn’t be. There was some other explanation. Meanwhile, he had to play along, because the kid believed, even if he didn’t. . . . “It sounds like this thing needs a medium to talk through,” Frank said, thinking quickly. He’d heard of the psychic medium scam, some with a kid hypnotized for good measure.

“A child,” Joe corrected. “At least, that’s according to my father. That was why Sarah. But Sarah began to resist this medium thing too much, and—”

Frank waited. And waited. “And what?”



“He got angry,” Joe said in a soft voice. “He—strangled her. Six months ago or so.”

A thin line of ice traveled down Frank’s spine. “You did see this?”

Joe nodded, and his haunted eyes begged Frank for forgiveness. “I can show you the grave.”

*Evidence.* “That will help. Is it on Chosen Ones’ property?”

“It’s hidden, but yeah, it’s on our land. Their land.” He shook his head. “I’m glad to be out of there, but at the same time I feel sorta lost. Like I don’t know where I’m going now.”

“Don’t worry,” Frank assured him. “You’re doing the right thing.” *Damn bet you are, kid.* “But if the girl was murdered six months ago, then who’s he been using for the go-between since?”

Joe stared at the back of his hand. “That’s what I’m getting at. This family started showing up at Praise Meetings in Atlanta, before we moved everything out here. There was this little kid—he was kinda like the way I was when I was that age. I think one of the reasons I liked him from the start, now that I look back, is ’cause he wasn’t caught up in all that crazy Sacred Heart stuff like everyone else was. And he liked me, I think he kind of thought I was like a big brother. The kid needed someone to look up to, and I just sort of fell into the role, I guess.”

Frank was getting an eerie feeling about this, a sense of *déjà vu* that he couldn’t quite shake. *Why does this sound familiar?* he wondered, but saved his questions for later.

The back of his hand seemed to fascinate the boy. “The father, this drunk named Jim, got roped into the Sacred Heart real good. My father convinced him to bring his son to the Praise Meeting. The kid turned out to be better than Sarah.”

“The man’s name was Jim?” Frank asked, knowing now why this all seemed familiar. And he didn’t want it to. “Was his last name Chase?”

Joe frowned. “Might have been. Everyone there is on a first-name basis, but it’d be on record somewhere.”

Frank knew he had to ask. “What about the boy? What’s he called?”

“Jamie,” Joe said. “The boy’s name is Jamie.”

*Oh Lord,* Frank thought, keeping his face as bland as possible. *How do I tell Cindy Chase this?* The answer came to him quickly: *You don’t. At least, not yet.*

“He grabbed the kid—actually, he got Jim to grab him and bring him here. He had Jim kidnap the kid out of school, and lie to him, told him that the compound was a summer camp or something. Then they started using Jamie all the time as the medium thing, and they started starving him to keep him quiet, make it easier for the Holy Fire to talk through him. All he gets is juice—” Joe faltered, then picked up the narrative again. “That was when I started to feel bad about my position in the Guard, the whole Sacred Heart thing. Last night—Father made me a lieutenant with a new promotion, head of Internal Secur-ity. He must have figured something was wrong, ’cause all of a sudden he started dangling all this stuff in front of me. New apartment, new rank. But—I just can’t take it anymore.”

“You couldn’t take what happened with the little girl?” Frank asked.

Joe shook his head, guiltily. “No, I mean, I know that sounds bad, but I didn’t know her. She was kind of a puppet for Father, and it was like what was happening wasn’t real. No, it’s what he’s doing to the kid. For weeks they’ve been starving him, to be a better channel for this Holy Fire, and he keeps getting weaker and thinner—he can’t hardly stand anymore. It’s torture. I got some food through to him, but it’s not enough to save him. I was up against too much in that place. I had to go get help.”

Joe shuddered. “Sir, you’ve got to go in there before it’s too late. Father’s been putting him in a sensory deprivation tank for some godawful reason, which is just hurting him more. It’s something I don’t understand at all, it’s like he does it just ’cause he can. And whatever else happens, Jamie can’t go on much longer!”

Joe’s eyes were pleading, glistened over with tears not yet ready to fall. “I’m responsible, too. Arrest me if you want to, but go in and save him.”

Suddenly all the barriers broke, and Joe put his head down on his arms and sobbed—tiny, strangled sobs that sounded horrible, as if the boy was choking.

Frank was amazed. After all that control, he hadn’t expected the boy to break down and cry. The other patrons in the restaurant had already left; now it was just them and Peggy, who turned the front door sign to “Closed,” then came over with a box of tissue.

“Sorry,” Joe said, after composing himself in the face of a strange female. “I didn’t mean to—lose it like that.”

“It’s okay,” Frank told him, feeling a little better now that he knew the kid still had some real emotions. “Cry as much as you want to. We’ll figure this mess out -somehow.”

But the control was back, at least for the moment. After a while, Peggy began bringing their food over. Old George was watching, covertly, his face lined with concern.

“Hope you’re still hungry,” Frank said. “There’s a lot of food here.”

Joe’s appetite did not seem to be dampened at all by grief; the boy devoured everything in front of him.

“Don’t worry, son, we’re not going to arrest you,” Frank assured him, between mouthfuls of his own hamburger. “For one thing, I don’t see evidence yet of any wrong-doing on your part. I doubt any judge in the country would hold you responsible for what happened to the little girl or to the boy, either, as long as you’re willing to turn state’s evidence. Would you be willing to testify against your father?”

Joe didn’t answer right away. He seemed to mull over it, but only briefly. “Yes. I—I know I shouldn’t think twice about it, but my father scares me, sir. He has too much power, and what he says goes. If you haven’t got a bullet-proof jacket lying around, I think maybe you should find one, if you want me alive long enough to testify. Even then it might not make any difference.”

“I’ll see what I can come up with,” Frank said. Now it seemed like a pretty good idea. *Assault weapons. I guess death squads and assassins is a logical next step. After all, this Brother Joseph has killed at least once. . . .*

“Surely he left something behind?” Brother Joseph said carefully.

He had been eating lunch alone in his private dining room, when Luke had interrupted the meal. He didn’t like being interrupted at meals. Especially not with news like this.

*Joe. Gone. No—not possible.*

“No note?” he persisted. “No clues? Nothing at all to tell you about where he went?”

“Nothing,” Luke said simply, his eyes staring at the wall over Brother Joseph’s head. “He left nothing behind, sir. Some clothing appears to have been taken, but none of the Chosen Ones’ uniforms. He vanished, apparently, as a civilian. No one really knows where he is.”

The preacher’s eyes narrowed at the news. *I knew the boy was up to something*, he thought coldly, a slow rage building. *The devil must have had his claws in him for a long time now. Why else would he turn against me? Haven’t I shown him the way? Didn’t I give him more than any other father would? I gave him one of the most prestigious honors he could ever hope to achieve. And this is how he repays me? How dare he?*

Then the rage—paused for a moment. *Or—did he? How could he dare?*

“This is simply not acceptable,” he said to Luke. “I think that your conclusion that my son has abandoned us and gone to the authorities is premature. He could be testing us, you know. That would be just about his speed.” That made more sense. Surely the boy would never dare run off. *He’s probably trying to impress me.* He smiled as the logical explanation unrolled before him. “I can see it now, flexing his new muscles as the new Internal Security head, hiding in some corner we’ve forgotten about, waiting to see what precisely our reaction would be to this. If you think about it, our response would be rather revealing. It would emphasize our ability to handle—or not handle—a defection.”

Luke shook his head, stubbornly. “No, Brother Joseph, I just don’t think so. Haven’t you noticed how peculiar he’s been lately? Especially around Jamie. If you ask me, it seems he’s had a change of heart about the Cause. The devil’s in his heart, and he’s not listening to the voice of God anymore.”

“Well,” Brother Joseph said, smiling thinly. Luke’s statement touched a raw nerve, and he tried to conceal it as much as possible. “I *not* asking you. Use your head, man! This is my flesh and blood you’re talking about! I suggest you organize a thorough search of the complex. If he wants to play this little game with us, we’ll show him we can play it better.”

“As you wish, sir,” Luke said, but it didn’t look like he was pleased with the assignment. “We will conduct a thorough search of the complex. Again.”

“You do that,” the preacher said. “And I suggest you not report back until you find him.”

Brother Joseph watched the retreating back, a bit surprised that Luke had actually contradicted him. Nobody in the organization had ever done such a thing.

For that matter, Luke was the only one who could do it and escape serious punishment. His loyalty was unquestioned, and he was totally devoted to his leader and the Cause. But it wasn’t like the man to think for himself; usually he just followed blindly, a quality Brother Joseph encouraged in his followers.

But there had always been an unspoken competition between Luke and his son. *Competition and animosity. They've tried to conceal it from me, but I saw it anyway. Interesting that Luke seems eager to declare my son a traitor.*

Never mind. It wasn't going to ruin his day. He had much to look forward to tonight. This particular Praise Meeting was going to be special, he knew. The Holy Fire had been restless lately, an anxiety he could feel in his bones, suggesting that a spectacular channeling was in store for them all tonight.

Alas, it would probably be the last one, at least with Jamie. The boy had been pushed to his limits, though for a good reason, the only reason necessary: *the Holy Fire desired it.* Now the boy was closer to death, which took him closer to God. Brother Joseph had estimated yesterday that the boy had perhaps a week left to him, before starvation and the Holy Fire finished him off. After tonight, he would either be a vegetable or dead, most likely the latter.

The preacher sighed, staring at his unfinished meal. He wished there was some way to do this channeling so that he didn't have to go out and find another host every six months. It was so . . . inconvenient. Jamie in particular had been far better than Sarah, who was, he now saw, a mere container. She had been to Jamie what a hatchback coupe was to an exotic sports car. The boy was a perfect vehicle, and the only thing that had kept him from disposing of Sarah when she started to resist and substituting the boy immediately had been Jamie's whore of a mother. Cindy had been a nuisance from the very start. It was a good thing she had been left behind in Atlanta.

Why, he wondered now, had Sarah begun to resist? So far Jamie had been quite complacent about the whole thing. Perhaps it had been the girl's age. He noticed that she had begun to mature, a little early, at ten. *That has to be it!* he decided. As soon as girl children began to mature, they took on the attributes of any whore. This womanhood, this *contamination*, must be the evil that made her resist the holy touch.

It was all he needed to formulate a brilliant theory. *If it weren't for men, all women would be spawn of Satan! Why are most preachers men? Didn't Eve succumb to evil, not Adam? And of the church's staff, how many women fulfill any kind of useful role?* The only one that came to mind was Agatha, the retired schoolteacher whom he'd won over years before. And *she* was old, well past menopause. Sterile. Pure. The rest of the women in the place were cattle. *Baby producers. Preferably, boy producers.*

He glanced up at the clock on the wall and frowned when he saw the time. Ten past one. *Looks like my wife isn't going to join me. Wonder what's gotten into her? I'm going to have to check into that. This is the fourth meal in a row that she's taken elsewhere.*

He finished his solitary lunch and went directly to Joe's room. The door was open, evidently left that way since the first search. Frowning, he saw the sinister paperback he'd flung across the room the night before, displeased to see that Joe hadn't destroyed it. *How dare he defy me?* he seethed, poking through the boxes that remained. *When I see him again, I will have to punish him severely for this.*

His pager went off at his waist, and when he checked the number saw that he was being summoned to the central security station. *Ah! Maybe Joe's decided to report in. Mystery solved.*

When he arrived, however, he could see from the expressions on all assembled that this wasn't the case. There were half a dozen security officers there, immaculate in their uniforms, plus Luke. They jumped up from their consoles and saluted as he entered. But nobody seemed willing to meet his eyes, and that alone was enough to stir his wrath.

“Well?” he said impatiently, when no one offered to explain why he had been paged. “What is it?”

Luke was standing in the middle of the cluster of guards. They glanced covertly at the man, deferring the answer to him. He cleared his throat, and with an effort met his leader’s eyes.

“One of our people has seen Joe,” he began. “In town.”

Then he stopped, and the silence was infuriating. “Yes? And?”

Luke coughed. “He was seen talking to a sheriff’s deputy. He was not wearing the uniform of the guard. Apparently, they spoke for a long time.”

Brother Joseph stared at him, stunned. He didn’t know how to respond. *Who saw him? There aren’t too many people it could be—only a few of us go out at a time. No one who really knows Joe. . . . It must be a mistake, -either that or it’s an outright lie!*

“Who says he saw Joe? I want to speak to him personally.”

As if on cue, the group parted, revealing a man in the back who looked like he wanted to become invisible. He didn’t look well; actually, he was obviously suffering from a hangover. But then, he usually was. Lank blond hair straggled greasily and untidily over his ears; his eyes were so bloodshot you couldn’t tell what color they were. His skin was a pasty yellow-white, and his forehead was creased with a frown of pain.

“Jim Chase?” Brother Joseph said. “On your honor, now. Did you see Joe today?”

“Ah, yessir. I sure did,” Jim said, though his eyes never quite met the preacher’s. He seemed to be studying the wall behind the preacher instead. “Like Luke said, he was talking to this big Indian deputy, there at this diner. I pulled into the parking lot and was going to go in and take a leak, when I saw him through the window with his back turned to me, talking to the cop.”

Brother Joseph frowned. “If his back was turned to you how do you know it was him?”

Jim shook, but didn’t back down. “I saw his profile a few times, when he looked out the window. It was him.”

Brother Joseph stepped closer and examined Jim’s -disheveled appearance carefully, letting Jim know he was taking note of the state the man was in. He sniffed, once. His nose wrinkled at the reek of bourbon.

“I see,” Brother Joseph said, turning away. “You have a strong odor of liquor about you. I’ve told you before that I don’t mind my flock imbibing from time to time. But in your present condition, how can I be certain you weren’t, how shall we say, seeing things?”

Jim didn’t seem to have an answer to that. “Sir, I wasn’t.” He shook his head. “I know your son; you know yourself he’s spent a lot of time with my—with Jamie. Besides, I saw his tattoo in the window. The swastika.”

Brother Joseph felt himself blanch; he’d always wanted his son to have the blasted thing taken off. It just wasn’t politic to be brandishing symbols of something that had failed, no matter how noble their cause had been.

“Seems cut and dried to me,” Luke said calmly. “That must have been him, then.”

Brother Joseph knew that his tranquil facade would dissolve completely if he stopped to think. And he knew that he’d lose some of the power he had over these men if he didn’t take back control; in fact, he could feel the power crumbling now.

*Get a grip on yourself. And deal with this.* “We must consider Joe a renegade and a traitor,” he said, emotionlessly. “He is to be shot on sight, provided it can be done anonymously. Luke, would you kindly dispatch an assassin to eliminate him?”

“Yes, sir,” Luke said. The preacher thought he saw a smirk forming at the corners of the man’s mouth.

*You would enjoy that, wouldn’t you, you little toady?* he thought, but retained his own cold smile. It didn’t matter. Command had been reestablished. *You see, my followers? The importance of my own flesh and blood pales in comparison to the importance of our mission. I’ll sacrifice my own traitorous son without a hint of regret so that we may march on unimpeded!* He nodded, offering tacit approval to Luke to do the job himself. The rest of the guardsmen seemed frozen in shock at Brother Joseph’s decision.

Saying no more, Brother Joseph left to visit Jamie in his cell.

*After all, didn’t God sacrifice his own son?*

## CHAPTER TWELVE

*These mortals are ineffectual fools,* Al thought, during the long ride back from Pawnee. *I can’t believe this has gone on for so long without a resolution. Our ways are better.*

It was a judgment he had made a long time ago, but the whole sad situation with Cindy, Jamie, Frank and the Sacred Heart of the Chosen Ones simply reinforced it. After this latest encounter with the sheriff’s office, he’d just about decided that unless he intervened, the outcome of this was going to be bleak. *The wheels of justice turn in this county, true, but only slowly. If this were a violation of an elven law, the matter would have been -resolved long ago, by spell or swordpoint. If it hadn’t been for the Salamander, I’d have found a way to take care of it -myself.*

All the way back from the sheriff’s office, they were ominously silent. Gone was the hopeful mood during their trip out to Pawnee; Cindy oozed depression. Any moment Alinor figured she was going to break down and cry. It was all he could do to keep his shields up and his mind clear. At this point in the game, he needed everything working in top form.

Keeping Cindy’s emotions out, though, wasn’t the real problem. His own simmering anger threatened to overwhelm him. *Now I know why I deal so little with the humans’ world,* he thought. *I would go mad with all that . . . that . . . red tape!*

Frank had been no help at all. It only confirmed what he suspected all along: that the sheriff’s department, though with all the right reasons for their actions, had no intention of including them in any move they might make against the group. That alone rankled him. After all, hadn’t he already been in the

camp and gotten closer to the situation than any law enforcement officer?*I know more about what's going on in there than they do—or could. They have no concept of the universe beyond their own, immediate physical world. They wouldn't know a ghost if they walked through one!*

He couldn't begin to consider explaining the Salamander to the cop.*He'd probably have me committed or jailed or something, he thought, shuddering at the possibility of being surrounded by all that cold steel.They have no idea what they're up against. The Salamander could come in and pulverize anyone's mind without much effort. Great Danaa—it would happily pit all of its followers against the law enforcement people and gorge on the resulting -carnage. . . .*

In fact, that was probably what the Salamander had in mind.

*What he doesn't know—couldn't know—is that Jamie is being exposed to this thing regularly. If his mind isn't destroyed yet, it will be soon, perhaps even the next time they have their little "Praise Meeting." At the sheriff's rate of progress, Jamie isn't going to last long enough to be rescued.*

He considered another nagging possibility.*The Salamander is going to see this raid a mile away. It probably knows about it already. Then what? Is it going to instruct Brother Joseph to fortify the underground complex of bunkers even more? Short of a bombing run with napalm, there would be little chance of getting to the soldiers. And if we did, what would be left? Too risky to the children to even consider it.*

They pulled into Hallet raceway in the late afternoon, and Al reached forward with his mind to make sure the air-conditioning was on in the RV. The temperature was up to at least a hundred now, a county-wide sauna. Heat like that that would only aggravate already touchy tempers. Al would have to be careful lest Cindy blow up in his face; he sighed with the realization that she probably would anyway, regardless of how much caution he exercised around her.*How can I blame her, though? If it were my child—and I'm beginning to feel like it is—I would be frustrated to tears, too.*

Fortunately all at the track had been running perfectly since that last minor fix on the engine, and the team had given them as much time as they needed off.*Thank Danaa, he thought, wishing that all racing gigs had gone as well mechanically as this one.If we'd had to deal with a balky engine, I doubt we would have had the time to do as much as we have.*

After they had parked the car, Cindy excused herself. She said she had to go make a call to her bank in Atlanta. Al suspected she just wanted to be alone for a while and didn't say anything. She'd probably go hole up in the -ladies' room over by the stands and cry her eyes out.

Bob looked tired and slouched back on the couch-bed with a Gatorade and a *Car and Driver* magazine. Not surprising, after being up most of the night working on Cindy's car. Al didn't really want to burden his friend with what was on his mind, but they had made promises to each other that no matter what they would be there for each other. It was a pact encouraged by every one of the Folk who'd joined SERRA, for experience had shown that their kind didn't always do very well going solo in the humans' world.

*Especially, Al thought tiredly, when a Salamander is involved.*

He took a seat across his companion and pretended to study the table top for a moment. "You know, Bob," Al said conversationally. "This, ah, sheriff's office doesn't strike me as being all that efficient in dealing with this mess."

Bob lowered the magazine and gazed steadily at his partner, his eyes narrowed, with a slight frown on his lean features. “Eyah?” he said, but the glint in his eye suggested he already knew what to expect. But he added no more to his comment. Instead, he waited patiently for his friend to continue.

“I mean, look at it. They have all the evidence they need to raid the place, or at least investigate the cult a lot closer. If they did, they’d find Jamie, you know they would! But their own laws are preventing them from doing it!” He felt himself snarling and clamped control down on himself. “The laws that were designed to prevent this abuse are indirectly condoning it,” he said a little more calmly. “What sense does that make?”

Bob took his time responding, as usual. “I don’t pretend to be a part of the humans’ world,” he replied, slowly. “I know, I am a human, but I don’t understand it. I feel like I’m sorta caught between the human and the elven worlds, and to tell you the truth, most of the time Underhill seems a lot more sensible. This is one of those times when it’s especially true.” He sighed wearily. “I think I know what you’re getting at. You want to go in. Like Rambo. Play Lancelot. Do you really think, though, that you can take on this thing by yourself?”

Al bristled at the suggestion, however true it probably was, that this was out of his league. “I don’t know if I can or not,” he said. “We don’t have a choice, and I’m going to have to try. The law enforcement people involved in this deal are blind to the Salamander; they wouldn’t believe in it even if we told them about it. How could they hope to combat something they can’t even see?”

“Right,” Bob said, and shook his head. He knew that no matter what he said, Al was going to go ahead and do what he was planning on doing anyway. And Al knew that he knew. It had never changed anything before, and it wouldn’t this time, either. “Had it occurred to you that maybe you should call in some help?”

Al snorted indignantly. The problem was, he had. The Low Court elves he had contacted—hundreds of miles away, in Dallas—had shown polite interest in the Salamander project, but nothing more. He had explained carefully to them how imperiled the boy was, pushing all the proper elven buttons to rouse their anger. But those he talked to had sadly shaken their heads, telling him that there was nothing *they* could do. There simply was no nexus close enough—even if they had been able to transfer themselves to it in time to do any good. They couldn’t operate that far away from the nexus in Dallas. There were no High Court elves there, and while the Low Court was sympathetic to his plight, they were helpless. They simply could not survive more than fifty miles from their grove-anchored power-pole. And he hadn’t been able to contact any of the High Court elves of Outremer or Fairgrove. Al checked again, working through his anger—but once again he could touch no one. He released the fine line of communication he sustained and refrained from beating his head against the nearest convenient wall.

“I see,” Bob said, as if reading his mind. “No luck, huh?”

“None.”

The discovery left him feeling empty, reminding him how different he really was from the other elves. Traveling the world, intersecting with the humans’ universe whenever necessary, was for him a way of life. To the rest—except for those in Fairgrove and Outremer, and some rumored few in Misthold—it was an esoteric and dangerous hobby. *They’re probably behind shields or Underhill. Damn. Why didn’t I tell them about this when I first realized the Salamander was involved?*

“So what do you suggest?” Bob said. “Waltz in there all by yourself, politely inform them you’re there



for Jamie and then walk out with him?” He sat up, setting the magazine aside, and faced Al. “You really think they’re going to go for that?”

“No, no, *no* !” Al said, a bit of his anger slipping past his shields. “Just what kind of a fool do you think I am? I’m going to pull out every trick I can conjure just to get through this one alive. What choice do I have? You know that child hasn’t a chance unless I go in after him! Frank Casey is a good man, but he’s only one sheriff, and he’s the *only* one who knows or cares about Jamie! How much will you wager me that he’s the least senior man involved in whatever it is they’re doing about the Chosen Ones? *I have* to go in there because no one else will!”

“God,” Bob said, wearily. “Listen, Alinor, I’m not blind or deaf. I saw the maps and all, and the way Casey hid them. It’s just that you’re going to have to go up against that thing, and there is nothing on a magical level I can do to help you. I want you *to think* about what you’re doing and not just charge in there like every other macho warrior in Outremer, thinking you can conquer the world just because you can work a few magic tricks. I’m afraid for you, even if you won’t be for yourself. This thing scares me.”

Al snorted. “Don’t think for a minute that it doesn’t scare me. I told you, I’m not a fool. Anyone else might act like a ‘macho warrior’—but they don’t know what they’re up against. I do. Believe me, I do.”

Near their RV, a barbecue party was in noisy progress. In the distance was the dim roar of race cars, the muted bark of a PA system. Around them the world was functioning normally, while they discussed—what? A raid on a crazed madman and his army—confronting a supernatural monster. Life had progressed way beyond surreal.

But he had a sudden idea. “There is something you can do to help me. Keep a close eye on Cindy when I go in there.” Bob flinched at the mention of “there,” but Al continued. “Keep her occupied. I don’t want her to know what I’m doing.”

Bob gave him the Look. “What, exactly, will you be doing? And don’t forget the cops. They can still come after us if they find out we’re interfering. Remember, the deputy told us to stay out of it.”

Al expelled a breath as he gazed at the floor. *What, indeed?* “Here it is. *If* they find out, it’ll be after I’ve gotten in and out. At that point dealing with them will be the easiest part of this whole mess. I play games with Frank’s memory, make him forget ‘Al,’ replace what he knows with memories of some crazy human antiterrorist or something. Let him spin his wheels trying to find someone who never existed. I’ve done it before. It’s the Chosen Ones we need to be concerned with the most.”

“No kidding,” Bob muttered. “So how are you planning on keeping yourself bullet-hole-free?”

Al shrugged. “I’ll go in with James’ face, or someone else they’ll recognize.”

Bob nodded. “Okay. And once you’re in, then what?”

Al shrugged. “I wing it, I guess.”

Bob groaned.

Jamie came awake in the darkened cell, suddenly aware that someone was sitting in the room with him.

:Sarah?:he sent, but there was no answer, and the presence was solid. It smelled, sweat and dirty clothes and mildew—real.

And another odor that could only mean his father. That smell. Joy juice.*Oh, no, I'm going to get sick again.*

He had barely enough energy to turn over and vomit into a small trash can that had been left there for that reason. A man named Luke had told him to use it if he got sick again, and if he missed it he was going to spank him with a rubber hose. Long welts on his legs and buttocks testified to his poor aim. It was difficult to hit the bucket when you saw two of them.

When he was finished he leaned back on the bed. From the sound his vomit made, he knew he'd hit the bucket, so he knew he wouldn't be beaten this time. But he was still afraid. He looked up through the fog that clouded his vision at the face in front of him he dimly recognized as his father's.

"Daddy," he whispered, since that was all he had the strength for. "What did I do wrong? What am I being spanked for?"

It was always possible that to ask such questions would only solicit more beatings, either from his father or another adult nearby. It didn't matter. It seemed like whatever he did, it was wrong, and it was his fault.

*Always my fault.*

"Don't talk back to your daddy," Jim said angrily. "Don't you *ever* talk back to me. There's a reason for all this. I know it, you don't have to. Just you wait and see."

Although Jamie heard the words, there wasn't much sense he could extract from them. Another question formed, then slipped past his teeth.

*"Where's Mommy?"*

Stars exploded in his vision as Jim hit the side of his face. Jamie saw stars and felt his whole face spasming with pain, then aching right down to the bone, his teeth -loosening. His head jerked to the side, stayed that way. He had no energy to cry or scream or protest or agree to what was going on. All he could do was to lie there in terror and wait for whoever was inflicting the pain to go away, however temporarily; they would always return, he knew.

"I'll beat the devil out of you yet," Jim said, but his voice sounded like he was further away, though he hadn't heard his footsteps retreating. Jamie heard another voice then, one that sounded like Luke's.

"Tonight's the night," he heard Luke say, further away, beyond the open door where light spilled into the room.

"There's too much of his damn mother in him," Jim Chase said, as if that was Jamie's fault. "He won't believe in anything! He always has to ask *questions!* It's his damn mother, I tell you—"

He heard footsteps as they left the room. "It don't matter," Luke replied. "Holy Fire can use him now whether he believes or not, and anyway, after tonight it'll be all over with." Luke laughed, nastily. "Until then, we'll let him see what *questions* buy doubters. He gets to see what the darkness of hell is like."

The light went out.

Darkness used to mean terror, now it was welcome. Darkness usually meant the beatings would stop.

*:Sarah. Help me,:he called.:You promised you'd help me.:*

Long moments passed as he waited for his companion. As always she appeared, faithful as ever, this time as a ball of bright white light at the outer periphery of his vision. Her presence, over the last several visits, seemed to be getting stronger. Jamie didn't know what to think about that, except that maybe he was getting closer to becoming a ghost like her.

She hovered there a long while, longer than usual, which made Jamie nervous.

*:What's wrong?:he asked.*

*:I can't stay,:she said, sounding afraid.:It's getting stronger. If I stay too long it will see me, and I don't know what will happen yet. I came by to tell you . . . :*

The light flickered, dimmed, threatened to go out.

Jamie panicked..*Sarah! Don't go away.:*

The light brightened..*. . . to tell you help is on the way. Joe ran away and told the police what was going on. And . . . :*

He waited for her to finish, but he sensed she was struggling against something, like there was a hard wind where she was, blowing her away.

The light surged back one more time, for a brief -moment.

*:. . . that I love you.:*

And the wind blew the light out.

Bob stood in front of the white van with his hands planted on his hips and a frown on his face. Cindy stood beside him, holding his arm tightly, but trying to be so quiet she was holding her breath. "Look," he said—profoundly grateful that it was after sunset and there was no one near enough to see that he was talking to a grill and a pair of headlights. "You know he and Andur went over there with no backup. You *know* he's not up to this! So who's left to do anything? You and me!"

The lights glowed faintly for a moment. Bob wished—not for the first time—that he was one of the human fosterlings with the power to speak mind-to-mind. But then Nineve was probably just as frustrated with this as he was. None of the elvensteeds could speak audibly—and in fact, none could transform up to anything larger or more complicated than a cargo van. Nineve's interior modifications were all due to the same magic Alinor used to modify the Winnie. Otherwise, Bob would have had her shift into a nice solid M-1 tank.

"Here's what I figured," he continued, hoping desperately that what he had *figured* was going to work. "I've been playin' with the scanner Les Huff's got in his trailer; he's got this book on police freqs, and

I've been listening every night, tryin' t' see if there was anything goin' down with the cops, okay? Well, just after Al left, there's all*kinda* stuff, radio checks, code-words—sounded like somebody was gearing up for something real big. Well, when we visited that Pawnee County Mouny, he covered up what we thought was plans for a big raid. I figure that big raid's about to happen. And Al's right smack in the middle of it. But—*but*—if you ask the owls where it's all coming from—and then we catch them gearin' up—well, maybe we can force their hand. If we get them to kick off that raid early, while Al's in there, maybe that*thing* he's -going up against'll pay attention to them and not him."

Nineve's lights came on and stayed on—and her motor started up abruptly and the driver's-side door popped open. Bob could have wept with relief.

Cindy released his arm and started for the passenger's side as Nineve revved her engine. Bob grabbed her elbow before she had gotten more than a step away. "No," he said, holding her back. "You stay here."

She whirled, balling her fists, her eyes flashing in sudden anger. "No?*No*? What the hell do you mean,*no*? That's my*son* you're talking about—"

"That's the police from a backwater, redneck, prehistoric county we're talking about," Bob replied levelly. "Plus the FBI, the state cops, maybe the DEA for all I know. All good ol' boys*frum roun' ear*." He imitated the local accent mercilessly. "You're not*frum roun' ear*. You're not military, you're not even male. If you can think of a bigger bunch of macho ass-kickers, I'd like to hear it some time. *Your* son isn't gonna mean squat to them, Cindy. You show up, and if you're lucky, they'll just dismiss everything you tell them as female hysterics and shove you off into a corner to make coffee. If you're*not* lucky, they'll throw you into the county clink to keep you out of their hair!"

She fell silent and stopped resisting his hold. He continued, a little more gently. "Cindy, it's not fair, but that's the way these guys are gonna be, and we've gotta deal with it. I'm a man, I speak their language. I'm a National Guard MP with a security clearance, I know how to handle a gun, I've got grease and oil under my fingernails—if I go in there and find Frank first, I think maybe I can convince him to deputize me and bring me in with them. If I'm deputized, he can*assign* me to find Jamie. And figure I've got a better than average chance of not getting shot in the ass."

He took a deep breath, as Cindy slumped and put her hand to her mouth to keep from crying. "Cindy, Frank's not a bad guy—he wants to help, but he's got his job to do. He may even be happy to see me. More important, though—if we start a ruckus while Al's in there, we'll be giving him cover. If between us we can't get Jamie out, no one can. But if you go, that's not gonna happen. We'll*both* wind up in the county slammer. You for showing up, me for bringing you."

"All right," Cindy said, in a small voice. "I guess you're right. But—just sitting here, not doing anything—"

"I know it's hard, Cindy," Bob told her earnestly. "It's the hardest thing in the world. I've done my share of waiting, too. Not like this—but I've done a lot of it. Will you stay in the RV and trust me?"

She nodded, shyly—and to his surprise and shocked delight, kissed him, swiftly. Then she turned and ran into the RV.

"Did that mean what I thought it meant?" he asked Nineve. The lights blinked twice, and he touched his lips, a bemused smile starting at the corners of his mouth. "I'll be damned. . . . Well, hell, this isn't catching any fish. Let's get going!"

Bob faced Frank Casey with a stolid, stubborn expression he knew the deputy could read with no mistake. Casey, in his camos and blackout face-paint, looked absolutely terrifying; bigger than usual, and *entirely* like a warrior. If they'd let him wear feathers, he'd probably have one tucked into the cover of his helmet.

Casey was trying to intimidate him with silence and a glower. Bob refused to be intimidated. Casey tried a little longer, then deflated.

"Christ," he muttered, removing his helmet and passing his hand through his hair. "I don't know how you found out about this—but you're here now, and Captain Lawrence says your ID checks out—shit, I can use another hand, I guess." He shook his head. "Consider yourself deputized. Goddamn. At least you got more sense than that hothead buddy of yours with the hair."

Behind Frank, the Air National Guard hangar at the tiny regional airport was as full of feverish activity as a beehive at swarming time; it had been *badbefore*, when he first strolled in. But now—

He'd almost been arrested on the spot, until he cited Frank Casey as his contact. Then he'd faced an unfriendly audience of DEA officers, National Guard officers, FBI agents and police. They hadn't liked what he told them about Al.

*And I didn't even tell them a quarter of it.*

"Yeah, well," Bob coughed. "I couldn't stop him. Tried, but—" He shrugged. "He's real worried about that kid."

"So'm I," Frank said grimly. "But I've got the FBI, the DEA, the County Mounties, the state boys—and half the local National Guard to worry about, too. They made me local coordinator on this thing, they've been letting me call some of the shots. And your buddy may just have blown our raid."

"Maybe," Bob said cautiously. "Maybe not." *How do I play my ace in a way he'll believe? He sure as hell won't believe me about the Salamander. . . .* "Seems to me these guys've got ways of finding out things—like they've been able to screw things up for you before this." The flinch Frank made cheered him immensely. He was on the right track! "So, okay, they may even know about this one. Except you're gonna jump the gun on them. So *maybe*, 'cause we forced your hand a little, you got a chance of catching 'em off-guard." He cocked his head to one side. "So that's why I asked you to bring me in on this. I know what he looks like; hopefully I can find him before he catches a little 'friendly fire.' *That* sure wouldn't look good on the report."

Frank shook his head slowly. "Man," he drawled, "I haven't heard a line like that since *Moonlighting* got -canceled."

Bob almost grinned and stopped himself just in time.

"Right now, the *only* reason your ass isn't in the county jail is because I convinced *my* superiors that *you* are somebody I've worked with before. Your Guard record helped, but basically they're going on my word." Frank looked back over his shoulder at the half-dozen Blackhawk helicopters being loaded at double-time. "Don't push your luck."

“No, sir,” Bob replied, with complete seriousness.

“You’ve got three assignments,” Frank said, holding up three fingers, and counting down on them. “Find your buddy. Find the kid. Try not to get ventilated. When you accomplish one and two, get down and *stay* down so you can accomplish three.”

“Yessir !” Bob didn’t salute, but he snapped to a completely respectful attention. Frank nodded, apparently satisfied.

“Now get your ass over there,” he said, nodding at the third chopper in line. “You’re with Lieutenant Summer; you can’t miss ’em, he’s the only black officer in this crowd. He knows you’re with his bunch. One of his men turned up sick, so lucky you, you get to ride. And buddy, that’s all you got. You manage to liberate a weapon from the enemy, *then* you’ve got a piece—otherwise, you got -nothing.”

Bob nodded. He hadn’t expected anything else. There wouldn’t be any spare weapons on this trip—and even if there had been, there was no one here who’d take responsibility for signing him out on one. If an assault rifle turned up missing after all this was over, and then guys in charge found out an outsider had been brought in at the last minute—there’d be no doubt of where the gun went (whether or not that was the real truth), and the one who’d authorized issuing it to Bob would be in major deep kimchee. And in theory, given his assignments, he wouldn’t *need* one. Not having a gun would make him concentrate on those assignments instead of playing Rambo.

Frank looked him up and down one more time. Bob knew what Frank was thinking, given his “nonstandard” clothing. When he’d headed out in this direction, he’d had a small choice of outfits. Instead of going for concealing gear, since he figured he wasn’t going to be in the first wave, Bob had chosen to suit up in *real obvious* clothing—his bright red, Nomex coverall. There wasn’t a chance in hell that any of the Bad Guys would be wearing something like *that*, which meant that the Good Guys—in theory, anyway—wouldn’t mistake him for a lawful target. Al would recognize him if he saw him, even at a distance, even during a firefight. Hopefully Jamie would recognize racetrack gear and trust him. Nomex was fire-proof and heat-resistant; he might be able to make a dash into or out of a burning building if he had to.

Of course, this same outfit made him look like a big fat target for the *Bad* Guys—

Frank shook his head. “How come you didn’t paint a bulls’-eye on the back while you were at it?”

“Reckoned all they’d see was a red blur goin’ about ninety, and figure I was a launched flare,” Bob drawled.

Frank’s mouth twitched. “Deployable decoy. You’re -either the bravest bastard I ever met, or the craziest. Get over to that chopper, before I change my mind.”

This time Bob *did* salute, and did a quick about-face before Frank got a chance to respond. A huge black man in camos was supervising the loading of his men; as Bob quick-trotted over, he looked up and waved impatiently at him.

Bob broke into a run—hoping he wasn’t about to make the biggest mistake of what could turn out to be a very short life. . . .

The gloomy, empty hallway would echo footsteps, if Alinor had been so careless as to make any noise. Wherever the Chosen Ones had gone to, it wasn't *there*, and Al was perfectly happy to have things that way.

But he was going to have to find somewhere to hide for a little, while he got his bearings. There was so much iron and steel around him that his senses were confused; he needed to orient himself—and most of all, he needed to find where the Chosen Ones all were—and where Jamie was.

He slipped inside the door marked “Cleaning Supplies” and closed it behind him. He waited for his eyes to -adjust to the darkness, and made out a mop, a bucket, and a sink with two shelves over it, with one gallon jug of cheap disinfectant cleaner on the top shelf. Nothing else.

*Not a lot of supplies. I suppose it's easier to punish someone by making them clean the floor with brute force than to buy adequate supplies. Then again, any penny that goes to buy a bottle of cleaner doesn't go to buy bullets—or steak for Brother Joseph. That's the Way of the Holy Profit.*

Getting in had been much easier than he had thought it would be. First of all, he'd gone in right after dinner, when the guards were torpid from their meal. He slipped in with Andur's help over the first two sets of fences at some distance from the compound, then he'd walked around to the third checkpoint openly, as if he'd been out for a stroll. He'd altered his face to look like Jim Chase's—then, as he approached the third set of security guards, he'd planted the false memory that they had seen the man going out—supposedly for a walk—about an hour before. They waved him in after no more than a cursory question or two. He continued his stroll towards the main bunker, as the sun splashed vivid reds in fiery swaths across the western sky.

But the next problem confronted him immediately, in the form of a technological barrier. Illusions weren't -going to fool video cameras, and there was one just inside the bunker door. He would *have* to pass it to get inside.

Well, there *had been* one. Technically, there still was one, it just wasn't working right now.

He had paused just out of range, loitering for a -moment, as if enjoying a final breath of fresh air before descending into the dank bunker, and had checked out the circuit the camera was operating on. To his delight, he had discovered that they hadn't replaced the wiring of that line after his initial tampering. He had used a fraction of his powers to create an electrical surge that had fried the camera just before he turned to face it. And with the corridor beyond empty it had been child's play to penetrate into the lower level and find this closet to hide in.

Now, as he braced himself carefully against the wooden support-beam and sent his mind ranging along the electrical circuitry, he discovered they hadn't replaced *any* of the wiring, despite all the damage his tampering had been causing. Evidently none of these folk associated the cascading equipment failures they'd been cursed with to an overall failure in the wiring.

*Maybe it wouldn't occur to them. They may be the “plug and play” type, using things without understanding them.* Al found that kind of attitude impossible to put up with, but most humans seemed to be like that. He had learned that if you asked the average mortal how something he used every day (a light bulb, for instance) worked, most of the time he would not be able to tell you.

Mortals relied on others more than they ever dreamed—even the Chosen Ones, who prided themselves on being self-sufficient. It was a false pride, for without the outside world to support them—in the apocalyptic world they seemed to dream of—their entire way of life would fall apart within weeks.

*Never mind that. Just take advantage of it.*

He located the shielded security circuits and sent surges along all of them, blowing out every security camera he could find. There was more he could do—he hadn't done much in the way of starting electrical fires yet, except by accident—

*Not yet. I might need the distractions to cover me.*

The first thing he needed to do was to locate the bulk of the Chosen Ones, using the wires to carry his probes. He found them, as he had expected, still in the communal dining hall. Good; he wasn't likely to run into any stragglers for a while yet.

*And now for my enemy.* He searched for the Salamander, then, sending his mind cautiously out into the emptier parts of the building complex to look for it. He had a fair idea of where it might be. The room of the Praise Meetings. Hopefully, it would be drowsing.

He recoiled swiftly as he touched it, realizing by the difference in the tension of its aura that it *wasnot* half aware, as it had been before when there was no meeting. It was awake — but it was preoccupied, as if something else had its attention, and it had little to spare to look about itself.

It was in the Praise Meeting room. In fact, as he examined its energies from a cautious distance, it actually seemed to *bebound* there somehow, as if it had been tied to something that was physically kept within that room. Was that possible? Could a being of spirit and energy be confined like that?

It had been possible during his ill-fated excursion into the world of the humans in the time of the First Crusade. The creatures had been imprisoned within the little -copper boxes. They would be freed only if Peter the Hermit actually broke the spell binding them—which he had, so that several of them could travel with other armies than his own. That had been a mistake—as Peter had learned—for once released, there was no controlling them. Even the ones still bound to their containers would seize the opportunity to run amok when released temporarily.

That made another thought occur to him; this creature had actually felt familiar when he'd first encountered it. He had dismissed that feeling as nothing more than the reawakening of old memories. Now he wondered if he really had sensed the presence of an old adversary. Was it possible? Could this creature be one of the Salamanders that *hadnot* been released, one he knew? Could it still be tied to something physical? If that were true—

*That would explain how the damned thing got over here. Most magical creatures cannot just buy a plane ticket, but they can invest themselves in a transportable object, which also gives them the advantage of a physical storage nexus for their power. That could be it. Hmm. The last time I saw those creatures they were spreading violence through the Middle East.*

*. . . which might partially explain why the Middle East was still, to this very day, a hotbed of violence, if the Salamanders were still there, still spreading their poison. . . .*

*If this creature has a physical tie, then I can do something about it. I can force it back into its prison, or I can dismiss it from this plane altogether!*

He slid his back down along the wooden support-post until he was sitting on the cold concrete floor of the closet, his knees tucked up against his chest. He would have to probe very carefully. He did not dare



catch the Salamander's attention; bound or not, it was still dangerous, and he was no match for it in a one-on-one fight.

He still didn't know if it truly *was* bound, either. Even if it was, there would only be a very limited window of opportunity for him to act against it. And he had to know *what* it was bound to.

He allowed his perception to move slowly through the electric lines, extended his probe into the room beyond, testing each object on the room for the peculiar magic resonances that had been on the Hermit's enchanted -containers.

Nothing. Nothing again.

But wait. How about something quicker—searching for copper?

Still nothing.

There was nothing there but chairs, a little bit of audio-visual equipment. Nothing that could possibly have “held” the Salamander, and certainly nothing that had any feeling of magic about it at all.

*Wait a minute—what about on the stage?*

He moved his perception to the circuits running the footlights, and “looked” out across the wooden platform. It seemed barren; it held only the podium, a single chair of peculiar construction, a flag—

He recoiled as he touched the Salamander's dark fire. *Blessed Danaa!*

The flag—no, the *flagpole*—radiated the peculiar dark power of the Salamander. There was no doubt, none at all. The creature was bound to the brass, sculptured -flagpole.

*I don't remember any flagpoles! Copper boxes, certainly, but no flagpoles—*

Besides, the pole couldn't be more than a single century old. Two, at the most. And if there had been any human mages capable of imprisoning a Salamander these days, surely he would have heard about them; power like that couldn't be concealed in an age of so relatively few mages and so much communication.

There wasn't even anything of copper, which was the only metal that he recalled the Hermit using for his containers. Copper, not brass—

Brass. But brass is an alloy of copper, isn't it? Maybe it wasn't the shape that mattered, it was the metal.

...

Blessed Danaa. What if someone found one of the boxes and used it for scrap? That must be it; someone smelted the damned thing down. They smelted it down and made . . . that.

He pulled all of his senses back, quickly, and sat quietly for a moment, calculating his next move. Now would be a very good time to call in an ally.

He closed his eyes again and reached out with his mind, but this time in an entirely different direction.

:*Sarah?*: he called, hoping he was doing so quietly enough to avoid the attention of the Salamander.

*:Sarah? It's time—:*

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

*:Hush!:The little girl literally popped into the tiny closet out of nowhere, surprising Alinor into a start.:I got Joe to run away. Don't call me like that! It's not listening for us now!:*

*:I don't think it'll hear us,:Al replied, after a quick check.:It's real busy with something.:*

*:Jamie,:Sarah said angrily.:It's getting ready for Jamie. It wants to kill him and take his body, and it can this time! Jamie's real sick—and I can't fight it off now, not when he can't help.:*

Al elected not to ask just how sick Jamie was; he couldn't do anything about it, and there was no point in worrying. If he succeeded in banishing the Salamander, Jamie would be with his mother by dawn. If he didn't, they'd both be beyond help.

*:Sarah, what exactly happens when Brother Joseph calls the monster?:he asked.:Describe it as closely as you can. I think there's going to be a point where you and I can stop this thing, but I have to know exactly what it does, and when.:*

She wasn't an image so much as a hazy shape, but he could tell she was thinking very hard. There was a kind of fuzzy concentration about the way she "looked." *:Well, he has to kind of get everybody all riled up.:*

*:Yes, I saw that,:Al agreed.:Does that anger make the monster stronger?:*

The image of a little girl strengthened as she nodded. *:I think so,: she said.:If he doesn't get them riled up enough, it can't come out of the door.:*

*:Whoa, wait a minute:Al exclaimed.:What door? What are you talking about?:*

She faded for a moment, as if he had startled her, but her image strengthened again immediately. *:What? Can't you see the door?:*

He thought quickly. *:Not that I recognize what you're talking about. Look, I'll try to stop interrupting you, and you tell me everything that happens, the way it happens, as if you were describing it to someone who hadn't seen it.:*

*:All right,:she agreed.:First he gets everybody all riled up. Then there's a kind of—door. It's kind of in the flagpole. The monster sort of opens the door and comes out, and that's when he's in this kind of world, where I am.:*

She seemed to be waiting for him to say something. *:The halfworld,: he said.:That's what elves call it. The place that's half spirit and half material.:* He thought for a minute. *:This door—is it kind of as if you were standing right at a wall, and somebody opened a door, and then the monster kind of unfolds out of it?:*

She brightened with excitement.: *That's it! That's exactly what it looks like!:*

So the Salamander was being confined in the flagpole, much as it had been confined in the copper box. Because there was no summoning spell involved, it required the energy of Brother Joseph's congregation to pry open the "door" of its confinement place.

:*Then what?*:he prompted.

:*Well, then the door goes shut again, and I don't think it can get back in until Brother Joseph lets it go again. So it stays there, and that's when it starts feeding on Brother Joseph. When it feeds enough on him, it can push Jamie out of his body and take over.:*

He chewed on his lip for a moment. He tasted blood and wrinkled his nose, remembering *now* why he'd started carrying packets of cookies around with him. It was a lot less painful to carry around a few cookies than it was to regrow lips and nails.

So, there was a moment, as he had hoped, when the Salamander had to feed before it could take over the boy, a moment when it was in the halfworld. Perhaps because there was no longer anyone who knew the summoning spell it could no longer enter the material world directly. In the spirit world of Underhill, it would be too powerful for him—in fact, it would probably be too powerful for anyone but a major mage, like Keighvin Silverhair or Gundar. In the material world, it would not only have the powers it possessed—fairly formidable ones—but it would have command of all of Brother Joseph's gun-toting-ruffians.

But in the halfworld it was vulnerable. In fact, if he could *keep* it in the halfworld, blocked from power, it would probably starve away to a point where he could bottle it back into the flagstaff permanently.

:*Sarah, can you protect Jamie from the thing if I keep it away from his body?*:he asked.:*I promise I'll keep Jamie strong enough that the thing can't feed on him, but I need you to keep him safe from it.:*

:*How?*:she asked, promptly.:*I will if I can, but how?*:

Now he hesitated.:*The Salamander—the monster—can't kill you. It can hurt you, but it can't kill you. If you keep between it and Jamie, you can keep him safe—:*

:*But it might hurt me?*:She tossed her head defiantly.:*Well, maybe I can hurt it,too! And I will if I get the chance! Besides, Jamie hurts a whole lot worse than me.:*

:*Sarah—*:he hesitated again, deeply moved by her bravery.:*Sarah, you are the best friend anyone could ask for. I think you're pretty terrific.:*

The hazy form flushed a pleased, pale rose color.:*They're gonna start the Praise Meeting pretty soon.:* she warned.:*If you're gonna sneak in there, you'd better do it now.:*

:*Thanks, I will.:*He uncurled, slowly, flexing his muscles to loosen them.:*See you there?:*

There was a hint of childish giggle, and a cool breath of scent, like baby powder; the glow bent forward and brushed his cheek—

—like a little girl’s kiss.

Then she was gone.

The room where the Praise Meeting was held had been constructed rather oddly. There were places, little niches, behind the red velvet curtains covering the back wall where a man could easily stand concealed and no one in the audience (or even on the stage for that matter) would know he was there. Al wasn’t quite sure what they were there for. Were they some construction anomaly, an accident of building the place underground?

Probably not, he decided. The niches were too regular and spaced too evenly. They were probably there on purpose, places where helpers could be concealed to aid in stage magic tricks in case the “channeling” ever failed.

Or maybe they were there to hold backup guards in case the loyalty of any of the current guards ever came into question.

Whatever, Al was grateful that they were there, although his hiding place was so near to the Salamander’s flagpole that he was nauseated. He managed to slip into place without attracting its attention and concentrated on making himself invisible to the arcane senses, as the first of the Chosen Ones began to trickle into the hall, avid to get good seats in the front row.

He couldn’t see much; his hiding place was directly behind the chair he suspected they would use for Jamie, and he didn’t want to chance attracting mundane attention by making the curtains move. But his hyper-acute hearing allowed him to pick up good portions of the conversation going on out in the audience, and the gist of it was that something special was supposed to happen at the channeling tonight. Brother Joseph had promised something really spectacular.

And—so one rumor went—the Guard had been placed on special alert. That rumor hinted that a confrontation with secular authorities was about to take place.

“Well, if they want a war, we’ll show those ungodly bastards what it means to take on the Lord’s Finest!” said one voice loudly, slurred a little with drink.

Al felt a chill of dread settling into the pit of his stomach. *A war—*

“Those godless bastards think they can come in here with the Red Army and march all over us! They think we’ll lie right down, or maybe poison ourselves like Jim Jones’ losers!” someone answered him, just as belligerently. “Well, they’ll find out they haven’t got the Lambs of God to deal with, they’ve got the Lions! When they come in, we’ll be ready!”

This could only mean one thing. The Salamander *knew* about the plans to attack the compound, and just as he had feared, it had passed the warning on to Brother Joseph. But did it know when the raid would start? *Blessed Danaa—could it be tonight?*

Before he could even begin to add *that* to his calculations, the noise of a considerable crowd arriving and the sounds of boots marching up to the stage made any other considerations secondary in importance. He sensed the Salamander’s rising excitement and knew by that sign that Brother Joseph had arrived to get the evening’s spectacle underway.

He tensed and readied his first weapon of the night.

There was the scuffling of feet, and the sounds of two people doing something just in front of his position. He guessed that they were binding Jamie down in the chair, using the canvas straps he'd noted. That was all right; when the time came, those straps might just as well not be there for all that they were going to stop him.

Suddenly lights came on, penetrating even the thick velvet of the curtains, and the crowd noise faded to nothing but a cough or two.

*"My brothers and sisters, I am here tonight to give you news both grave and glorious."* The voice rang out over the PA system, but from the timbre, Al sensed that even if Brother Joseph had not had the benefit of electronic amplification, his voice would still have resonated imposingly over his flock. The man might not be a trained speaker, but he was a practiced one.

*"The time the Holy Fire has warned us of is at hand! The time when the evils of all men shall be turned against us is near! Even now, the Forces of Darkness ready their men—andyes, brothers and sisters, I do not speak merely of the demons that have infested even my own son and sent him running to betray us to the -ungodly!"*

There was a collective gasp at that, as if the news of Joe's defection came as a surprise to most of Brother Joseph's followers.

*"No, my Chosen Ones, I speak of men, men and -machines—armed as we are armed with guns and bullets—but they are not armored as we are armored, with the strength of the Righteous and the Armor of the Lord! Say Halleluia!"*

A faltering echo of "Halleluia," answered him. Evidently the arrogant, belligerent attitude of those two early arrivals was not shared by the majority of the congregation. But Brother Joseph did not seem in the least disturbed by the lackadaisical response.

*"Yes, they plan to fall upon us, like wolves upon the sheep!"* he continued. *"But they do not know that the Holy Fire has warned us, even as the Virgin was warned to flee into Egypt, even as Lot was warned of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah! Say Halleluia!"*

This time the chorus took on a little more strength. And it was very nearly time for Al to think about launching his first attack.

*"Yea, and the Holy Fire will tell us all, tonight, the time when the Army of Sin will seek to destroy the Holy! The Holy Fire will do more than that, I tell you! Tonight, the Holy Fire will take shape and walk among us, even as Christ Jesus took form and walked among His Apostles when He had risen! Say Halleluia!"*

This time the shout of "Halleluia!" was enough to make the floor vibrate under Al's feet.

*"The Holy Fire will lead us to victory! The Holy Fire will be our guide and our General! The form of this boy will be transformed into the Chariot of God, the vehicle for the Voice of God and the Sword of the Almighty! Say Halleluia, thank you Jesus!"*

Cacophony ensued, and Al sensed that Brother Joseph was about to turn the energy of the crowd from

positive to -negative.

*“And who are these Godless Enemies?”* Brother Joseph asked.

The response was a roar in which Alinor picked out the words “Jew,” “Communist,” “Liberal,” and “Satanist,” as the most frequent.

*“And what do we do about them?”*

Someone started a chant of “Kill, kill, kill,” which was quickly picked up by the rest, until the entire room—probably the entire building—resonated with it. The energy coming from them made Alinor shudder, even though he was shielded from most of it.

And the Salamander was—literally—eating it up. Al sensed that the creature was prying open its prison from within. Like a man forcing a door open against a heavy spring.

*He’s forcing it open against the binding spell, Al -decided. He needs the energy of the crowd to do it, as I thought.*

He waited, as the Salamander slowly forced its way out of its prison, opening a doorway into the halfworld, bit by bit, until it stood free in the halfworld and moved away from the flagpole—

*:Now, Sarah!:* Al “shouted,” and cast the spell that permitted him to “step” out of the physical world into the halfworld. He placed himself squarely between the Salamander and its home, before the creature was even aware that he was there. As he got into place and launched a levin-bolt at the creature, Sarah flung herself between the Salamander and Jamie, covering him with her own insubstantial body.

The Salamander saw her just as Al’s levin-bolt struck it from behind. It turned—its eyes were pits of fire, and its black body hunched as it snarled with rage and prepared to attack—

And Alinor cast the second spell he had readied. The one that reinforced Sarah’s protections, bolstering her powers—sealing Jamie away from its reach.

As the Salamander lunged for him, he cast his third spell—reaching the absolute limits of his ability as a mage—and eluded it by a hair, stepping out of the halfworld and back into his hiding place behind the curtains, with scarcely a ripple in the cloth to mark his movement.

Weakness flooded through him, but he dared not pause, not even for a moment. Timing—that was going to be all of it.

Outside the curtains, Brother Joseph had no idea that anything was going wrong.

He was about to find out differently.

*Thank Danaa this isn’t spell-casting as such—*The thought was fleeting; hardly noted as Al attacked the breaker boxes, fusing everything in sight, so that nothing would protect the lines beyond, and surging every circuit, every wire—

A full lightning strike couldn’t have wreaked more havoc. Every bulb in the hall exploded in a shower of sparks—electricity arced from raw sockets and dozens of fires burst into existence as wires shorted out. The Salamander’s energy-source fragmented as the crowd -itself fragmented into a chaos of screaming,

frightened humans, each one clawing for an exit and paying no attention to anything else. Now they showed their true colors, panicking, trampling over each other, ruled only by fear; a selfish fear that cried out from each wizened little soul that *he* was more important than anyone else here, that *he* should be saved—

Brother Joseph screamed at them, howled orders at them, but the sound system had died a fiery death with the first surge, and not even he could shout loud enough to be heard over the screams of his congregation.

Alinor took advantage of the chaos to dash aside the curtains and fling himself at Jamie's chair, pulling out the only physical weapon he'd brought with him, a silver-bladed knife. Jamie's guards had been the first to flee, and Brother Joseph was temporarily paying no attention to anything behind him. Alinor slashed through the straps holding Jamie to the chair; the boy started at the first touch, then stared at his rescuer in numb surprise. Not that Al blamed him; he wasn't wasting any energy on a disguising illusion.

"Sarah sent me," he said in the boy's ear, as he slashed the last of the bonds. He glanced briefly into the halfworld; with no energy-source to help it, with Sarah and Alinor protecting the boy in the halfworld and the physical world, there was only one logical place for the Salamander to go—back into its prison.

And once there, Alinor could see it got no further chance to escape until he delivered it to a greater mage than he; one who could seal it there for all time.

The Salamander had other ideas.

It shrank away from Sarah, the child-spirit incandescent with a cool power far beyond anything that Alinor had sent her, standing between it and its prey like an avenging angel. It didn't even try to confront her—but instead of leaping for the protection of its prison-home, it turned, snarling, and leapt in another direction entirely.

Straight for Jamie's father.

Alinor snatched the boy up and ran with him as the Salamander made brutal contact and the drunkard's face and body convulsed. Where the Salamander had found the energy to make the leap into an unprepared, unsuitable body, Al didn't know—but he had to get Jamie away, and now, before anything else happened. Once Jamie was safe—

The fires were spreading; one whole corner of the hall was ablaze, giving more than enough light for Al to see his way to the exit with Jamie. He jumped over fallen chairs, kicking others out of the way, as he bullied his way through confused and terrified humans to the door that led to the outside corridor.

But suddenly someone blocked his path, deliberately. A man with a shaven head, in the Chosen Ones' uniform, stood in an attack position and brandished an enormous, unwieldy knife at him, blocking his way.

The man Al cared nothing for. His weapon, however—*Cold Iron*—

Al acted instinctively, without thinking, lashing out with his mind and throwing an illusion of nightmares straight into the man's thoughts, bargaining that he might be marginally sensitive. It worked better than he could have hoped, sending the man screaming to the ground, clutching at his head, howling that his brain was being eaten by serpents.

Alinor kicked him in the side as he passed, to ensure that he did not follow, felt the crunch of broken bones beneath his heel, and ran on.

He shoved his way through the last of the panicked Chosen Ones—old people, mostly, too frightened and bewildered to know where to go—but once he was out in the corridor leading to the bunker entrance he met with a new tide of humans, this time pushing and shoving their way *into* the depths of the underground building.

*What—*

The answer came with the muffled, staccato *crack* of automatic weapons' fire just beyond the entrance. He shoved his way into the middle of the corridor just as an explosion blew the doors off the hinges and deafened him.

The people at the farthest end of the tunnel were flung into the air, backlit by the fires outside; they flew at him and hit the ground, in a curious time-dilation slow-motion. Those nearest him cowered away, hiding their faces in their arms. Jamie started and began shaking, but neither cried out nor hid his face.

*The raid—great Danaa, they've started the raid—*

His ears weren't working right, though he doubted the humans could hear anything at all. Explosions and the sound of gunfire came to him muffled, as if his head was bracket in pillows. He held the boy to his chest and forced his way through the crowd; it thinned quickly as noncombatants fled into the depths of the bunker.

He burst out into a scene straight from a war movie.

Fires roared everywhere; helicopters touched down and disgorged troops wearing SWAT team, DEA and FBI vests, who poured from the hatches and took cover. *They* didn't seem to be firing until they had sure targets; all the random gunfire was coming from sandbagged gun emplacements and the weaponry of the Guard, Junior and Senior.

One of the helicopters hovered overhead, flooding the area with light from a rack of lamps attached on the side. And in the light, Al caught a flash of familiar color—something that didn't belong in this chaos of camouflage and khaki.

A red jumpsuit.

*Bob!*

The mechanic wasn't that far away, thank the gods. He dashed across the open space between himself and the chopper, praying that the invaders would see he was carrying a child and that he was unarmed, and would hold their fire. Bob recognized him as he was halfway across and ran to meet him. He thrust the child into Bob's arms before the human could get a word out.

"Get him out of here!" Al shouted—and before Bob could grab his arm, he turned and ran back in the direction he had come.

He had unfinished business to attend to.

But the unfinished business was coming to him.



He sensed his enemy's approach before he saw it—then saw, as the Salamander emerged, that his enemies were two, not one. Jamie's father emerged from the mouth of the bunker and beside him was Brother Joseph with something long and sharp in his hands. The drunk's expression had completely changed, his eyes pits of fire, his face no longer remotely human.

*So much for James Chase. He was half brain-dead -already, from the alcohol; it must have been easy for the Salamander to take him.*

The preacher spotted Al first and pointed, his mouth opening in a shout Al couldn't hear. But the Salamander did; its mouth twisted in a snarl, and it made a lashing motion with its arms—

And the razor-wire surrounding the compound came to life, writhing against its supports, trying to reach Alinor. He backpedaled into the temporary safety of a helicopter, but the stuff was still coming, and if it bound him—

A hellish noise right beside him pounded him into the dirt, as the door-gunner in the chopper let loose a barrage against a trio of gunmen that caught Jim Chase and cut him in half. Brother Joseph must have seen the gunner take aim; he hit the dirt in time to save himself, but Jamie's father had only seconds to live—

Seconds were enough for the Salamander.

As another munitions dump exploded on the far side of the compound, light flared and danced around the two men, one dying, one alive—and when it faded, the Salamander glared at Al from out of Brother Joseph's eyes.

The man's eyes swept the space between them and found him, stabbed him. This time Alinor did not run from the challenge. He faced it; walked slowly toward it, oblivious to the gunfire around him, to the explosions as one of the munitions dumps went up in the near distance, a giant blossom of orange flame. None of that could touch him now—not in this moment. There was only one -enemy that mattered. The Salamander: ancient as he, perhaps more so—and his enemy since the -moment he'd first seen it.

*:All!: Sarah's voice rang inside his head, although he didn't sense her anywhere in the chaos.: Jamie's safe!:*

That was all he needed. There was one thing he had not yet tried with the beast to defeat it—and it was now, or see the thing loose in the world again, jumping from host to host like any parasite, bringing rage and chaos wherever it went. This fragile world could bear no more of that—

The monster was hanging back for some reason—

*Waiting for more power?*

Well, then, he'd give it power. He'd cram power down the damned thing's throat until it choked!

He rushed it; the monster wasn't expecting *that* and tried to elude him, but he grappled with it. It reverted to its old ways and tried to manipulate him as it manipulated the humans, but this time instead of fighting it, Al let it happen. The Salamander infused him with anger, but it could not direct that anger, and in a sudden surge of rage-born strength, Al tore the flagpole from its hands.

And with the pole in his hands—he *knew* what it was. Not just a prison, but *aground*, a focal point for the Salamander’s hold on the physical world.

And any ground could be shorted out.

*I’ve learned how electricity works, and magic and electricity are related in every important way. Only you don’t know that, do you, monster? Come on, give me all you’ve got, you’re getting it back!*

Again, he did not think, he simply acted; linking into every power source available to him, whether the physical fire, the arcing electrical current—

*:Here!:* Sarah cried, and a new source of power surged into him, a power so pure, clean, and strong he did not want to think of what its source might be—

He plunged the staff into the Salamander’s chest—and the creature laughed, for how could he expect to harm it with its own ground? He held to his end of the flagpole as the Salamander closed both hands about the other end and opened itself up to drain him of power.

And the moment it opened itself, Alinor leaped back and poured every bit of power he had available *into* it.

The staff shattered as the massed electricity of the compound’s power grid arced into it; the Salamander convulsed, its mouth gaping in surprise, and Al loosed the magical power Sarah was channeling into the raw wound.

Its mouth formed the word “No!” but it never got a chance to utter it. Its eyes glared like a fire’s last glowing coal, defiant before its death, and between one breath and the next—it vaporized.

Brother Joseph fell to the ground, hardly recognizable as human, a burnt and twisted human cinder. The last charred sliver of the staff dropped beside him.

As Al stood there numbly, a bullet ricocheted off the building nearest him and buzzed past his ear, startling him into life. He glanced around; the Good Guys seemed to be winning, but there was no reason *why he* had to stay around to help—

A hint of movement on the other side of the fence gave him enough warning to ready himself; in the next moment, Andur launched himself over the tangle of wire and slid to a halt beside him. He grabbed a double-handful of mane and hauled himself aboard as another bullet buzzed by, much too close for comfort. He watched a SWAT officer level a pistol at him, then lower it, amazed—then Andur was off like a shadow beneath the moon, leaving the noises and fire far behind. . . .

All Al really wanted to do was get back and into a bed, any bed—but he reached back and touched one mind in all the chaos.

*I was never there. You never saw me. Bob ran in and rescued you. It was all Bob. . . .*

Then he allowed himself to slump over Andur’s neck.

\* \* \*

“Hey, Norris!”

Alinor looked up from beneath the hood of the car to see one of the Firestone boys waving at him.

“Yeah?” he said, standing up and wiping his hands on a rag. “What’s up?”

“There’s a cop here, he’s looking for a mech named Al. Big blond guy, says he wears black a lot. Know anybody like that?” The Firestone pitman eyed Al’s scarlet Nomex jumpsuit and raven hair with amusement.

“Not around here,” Al said truthfully. “The head of Fairgrove looks like that, but he never leaves Savannah.” *And that’ll teach you for not answering my aid-calls, Keighvin Silverhair.*

“Well, he’s with Bob, so I guess it must be something about the raid on those fundie nuts they pulled the other night.” His curiosity satisfied, the pitman turned back to his stack of tires, and Al returned to his engine. He was paying only scant attention to it, however; most of his attention was taken up with the four humans heading for the pits.

Frank Casey didn’t know it, but the moment he’d passed out of Alinor’s sight, Al’s appearance and name had been altered. And in the stories he’d told the rest of the crews, the actions that should have been ascribed to Al had mostly been attached to Bob—with the exception of those few that could not logically have been transferred. *Those* Al left alone, taking on a new persona, entirely, of Norris Alison. The story was that Al had gotten into the Chosen Ones’ compound and sabotaged their electrical system, giving the impromptu army good cover for their invasion. Then he had somehow slipped past the sentries outside and had -vanished.

Bob’s *sother* partner, the sable-haired “Norris,” had shown up the next morning, after Bob supposedly called for extra help on “Al’s” disappearance.

Cindy’s memories had been altered, though not without much misgiving on Al’s part. He hated to do it, but the memory of her discovery of Alinor’s species had been temporarily blocked. The not-so-surprising result was that her growing emotional attachments to both Al and Bob had been resolved into a very significant attachment to Bob alone. And now that Bob was the sole rescuer of her child—

Al sighed. *Well, he certainly seems to be enjoying his new status.* His loss was Bob’s gain . . . and Cindy *was* mortal; he was her kind. There would be no conflict there.

*If anything more permanent ever comes of this, he promised himself, I’ll take the block off her real memories. By then she’ll have learned about us all over again, and she’ll know why I had to take them.*

Frank Casey wore the look of a very frustrated man as he searched pit row for someone who didn’t exist. Finally he gave up and allowed Bob to bring them all over to the Firestone pit for a cold drink.

Al waited while Bob fished soft drinks out of the cooler, watching Jamie out of the corner of his eye. This was the boy’s first day out of the hospital, and although he was still painfully thin, he had some of a child’s proper liveliness back. When they had all been served, he stood up and sauntered over himself, pulling out a Gatorade before turning to face the others.

“Miz Chase,” he said, tugging the brim of his cap. “Well, so this is the little guy, hmm?”

Cindy nodded, and Jamie peered up at him, a little frown line between his eyebrows, as if he was trying to see something and having trouble doing so.

“I don’t know if Bob told you, but we’re all through here after the race tomorrow. We’ll be packing up and heading back. Did you have any plans?” Then, before she could react to what could only be bad news, he added, “You’re welcome to come along, of course, if you’ve nowhere you need to go. We can tow your car, and the boy can sleep or play in the RV. You, well, we could use another driver to switch off with. Our boss, Kevin—well, he might maybe need another hand in the office. If he don’t, likely one of the test drivers can dig up a job. Tannim’s got a thumb in about everything.”

She hesitated for only a moment before saying, with a shy glance at Bob, “If you really don’t mind, I think I’d like that. There isn’t that much for me in Atlanta except the house—”

“Can always sell it,” he suggested.

Then he turned away as if he had lost interest in the conversation, pausing only long enough to drop his race-cap over Jamie’s head. The boy lit up with a smile that rivaled the Oklahoma sun and ran to his mother.

The quartet drifted away after a final futile effort to find “Al,” and before too very long, the rest of the crew -departed in search of dinner and a nap before the long night to come of last-minute race-preps. The only sounds in the pit were those of reggae on a distant radio, cooling metal, an errant breeze—

But suddenly Al had the feeling that he was being watched.

He turned abruptly.

For a moment there was nothing behind him at all—then, there was a stirring in the air, a glimmer—and there was Sarah, watching him with a serious look on her face.

*:I’ve come to say good-bye, she said solemnly.: Jamie doesn’t need me, and all the Chosen Ones are in jail, so I have to go.:*

He nodded gravely. “I understand,” he told her. “You were a very brave fighter out there, you know. A true warrior. I was proud to be on your side.”

She looked wistfully at him.*:You’re nice, she said.: I wish I could say good-bye right.:*

It might have been that exposure to the Salamander made him more sensitive; it might simply have been that her lonely expression told him everything he needed to know about what she meant by “saying good-bye right.”

Well, after all, he *was* one of the Folk.

He triggered the spell and moved into the halfworld with her.

She clapped both her hands to her mouth in surprise and delight.*:Oh!:* she exclaimed—and then she ran to him.

He held out his arms and caught her, holding her, hugging her for a long, timeless moment, trying to make

up for all the hugs that she had never gotten. He thought she might be crying; when she pulled away, wiping away tears, he came near to tears himself.

*:I have to go,:she said.:I love you.:*

She faded away, or rather, faded *into* something, into a softer, gentle version of that blinding Power she had been linked with when she protected Jamie and helped him. Alinor wasn't certain he could put a name to that Power. He wasn't certain that he needed to.

"I love you, too, Sarah," he replied, as the last wisp of her melted away.

He waited a moment longer, smiling in the last light of her passing until he was alone in the halfworld, and finally sighed and triggered the magic to take him back.

With his feet firmly planted on mortal cement, he pulled the windblown hair from his face, packed up his tool kit and headed back to the RV.

After all, there was a race left to run.

## **-- When the Bough Breaks --**

### **Chapter One**

Maclyn, Knight of the High Court of Elfhame Outremer, leaned forward over the steering wheel of his classic '57 Chevy and flicked on the radio. Q-103 FM was playing two-fer-Tuesdays and had just finished up a set by Fleetwood Mac. The DJ cut into the fadeout, chattering, "Coming up for all you April Fools—two-fers by Phil Collins, The Beatles, and Grim Reaper. But first . . . a Guns N' Roses two-fer. . ."

"Aw Gawd, not Guns N' Roses. If I want to listen to a garage band, I'll find a good one. . . ." The engine growled and downshifted as his convertible pulled out of the -secluded dirt road into traffic. The driver of a late-model Ford Taurus glanced over at them and did a classic double-take, jerking her head around to stare. Mac flashed a grin in her direction, and she waved before driving on.

His elvensteed, currently taking the form of a Palomino-gold '57 Chevy convertible with cream trim, was a traffic stopper. Rhellen didn't cause quite the disruption to traffic he would have in his regular form, Mac reflected, but he was still impressive. And women loved him.

With any luck, he would impress the socks off of Lianne McCormick.

Mac pushed his troubles with the Seleighe Court out of his mind. There would be time to deal with Felouen and her demands. The present, as far as he was concerned, wasn't the time.

"Okay, Rhellen, let's make some time," he told the car. "Tonight—weparty!"

The elvensteed growled affirmation and accelerated past two Fayetteville city policemen and one North Carolina Highway Patrol trooper, hitting seventy-five without causing so much as a chirp on their radar.

With Rhellen in full charge, Mac made it to Lianne's apartment complex running seemingly just under Mach One. *She*, the current human lady of his interest, if not his dreams, was sitting on the deck of her apartment grading papers, a tiny frown of concentration on her face. He pulled up silently and vaulted out of the car in equal -silence, which gave him a chance to admire her before she spotted him. She was slender, with short, soft chestnut hair, deep blue eyes and pale, flawless skin—she had the fragile, ethereal look frequently attributed to one of his own people. She had, too, the blazing energy of a human—she was, he thought, one of the delicate mayflies of the sentient world.

Like all humans.

*Here today and gone tomorrow.* He felt a moment of poignant loss and suppressed it. *But today will be a lot of fun, anyway.*

He intentionally crunched some gravel on the walk to let her know he was there.

She looked up, and her face lit with an amazingly sweet smile. “Hey!” she said. “Glad you made it. I was beginning to think you'd changed your mind. Or come to your senses or something.” She grinned when she said that, but Mac felt the pain of old rejection masked in her voice.

“Stand up a gorgeous gal like you?” he asked. “Not in this lifetime.”

She chuckled and arched an eyebrow. “Yeah, yeah—sure, sure. So are we going to go someplace, or am I going to spend the rest of the evening checking math tests?”

He smirked. “You won't even remember what math tests are.”

“I could live with that.” She shoved her papers inside the front door of her apartment and locked it. “Let's go.”

He showed her to the Chevy, and waited for her eyes to light up. Which they did, as predicted.

“Wow!” she whispered, and ran her hand slowly along one gleaming fender. “What a beauty. I've never seen one this color—or in such perfect condition.”

Mac felt Rhellen's pleasure and grinned. “Custom job. I'm pretty proud of him.”

“I'll bet.” A puzzled expression crossed her face. “Him?” she asked. “I've never heard anyone refer to a car *ashim* before.”

“In this case, it's appropriate,” Mac assured her.

Lianne stood back and crossed her arms over her chest. She tipped her head to one side and studied the car. She went down on one knee and carefully examined the under-carriage. Finally she nodded. “You're right. Definitely a him.”

*He'll love you for that,* Mac thought. *I think, lady, that you've just won yourself a friend.*

Rhellen preened under all the attention.

“By the way,” she said, as she climbed into the passenger's side, “you haven't forgotten the field trip

tomorrow, have you? I hope you're ready for it; you're going to need all the help you can get."

He laughed. "Forgotten, no. Worried? Also no. What's to worry about a herd of kids who're probably car-crazy to begin with? It'll be a snap."

She didn't reply; just smiled, the kind of enigmatic smile found on the Mona Lisa. The smile that said—"I know something you don't know, but you're going to have to find out for yourself."

The kind of smile his mother Dierdre would give him—

For a moment, he was taken aback by it, enough for a nagging little worry to intrude.

Then he dismissed it. What could this mere human know that he, with all his centuries, didn't? Ridiculous. He'd enthrall her little flock, dazzle her with his cleverness, and it would all be a pleasant day for everyone concerned.

Right now, he would concern himself with *tonight*. Tomorrow was not worth even thinking about. . . .

\* \* \*

*Looks like the troops have arrived.* "Hey, beautiful!" Mac shouted across the parking lot at Lianne as she jumped out of the first of the two bright yellow school buses to arrive at Fayetteville International Speedway. "What's a babe like you doing in a place like this? Sweetheart, where have you been all my life? Come, let me take you to the Casbah, where we will make beautiful music together. We will make lo—"

She made a shushing motion at Mac and blushed. "Like tigers," he finished. Neither the gesture nor the blush escaped the noisy herd of children who followed her out of the bus.

"O-o-o-oh!" yelled one boy. "Miss McCormick has a boyfriend!"

"Miss McCormick has a boyfriend," someone else repeated.

A chant started. "Miss McCormick has a boyfriend—Miss McCormick has a boyfriend . . . ."

Maclyn regretted his impulsive teasing. He had obviously just made things difficult for her, and he suspected she didn't appreciate the attention she was getting.

A teacher from one of the other buses, a good-looking woman in her mid-thirties, stared at him curiously, then walked over and whispered something to the beleaguered Lianne. Lianne nodded slowly, and the other woman raised an eyebrow. She gave Mac an appreciative once-over as she returned to her own flock of children.

He was used to getting those calculating looks from women. Usually, he enjoyed them. This time, for some reason, he felt embarrassed.

Lianne got her class lined up and led them across the pavement toward him. She sent him a killing glare as she and the rowdy fifth-graders advanced.

"Lianne, I'm sorry. I didn't realize that they would do that," he said.

“I’ll bet.” The kids behind her had taken up a whispered refrain of “Miss McCormick sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G,” and Lianne did not look mollified in the least by his apology. “The only way you wouldn’t have known they would do that is if you’d never been a kid in the fifth grade before.”

*And there, he thought, you have it. I haven’t ever been in the fifth grade. So how was I supposed to know? It’s not my fault your class is a mob of little barbarians. I’m innocent—this time. Unfortunately, there is no way in the world that I could convince you of that without blowing my cover.*

He smiled at her, shrugged helplessly, and tried to look boyishly ingenuous. “What can I say?” he asked. And then, in a louder voice that carried to the last kid in the back of the last line, Mac introduced himself to the class. “Hi. I’m Mac Lynn, and I drive race cars.”

*:Och, and he drives the maidens wild, he does, too!: came an impish, entirely uninvited thread of Mindspeech.: You have only to ask him, and he’ll tell ye so!:*

*:Mother!:* he snapped, trying to regain his aplomb.

*:So gallant, so regal, so handsome. And so modest he is—his hat sometimes even fits him these days! Why, he drives race cars, does he? Sure and what a fine man he must be!:*

*:MOTHER!:*

Despite Dierdre’s teasing, it was a good opening line. The kids calmed down and studied him, checking, he suspected, to see if they recognized him from television.

Mac didn’t mind. It wasn’t likely that they would, but the moment of their uncertainty would buy him their attention. He could take it from there. He drew on his years of racing experience, and with purely elvish fervor, translated his enthusiasm into terms that drew the sixty-plus fifth-graders in front of him wholeheartedly into the world he loved.

“What do you watch on television?”

Mac was answered by a barrage of titles—almost all of them cop shows or adventure cartoons. “See, now, on all of those shows, you get to watch car-chases, or the heroes drive hot cars. Think of Don Johnson without the Daytona, or Magnum without the red Ferrari—it just doesn’t work, right? Hey, your folks drive cars, you see ads on TV, there are roads practically everywhere—people are in love with cars. Some of us love ’em so much we want to drive ’em for a living. Think any of you would like to do that?”

A chorus of “Yeah!” and “Sure!” came back at him.

They were in his pocket. It was time to get them -moving—show them the sights. He asked them, “So . . . do you want to go look at some race cars, or what?”

They cheered.

*Nice kids, he thought. I’m glad I decided to do this.*



*Gruesome bunch of larvae*, Mac thought. He'd spent the better part of two hours showing the kids garages and pits, the medevac helicopter, the infield and starter's tower, and introducing them to mechanics and crew chiefs and various race drivers. Including his mother.

They'd enjoyed his mother, who just happened to be his crew chief. D.D. Reed (not as close to Dierdre as Mac Lynn was to Maclyn, but it would do) was ninety-five pounds of lightning and thunder, all wrapped up in one coveralled, pony-tailed, hellcat package. She took no guff from anyone and handed out twice the grief he ever gave her. She also looked half his age.

She gave him lip mental and audible, the mental over Lianne and his ego, the audible over everything else—much to the entertainment of the rest of the pit crews: his, and everyone else's within hearing. His crew knew the secret, of course, and thought it hilarious. Of the rest, there were a few more SERRA mages nearby that had a notion—and to those left, it was *still* funny to hear a "girl" giving hotshot Mac Lynn a hard time. Those who couldn't "hear" the telepathic comments were very nearly as amused as those who could.

The kids—*little sadists*—had loved it.

He'd also spent the better part of two hours watching them stick chewing gum on walls and under ledges when they thought no one was looking, kick each other in the shins, poke and prod each other and then stare off innocently into space when someone screeched. When he'd joked that some cars were held together with bubble-gum, one kid actually, sincerely, offered him his. Freshly chewed. Mac couldn't believe it.

He had no idea how many lug-nuts would be missing by day's end. He'd listened to their gross jokes. He'd answered their weird questions. He'd had more than enough. Finally, it was time to sit down on the small stands and watch the drivers speeding alone around the track in the time trials.

Mac was ready for the break. As kids wiggled and squealed and squirmed and passed notes and stuffed -paper down each other's shirts, he knew a moment of sheer gratitude that he had been spared the indignity of fifth grade.

*:They'd not have had you. You were worse than any of them.:*

He sighed.: *Thank you, Mother.:*

His mother might have been right, he reflected. Never-theless, he felt admiration for the guts of the teacher who had to put up with this sort of nonsense on a regular basis. He rolled his eyes and grinned over the kids' heads at Lianne.

She raised her eyebrows in a mime of disbelief at her class's behavior and grinned back.

Cars roared around the track, and from their front-row seats in the pits, the smell of oil, gasoline, exhaust, and hot rubber numbed the nose while the howling of engines numbed the mind. The few fans in the stands screamed and cheered at their favorites, as if by sheer volume they could push the drivers to better times. The palpable electricity in the atmosphere always got to Mac—that excitement was what had originally pulled him out of the timeless magic of Underhill and into the very human world of auto racing.

In between runs, the kids asked *more* questions.

One stub-nosed kid with bright brown eyes waved his hand in the air at Mac and bounced up and down on his bleacher seat until Mac was sure it was going to have a permanent bow in it. “Yes?” he asked warily. He’d already had more than a taste of what fifth grade boys considered reasonable to ask.

“I want to drive a race car when I get out of school, but Mom and Dad say I have to go to college. Did you have to go to college?”

That question seemed pretty harmless.

Lianne, however, gave Mac a warning look.

*Oh, yeah. College. That great baby-sitter of the post-adolescent masses. Naturally Lianne is going to want me to be strongly in favor of it.*

Mac shrugged helplessly. “No. I didn’t go to college, but I wish I had.” It was an easy lie. With luck it would mollify Lianne. “A college education is a good idea. If nothing else, it will give you something to fall back on if racing doesn’t work out.”

The look in her eyes when he said that, though, made him think he should have quit with a simple no.

And just then, D.D. popped up. “Mac doesn’t need college,” she said, with a sly look and a toss of her blond ponytail that told him she was going to zing him again. “He doesn’t even need a brain; he never uses the itty-bitty one he’s got. He has the rest of us to think for him. We don’t believe in overstressing anything that weak. Now *me*, I needed every mechanical engineering and physics course I could cram.”

The kid looked confused. “Why?” he asked. “You’re just a mechanic.”

D.D. cast her bright green eyes up to the sky. “Gloriosky. *Just* a mechanic? Sweetie-pie, I not only have to know *how* every part in that car works, I have to know *why*. This is leading-edge technology here; what we’ve got on our cars your daddy won’t be able to buy for ten, maybe twenty years. There’s no manual for what we’re doing; we’re working real automotive magic out there.”

“I’ll say,” one of the crew called out. “And D.D.’s the great high wizard of Ah’s. She can tell you what’s wrong with an engine just *by listening* to it.”

“And you don’t get *that* kind of expertise working on a dune buggy in your back yard—right, Mac?” she finished triumphantly, and vanished back behind a stack of tires.

*:There. Saved you again.:*

With the sinking feeling that he was getting deeply mired in something he was never going to escape from, he sought a graceful out. A flash of deep blue on the track caught his eye and promised sudden salvation.

“Much as I hate to admit it, my crew chief’s half right. Here’s the other half. There’s more to racing than driving fast—” he told them “—more even than winning races. Racing is a business. And it’s a tough one. If you can’t make that business pay off, you won’t be racing.” He waved over to the starting line. “Look at Number Fifty-eight, the car getting ready to start now. That’s Keith Brightman. He’s driving a ’93 Lola Wombat right now. He owns it himself. He has an efficient crew and a talented mechanic, and he’s a very good driver—but if he didn’t know how to run a business, he wouldn’t be able to race his own cars.”

D.D. appeared from somewhere else. “And if he didn’t know his engineering, he wouldn’t be able to trouble-shoot his vehicle while he’s driving it. Half the time he tells his crew what’s wrong, which is a heckuva help, let me tell you, and more than Tom Cruise here can do.”

She vanished again. Mac chose to ignore her.

“Keith is a good example of somebody who is doing what he wants to do because he has the smarts and the guts, and because he isn’t afraid to work hard. If you want to be a driver, use him as your example.”

“Does *she* have a college education?” the school-hater asked with a hopeful glance towards the deep-blue Wombat.

“You bet,” Mac said. He’d picked Keith as his shining example of racetrack virtue for precisely that reason. It was going to pay off, too, he could tell. Lianne sent an appreciative glance in his direction. “College was where Keith learned about mechanical engineering, and probably learned how to run a business,” he added. “And had fun doing it.”

“*Brightman, K. Mech-E, Rose-Hulman Polytech, class of 1987, cum laude!*” screeched a voice that was getting tiresomely familiar, from just behind Mac.

The Wombat took off with a roar, and the questions stopped. The kids watched the car intently. Maclyn could tell they were impressed. Hell, he was impressed. More than it ever had before, the Wombat *moved*; Keith was putting on a real show. Mac could hear a difference in the engine, a rich, deep throb of power that grabbed deep in his gut and twisted; the rookie’s mechanic had made an exotic modification somewhere. That damned Wombat was flying like it thought it was a fighter plane and had forgotten the ground.

*What has Brightman done to that engine? Wonderful stuff, Mac mused. Magic with gears and cylinders—and maybe something Mom can duplicate. I hope she’s -listening.*

*:I am—what do you think I am, tone-deaf? I also happen to be Watching it. Teach your grandmam to suck eggs, why don’t you.:*

Maclyn had to give the Wombat’s crew credit. On a shoestring budget and what amounted to little more than native genius, they were putting themselves in a position to give the big boys a run for their money.

Mac’s ears followed the car even after it was out of sight. *:He’s taking seconds off of the best time we’ve had so far.:* Mac commented to his crew chief.

*:I’m paying attention, Mac.:* D.D. retorted. *:Unless someone else comes up with a miracle, he’s just gotten the pole.:*

The car did a flawless lap and dove into the final curve as if it owned it—and there was a sudden hollow, popping sound. It wasn’t much of a noise really, but Mac’s throat tightened, and his mouth went dry. The sudden hush of the crowd in the stand across from the pits was the first indication of the seriousness of the problem—then the car became visible from the right side of the pits, and Mac saw a tiny trail of smoke and sparks that streamed out from beneath the front wheels.

D.D.’s voice was in his head, all humor gone. *:Sweet Daana—Mac, a control arm just sheared! The lad’s going to lose her any second—:*

For one timeless instant, the car continued as though nothing was wrong, and then it seemed to bunch itself like a wild animal crouching for the attack. It swerved wildly to the left, then fishtailed back to the right, and in the middle of its rightward spin, collided with the outside wall. It rebounded and launched itself into the air, bounding end over end like a skier doing stunts off a ramp. The Lola disintegrated just as it was designed to, but in the direction it was heading, it was going to hit the low retaining wall in front of the pits nose-first at around a hundred miles per hour. And it was going to do it a mere twenty yards from sixty-plus school kids.

“No!” Mac heard someone bellow, and realized the voice was his own. *Gods and demons*, he thought. *Oh gods above—Keith isn’t going to make it out of there, and we aren’t going to make it out of here!*

A deep bass *whump* marked the car’s impact. Bits of car ricocheted back towards the crowd, and others came over the retaining wall; flames spurted from the engine pinwheeling across the asphalt. Screaming fans saw impending disaster and panicked. They jumped off the sides of the stands and tumbled to the ground, packing and running like frightened cattle in a slaughterhouse pen.

The roll-caged cockpit skidded upside-down in the middle of the track, trailing sparks. It followed the flaming engine unit as though they were strung together, its trajectory matching the engine’s—one of the worst possible scenarios Mac could imagine.

*They’re built to come apart to save the driver, dammit!* Mac thought in anguish, as he watched the cockpit collide with the engine right in front of the stands. Fuel spurted from the ruptured fuel-cell, torn open lengthwise, next to the limp driver. The spreading puddle of fuel inched nearer the shooting flames. *I can see the flames. Gods, I can see the flames—alcohol fuel should burn almost invisibly—this is even worse than it looks. Keith’s gotta be dead by now.*

Mac could only watch numbly. His puny magics were useless here. From the paddock, vehicles were gunning to intercept the wreck before it had even stopped moving. He heard a metallic whine, building in pitch, as the track medevac helicopter started its engines. *Now the whole tank goes*, he thought. *We have to get the kids out of here—*

There was no way. Shrapnel would be filling the air in a second, and it would fall everywhere, even in the paddock. “Get them down beneath the seats,” he shouted; he, Lianne, and the chaperons started pushing kids down.

He became aware of a tingling at the base of his skull. The hair on his arms was standing up—and he realized that he had first felt this sensation right after the car started to go out of control. His mind gave the sensation a name.

*Psi. TK.*

D.D., the Healer, the Empath, Mindspoke with quiet amazement.: *No one has been hurt yet by the flying -debris. The car hasn’t exploded yet. It’s coming from near you, Mac—but who’s responsible? There isn’t a SERRA Psi out here, and no elves but us, and none of the mages have the right spells. . . . :*

Somebody nearby was keeping the car from blowing.

Mac Looked around him. One fragile-looking little girl sat, transfixed, watching the disaster. Motionless,

silent, unblinking, she could have been a statue of a fifth grader, except for the breeze that blew her wispy blond hair around her face and caused her plaid skirt to ripple around the tops of her white kneesocks.

And from her poured incredible power.

In the crowd across the track from the paddock, one woman ignored the people milling around her—seemed even to ignore the accident. She read the face of a meter whose needle was in the far right-hand side of the red zone; she wore a cool, satisfied smile. Then she locked long, perfectly manicured fingers around a voice-activated mini-recorder and whispered into it.

“The accident went off flawlessly—shouldn’t be enough left of the car to prove sabotage. Rumors were right—definitely telekinetic activity here. Localized it to the pits across from where I’m standing, but too many people around to get a definite fix. TK is preventing the explosion of the car, though—bet anything on that—think one of the racing people must be our target. This explains why the Fayetteville track has such a good record, maybe. I’ll try to move in for a closer read.”

She stuffed the meter and the tape recorder, still on and ready, into her bag, and worked her way out of the crowd.

The fire crew sprayed foam on the blazing engine block and the spreading puddles of fuel; Heavy Rescue cut away bits of twisted metal. Mac stood transfixed, watching the kid who stared at the wreck.

*:Catch her before she leaves—I want to talk to her!:*D.D. ordered.

He agreed absently—then his attention was drawn to the racetrack, where one of the rescuers gave a triumphant shout.

They pulled Keith Brightman out of the car—and he stood on his own.

A number of things then happened at once. From their hiding place beside the stands, the crowd went wild. The rescuers and the young driver sprinted for the pits and the little cover they provided. Lianne noticed that one of her students was still in the path of potential danger, and Mac saw her pull the girl down behind the bleacher.

And that was when the fuel cell blew.

Shrapnel flew across the infield and into the pits. Mac winced at the sound of metal-on-metal as pieces of car went into the mesh that protected the stands. The crowd’s cheers became terrified screams.

*:Dammit!:*Mac thought as he huddled for cover behind a stack of tires.*:The kid’s got to be a line-of-sight TK. Lianne broke the contact when she moved the kid.:*

There was a pause. Then D.D. told him,*:I can still feel the child, Mac. She’s controlling the shrapnel. And no one’s been badly hurt yet.:*

Mac looked through the huddle of scared fifth-graders for the girl. Sure enough, she was peeking over the bleachers, still intent on the wreck.

The air cleared, and the crowd started climbing back into their seats. Several young soldiers on leave from Fort Bragg organized the mob of fans, then moved quickly through the crowd, looking for wounded. They escorted the three folks with small lacerations down to the infield medic.

There were no other injuries.

Down in the pit, Lianne McCormick and the other fifth-grade teachers efficiently rounded up their own crowd, herded them into a raggedy line, and marched them toward the exit.

“Lianne!” Mac bellowed. “Wait a minute!”

Lianne came back—the rest of the field trip contingent kept going. “We have to leave, Mac. This is the sort of thing parents have heart attacks over—we want to have the kids safely back to school before any footage shows up on a local newsbreak.”

“But I really wanted to talk to—”

“Gotta go, Mac,” Lianne interrupted. “See you soon?”

He forced a smile. “As soon as possible.”

She hurried after her students.

Mac’s watched his little TK trooping away, way to the back of the line—when, as if she felt his stare, she turned and looked directly at him—and the look in her eyes became one of startled recognition.

“Elf—” he read on her lips. “You’re an elf—”

He nodded, staring past her young face into her old, old eyes.

*:My name is Maclyn of Elfhame Outremer. My mother Dierdre Brighthair and I need to talk with you.:*

She didn’t respond to his Mindspoken request. She did, however, start to walk toward him—

And her face changed. Mac would have sworn that her eyes had been dark brown—but they weren’t. They were light green. The appearance of age and wisdom, the look of recognition that had been in them, were gone. Instead, her face reflected pure terror. She wrapped her skinny arms around herself and stared at him in wide-eyed dismay. Then she fled. She disappeared into the crowd of kids, leaving Mac standing open-mouthed and bewildered.

*:Mother, he noted, That was, I believe, the strangest encounter I have ever had with a human being.:*

D.D. had witnessed the last part of the odd exchange, and for once she had no sharp comeback. She only nodded, and replied, *:Something is very wrong there, Mac. I don’t know what it is, but there is something seriously wrong with that child.:*

## Chapter Two

Although he was attuned to his crew well enough that he would have *known* if any of them were hurt, Mac checked on them anyway. Everyone was fine, though one of the boys had sustained bloody knees from a slide across cement. D.D. was on the ground beside him, hands full of gauze, with a roll of adhesive tape in her mouth.

*:If you don't hurry up, you're going to lose our TK:*, D.D. said acidly, as he slouched against a tire-wall to watch her.

What was the rush? He knew where the child was. She wasn't going to escape them. *:She's in Lianne's class. I'll find her later, it's no big deal.:*

He felt his mother's impatience at that assumption, and if she'd been acidic before, her reply could have etched glass. *:I want to talk to her now, Maclyn. That makes it a "big deal.":*

The times Dierdre had taken that tone with him could be counted on both hands, with fingers left over. It instantly became a big deal for Mac. He hurried after the vanished fifth-graders, determined to hold up the buses long enough to borrow Lianne's TK student for a few minutes. Instead, he careened into a woman who'd been reaching to open the door Mac burst out of. She fell off her four-inch spike heels and landed on her rump on the cement.

"Why don't you watch where you're going, idiot!" she snapped.

She was gorgeous, in her early thirties, with porcelain-white skin and a flawless figure. She glared up at him through a tangle of waist-length red hair and snarled, "You could kill somebody that way."

*Real red hair, too*, he thought, distracted. *Not bottled.*

"I'm sorry," he said, and offered his hand. "I was trying to catch someone."

The woman was fidgeting with something in her purse—some sort of little black box. Suddenly she looked up, and seemed to actually *see* him—and her glare melted.

*Eh?*

"She isn't too bright if she didn't let you catch her," the redhead drawled. She gave him a slow, sensuous smile and extended her hand, allowing him to help her up, taking her time about it, too. She was slow to let go of his hand, holding onto it while she tested her ankles to make sure they still worked. Mac suspected that the little wiggles were also so that she could make sure he took a good look at her legs—which, painted into brown leather jeans, were admittedly worth looking at. She flipped her hair—he found himself thinking of it as *The Hair*—out of her face, and giggled.

"I suppose I'll survive." She looked up at him through her eyelashes. "You're one of the drivers, aren't you?"

Mac was wearing his Nomex suit. It was a bright red one. He might have had "RACECAR DRIVER" carved on his chest, and been a little more obvious, but he doubted it. He sighed and nodded. *Takes a real genius to figure that out*, he thought. *Lovely package, but I don't think there's anybody home inside the wrapper.*

He had lost interest in empty-headed humans a few hundred years before this one had been born. There was one advantage to the Folk; the rare cases with nothing between the ears but air tended to fall prey to Dreaming, which took them effectively out of circulation. “I’m glad you weren’t hurt,” he told her, doing his best to exude polite, *distant* sincerity. “I’ve got to run, though. I’ve got to catch a kid.”

She pouted. She actually *pouted*. “If you wanted any of the ones on those school buses, you’re too late. They just pulled out.”

“Damn!” Mac muttered aloud, without thinking.

She used his immobility as an excuse to come closer, and laid her hand on his arm. “What’s wrong? They steal something?”

“No,” he said shortly. “Hell—probably . . .” He shook his head, then looked down at her hand as if he was unpleasantly surprised to find it there.

She was observant enough to take the hint and removed it.

*I know where to find the girl. And D.D. knows I can’t outrun a bus. She should be reasonable.* “It doesn’t matter, really,” he told the woman. “Sorry I ran over you.”

“You’re the best-looking thing to run over me all week.” She flirted with her eyes shamelessly and giggled again, though she didn’t make a second attempt to touch him.

The giggle grated on Mac’s nerves. It sounded false—and anything that false made Mac very wary. It felt like—bait. And bait meant a trap.

And a trap meant that there was a lot more under The Hair than she was letting on.

“I’ll let you get back to whatever you were doing,” he said, taking a cautious step backwards.

“Oh, you don’t need to leave. I was lookin’ for you anyway . . . Mr. Lynn.” She looked at him with those big blue eyes, and leaned towards him, exuding a sweet -sexuality.

*That’s bait, all right. Wonder how many poor fools took it?*

He took another step backwards; she was oblivious to his sensitive nerves. “I . . . write—free-lance, y’know. And I just had to interview someone who knew about racing after that accident. It was just like *magic* the way nobody got hurt, don’t you think? I mean, that looked like *aterrible* accident.”

*What is she getting at? What’s she after?* “It looked worse than it was,” he murmured, looking for a way to get past her without knocking her over again.

She ignored his remark as if she hadn’t heard it. “And the way the driver walked out of there—I’ve never seen anything more *unbelievable* in my life. And all that metal flying everywhere, and not hitting anyone—well, I simply have to know how often a thing like that happens. You’d have to have *nerves* of *steel* to have a job like yours and run the risks you do every day. And I just knew you were the person to help me, Mr. Lynn. I mean, I’ve always been a big fan of yours.”

“I’m sure you have.” *Big fan of mine, eh? So why have I never seen you at the track before? And*



*why didn't you recognize me? And what were you looking for in here, if it wasn't me?*

She finally paused long enough to take a breath. "So will you let me interview you? I can't promise national publication, but I'll do my best. And the publicity would be wonderful for you, I'm sure."

She was lying, and he knew it. It wasn't just her tone, or his straining nerves. He'd seen her eyes flickering to the name tag on his suit just before she called him Mr. Lynn; he'd caught the awkward pause in her speech when she told him what she did. And he didn't believe for one minute the Sweet-Southern-Honey Vapor-Brained-Belle routine she was laying on him. She was no more from the Deep South than he was. That accent was as assumed as the one Dierdre used among mortals. The odds that she was a writer were slim—the odds she was a free lance were even slimmer. She was working for someone. And that look in her eyes—no, she wasn't anywhere near as dumb as she was playing. But now Mac was . . . curious.

*:Curious? Curious, are you! Is that what you're calling it now? Were you curious with Lianne last night, hmm? An' would ye be carin' what was between this one's ears if ye had her between the sheets, then?:* His mother sent him a wicked laugh. *I think not. Och, my laddie! He's a curious one for sure. Always mighty curious with the -ladies.:*

*:Mother, you will die young if you keep that up.:*

*:Too late for that, child. Besides, I'm only trying to teach you something—the next trap might be baited so attractively that you forget it's a trap.:* But then his mother's tone became serious. *I saw you couldn't catch the child. -Another time for that, then. If you really want to know about this little fishie, though, reel her in. I'll have a look at her.:*

*:Right.:* And suddenly Mac was all warmth and admiration. "Call me Mac," he told the redhead, and held out his hand. "Come on back and I'll introduce you round."

She shook his hand and turned up the wattage on her smile. "And you can call me . . . Jewelene. Jewelene Carter."

*:Yeah, sure.:* D.D. snickered. *:And you can call me Dolly Parton.:*

*Gawd, what a day.*

Lianne unplugged the hot-air popper and carried her buttered popcorn into the living room. She sprawled on the couch and stared out the sliding glass door at the dappled sunlight on the grass of the apartment quad. *I ought to go outside and sit in the sun on the deck and grade papers and listen to the birds,* she thought guiltily. *It's a gorgeous April day, and they're singing like mad, and love is in the air, and tomorrow it might be too cold or too wet to sit outside.*

*I need to unwind. Fresh air will do me good. I'll -regret it if I waste this weather.* Platitudes exhausted, she sighed, but she didn't move. She was too wrung out to move.

She couldn't concentrate on grading papers. She couldn't concentrate on averaging out grades. She was still mentally at the racetrack, with Mac shouting for everyone to take cover, a car about to blow up in their faces, fire, smoke, people screaming—and Amanda Kendrick sitting up on the bleacher staring at the disaster and trying to commit suicide. The entire business ground one more time through the seemingly

endless loop it had worn in her memory.

It had been close. Amanda was no more than behind the bleachers when the motor blew—and there had been hot metal flying *everywhere*.

*Except where there were people, Lianne mused. But that was luck. Amanda isn't stupid—not really. She had to know she was in danger. So why did she just sit there like a—what?*

It was a bizarre accident. Everything had been stacked against them. It was a wonder somebody wasn't dead. She'd heard later that only three people had been injured, and those had been fixable with a stitch or two. It seemed impossible. There had been no dead kids whose parents had to be phoned, no trips to the emergency room in the back of a wailing ambulance holding some bloody little hand, no six-o'clock news rehashes with plenty of gory film. There could have been. In fact, she didn't see how any of those nightmares had been avoided. Lianne decided she was about ready to believe in miracles.

So, really, it had ended very well.

*I'll never go on a field trip again, though. Anybody who takes fifth-graders on one of those things should automatically get a prescription for Valium from the Board of Education.*

Lianne sighed again and snuggled further into the plush cushioning of the couch. Her mind flicked back to Amanda Kendrick.

*Something is wrong with this picture, kiddo. Amanda wasn't frozen in shock at the sight of the accident. She was watching—fascinated—eating it up. She was furious when I pulled her down from her seat. And after the explosion, she was watching again.*

Lianne munched popcorn and pondered. It wasn't the first time she'd caught Amanda doing something odd, only it was the first time it had been anything so ghoulish.

She needed to talk to Amanda's family. Again. Her nose automatically wrinkled at the thought. The Kendricks were one of Fayetteville's *good* families. Daddy was a corporate lawyer, Mama was Vassar, Junior League, Arts Council—and raised champion Arabian horses. They were both Old Money, and both times Lianne had talked with them, she walked away from the conference feeling undereducated, poorly dressed, that her hair was messy, her makeup was smudged, and she had runs in her hose.

*That's not being fair to them, though. They're also concerned, attentive, and determined that their kids won't get a hothouse view of the world from education in Fayetteville's exclusive—and sheltered—private school. They want both of their girls to get a real-world education.*

The Kendricks were always frustrated and somewhat at a loss when they discussed Amanda. Lianne could understand that. Amanda's IQ and achievement tests said she ought to be the hottest thing in school since the handheld calculator—and her grades were erratic, to put it kindly. She was slipping through the cracks of the educational system in spite of her family's concern, in spite of her teachers' attention—in spite of everything.

As she thought about the family, something finally clicked.

Mama was actually Step-Mama, wasn't she? Doing yeoman work, as far as Lianne could tell—but not even -Super-Step-Mom could work miracles if Amanda was getting twisted ideas from somewhere else. Lianne wondered if the problem might stem from the real mother or the step-father.

It would be worth discussing with the Kendricks at their next conference. She decided she would set that up in the morning.

*Better yet—I have the number here somewhere. Why don't I call now? Then I'll be able to work.*

The phone rang only twice.

“Kendricks’.” The voice was female, cultured, and clipped.

*Ah, joy, Lianne thought. None other than Amanda's step-mother.*

“Yes, Mrs. Kendrick. This is Amanda's homeroom teacher, Lianne McCormick. I've called to see if I could set up an appointment to meet with you and Amanda's father.”

“*Again*, Miss McCormick? I'm beginning to wonder where the problems *are*. Andrew and I have visited with you more this year than we have with all of Amanda's other teachers put together. I think there is something significant about that.”

Great. Obviously the assumption now was that Amanda's problems were her teacher's fault. Lianne took a deep breath, prayed for patience, and sternly stepped on the nasty little thought whispering that they might be right. “I regret having to call you. However, I'm noticing some odd behavior from Amanda, and I'd like to discuss it with you.”

“I'm not sure I have the time to get away,” the voice on the other end of the line said. “There's been some trouble with the horses, and we don't like to leave the stable unwatched.”

Lianne saw an opening to get a closer look at Amanda's home life. She leapt at it. “I do understand that you've both been in a great many times this year, and I appreciate the difficulty that causes you. I'd be happy to come out to your home after school and talk with you. In fact, I think that might reassure Amanda that I do care about her progress.”

There was a long pause. “Well, that's kind of you, Miss McCormick—”

Lianne heard an evasion coming and headed it off. “I don't mind. In fact, why don't I stop by tomorrow—say, six o'clock?”

There was another pause. “I do have plans tomorrow—I've scheduled an afternoon with the trainer to look at my two-year-olds—we're getting ready for some of the national shows.” Then, perhaps realizing that she'd just put her horses' show status in front of her child's welfare, she immediately added, “But the day after tomorrow, I'm free, and I'll see if Andrew can wrap up with his clients in time to be home by six. Does that sound suitable?”

Lianne smiled. “That will be fine, Mrs. Kendrick. I'll see you at six on Friday.”

She hung up the phone and pressed her back against the wall. *Feels like I just won the first round of the Inter-national Chess Championship.*

The room was enormous, beautifully decorated, absolutely immaculate—a sweet, perfect,

peach-and-white little girl's bedroom as envisioned by a top designer. Stranger was unimpressed. Stranger knew the cost of the perfect bedroom. Downstairs the battle raged, and soon it would be time to pay the price.

*Gods, they're fightin' again. That bodes no good for her.* Stranger bit the bottom lip, tried to figure out a strategy that one of the others would be able to carry out.

Strategy was what Stranger was best at; even before—hundreds of years before—Stranger had been able to plan, to devise—to win. But a winning strategy required a willing army. The three-year-old, even if she could be lured out of hiding, would be no help—but if the three twelve-year-olds could be introduced to each other and enlisted, Stranger might be able to work something out. Stranger thought the elf would help—if the others could be made to go to him. They wouldn't trust *anybody*, but then, they didn't believe in elves. Maybe they would trust someone they thought didn't exist.

Her name wasn't really Stranger. It was Cethlenn. But she was a newcomer, and at first, the others refused to acknowledge her existence. Then she'd done them some favors. They'd reacted by giving her a name. To them she was Stranger. It was her badge of honor, and she wore it proudly.

Stranger's eyes watched twelve-year-old hands form numbers on the paper, carefully shaping out a long division problem. Stranger didn't know a thing about long division, and didn't care. The math could wait. Someone else would come along later and do it. Stranger was more interested in the fighting downstairs.

The Father was raising bloody hell, the Step-Mother was cold and hateful.

The Father's voice carried clearly up the long, curving stairwell and through the carved wood door. "You don't do a goddamn thing with her. That's the reason her teacher keeps calling, wanting conferences!"

"She's yours—not mine. I didn't marry you so I could be caretaker for that psychotic little rodent, Andrew. You deal with her." The Step-Mother didn't like Amanda, but that was nothing new.

"She needs discipline from you, too, Merry!" The Father's voice dropped an octave. A bad sign.

The Step-Mother sneered; she had wealth enough on her own that the Father couldn't cow her. "I'm sure she gets more than enough *discipline* just from you—and I have Sharon to look after. I can handle normal children."

"Sharon is getting big enough that she could stand a bit of discipline. You coddle her too much." The Father's voice turned threatening. Stranger had heard that tone of voice before.

The Step-Mother's voice could have frozen boiling -water—and was just as threatening. "You keep your hands off of Sharon. I won't have you turning her into another Amanda."

"Worthless, useless, frigid bitch! If you were any kind of a woman, we wouldn't be having this problem with Amanda!" the Father yelled, losing control, thus losing the argument. The Father wouldn't like that.

The kitchen door slammed. Then Stranger heard the tread of heavy footsteps on the stairs.

"Amanda," the Father's voice shouted from the other side of the door, "Your pony is standing in filth. Get down to the barn and clean out his stable. Now."

Stranger tried to hang on, tried to control what happened next, but the others were panicked. They pushed to get in. Stranger tried to tell them what to do, but they wouldn't listen. They were too scared. They hid in the closet, wrapping their arms around themselves, and ignored Stranger.

"No, no," they whispered. "No, Daddy, no." The little voices crying inside Stranger's head made the hair stand up on the skinny little-girl arms. Stranger shivered and screamed at the others to listen, to run, to get away—to find the elf. She was so preoccupied with trying to rouse them that she ignored the real enemy standing outside the door.

But finally, when the Father got tired of yelling outside the door and came in to get Amanda, Stranger went away instead.

"Mel, I've got a winner on this end."

Melvin Tanbridge rocked back in the soft glove-leather chair and watched the sun set over the ocean through the tinted glass wall in his office. "Secure line?" he asked.

"Scrambled," the other voice affirmed.

"Then tell me more, baby."

"Our target, I'm almost certain, is a racecar driver named Mac Lynn. I had too big a crowd to eliminate all the noise, but he's the best possibility. I got a chance to talk to him later, and even latent, he flicked the needle on the meter. I don't think he's too bright—all glands and no brains—but he has plenty of talent. And, my Gawd, Mel, the film I have of this accident—you'll have to see to believe. There's no chance that this one's just a fluke. Besides, the readings on your little monitor were all red-zone. I'm FedEx'ing the film, some taped notes, and an 'interview' I got with the driver to you—it will be on your desk -tomorrow."

"Fine." Mel tapped one manicured nail on the ebony desktop and smiled. "Nobody said we needed a nuclear physicist anyway. If he's stupid, he'll be easier to control. So—get a little background on him so we know what we're dealing with—then bring him in."

His agent chuckled. "On it already. I'm running a couple of goons that I brought with me today on the off chance I'd get lucky—maybe I'll be able to FedEx*him* to you tomorrow."

Mel laughed. "Sounds good. Who are you running?"

"Stevens and Peterkin." The voice sounded pleased.

Mel nodded and shifted the phone to his other ear. He picked up a pencil, started writing on a yellow legal pad. "They'll do. At least for pulling in a dumb jock."

"I'm going to need an alibi, and my clearance."

"First make sure he's the one. I don't want to have to feed any more mistakes to the sharks." Mel made another note under the first on his paper. "You set for money?"

"For the time being. If things get expensive, I'll let you know. But the cost of living here is nothing

compared to California.”

Mel’s attention drifted from the phone to the scene outside his window. A girl in a wetsuit rode her board in on the crest of a breaker.

“Mel? You still there?”

He dragged his attention back. “Yeah. I’m here. R-eport in tomorrow, let me know what happens.” He hung up the phone, and pulled a dull black box identical to the one the woman at the racetrack had from the top drawer of his desk. He aimed it at the girl on the surfboard and -depressed the switch. The needle on the meter didn’t twitch.

He shrugged and put the box back in his drawer.

Mac sat on a folding chair beside the Victor III while D.D. and her current human boyfriend, a twenty-six-year-old engineer-turned-biker, tinkered on it. They lay underneath the car, only visible from the knees down. An occasional *thunk* issued from under the car, but the three were otherwise, to all appearances, companionably silent. The human boyfriend—Redmond something-or-other—was concentrating on the car. And probably, Mac thought, sneaking an occasional grope of D.D.

None of it interrupted D.D.’s inaudible conversation, but then she had a lot of—skill. Mac wondered if the boyfriend knew how old she was. . . .

Probably. D.D. didn’t believe in keeping that kind of secret from someone she let into her bed. Chances were he was one of the changelings from another Elfhome. Maybe Fairgrove, birthplace of the Victor III; they grew a lot of mechanics down there.

*:Your little fish is no fish at all,:* D.D. remarked.

No surprise there. *:I knew that. But what is she up to?:*

*:My impression, laddiebuck, is that she’s out a-hunting—and with you her quarry. Nathless, you needna think ’tis your handsome body she’s lusting for. Nor your mind, though I doubt that occurred even to you. I’d say from the smell of her, ’tis magic she’s hunting.:*

He tightened his jaw; that was unwelcome news. *:Dangerous?:*

Mac heard an audible snort from under the Victor. *:Not to such as you and me. Merely amusing. But to another human, now—aye, there’s danger there. And I’m not for certain that she knows her target. There was, after all, the child today. Not a shield on her, and projecting like a woman full-grown. Sure, I’d wager you were nothing but a convenient bit of misdirection.:*

*:So much formymasculine charms, hey, Mother?:*

The snort this time was derisive. *:I always thought you sold yourself too dear.:*

D.D. rolled out from under the car and stared intently into her son’s eyes. “Go make yourself useful somewhere,” she told him out loud, and added in Mindspeech. *:Lead your little not-fish a merry swim. No doubt she’s waiting for you. Be sure she thinks you’re her quarry for true. While she’s chasing*

*you—who are old enough surely to take care of yourself—you'll be keeping her away from that child—who cannot protect herself.:*

*:A good point.:* The woman had looked expensive, from the clothing to the perfume. Someone was paying her well, if she was a hunter. A child would have no chance against her.

*:And no forgettin' now!:* she reminded him. *:About that child; you may deceive the woman all you like, but we need to find her.:*

He headed through the parking lot with the late afternoon sun baking his back and the glare of reflection -angling inconveniently into his eyes from the few cars that were left there.

And as D.D. had anticipated, the woman *was* waiting, Hair and all.

Mac suppressed a smile. The self-named “Jewelene” lurked in the shadows of a closed concession stand near where Rhellen was parked. He couldn't actually see her—but her anticipation was palpable. She wasn't going to be a problem—

A tingle at the base of his neck slowed him down.

No, she wasn't going to be a problem. The two men who were sneaking up on him from slightly behind and to either side could have been, however, if he hadn't been expecting something.

How to play it?

A vision of the Three Stooges, chased by villains, succeeding by sheer ineptitude, came to him from his last hotel room cable-TV binge. He smiled slyly.

*Rhellen, old friend, you and I are going to have some fun.*

His step became jaunty. He whistled a cheery rendition of “Laddies, There's Trouble, Oh, Trouble A-Comin'.” The tune was one he and Rhellen had used as a signal when tavern-hopping back in his days as a colonial rakehell. It had always been useful for assuring a backup or, if need be, a quick getaway.

He took in the slight change in attitude in the elven-steed, and felt his partner signal that he was ready.

Mac grinned and, without warning, bolted for the concession stand. “Jewelene!” he yelled. “Hey, baby! You waited around for me! Fabulous—and, gorgeous, it's your lucky day. I've got the whole afternoon free.”

The two gorillas who'd been casually working their way through the parking lot, following him, changed direction. “Jewelene” looked wildly for some place to hide, and realized there wasn't one. She looked straight at him, made an “Oh-what-a-surprise!” face, and smiled.

He caught her lightly by one wrist.

“Mr. Lynn,” she said, and forced a bright smile, “I didn't expect to run into you again.”

He leaned against the concession stand and gave her his best come-hither look. “Baby,” he purred, “we

both know that's not true. Why else would you be waiting around by my car after everyone else has gone home? And it's Mac—remember?"

"Right—Mac."

He slid an arm around her waist and moved her towards Rhellen. "You don't have to pretend with me. The first time I saw you, I knew we were meant for each other. And I could tell that you knew it, too." He gave her a quick little one-armed hug that threw her off balance. She fell against him.

Out of the corner of his eye, he caught the panicked glance she threw at her two goons.

"Uh, Mac . . ." She tugged ineffectually at his arm, then gave up. "I'm glad to see you. Really. But I was waiting to talk to some of the other drivers—for my interviews. I think I can sell this story to *Playboy*, but I need more, ah, input."

"Honey—Jewelene—why didn't you say so? None of the drivers are here right now," Mac lied fluently. "But I can take you to a bar where most of us hang out. I'm sure we can round up some other drivers for you to interview. And the atmosphere of our hangout will be great for your story. And I can give you any kind of 'input' you want." He tugged her toward the Chevy.

"Well, hey, that's—ah, really nice of you. Go ahead, and I'll follow you in my car."

Mac laughed. "I'm a professional driver, babe. You couldn't keep up with me if you wanted to."

Her goons were finally in position behind Rhellen, crouched down against his rear fender. "Jewelene" relaxed.

"Okay then, Mac. Thanks. Very much."

Mac had a hard time keeping himself from laughing aloud. He wrapped his arms around her tightly and pulled her into an extended kiss. "Wonderful. And after you get your interviews, we'll go home and interview each other."

She smiled back, and he noted a vindictive gleam in her eye. "Yes," she agreed. "We'll do that."

He escorted her to the passenger side of the car and opened the door for her. She climbed in, completely confident. He walked around the front of the car, and noted the movement of one of the men around to Rhellen's driver's side. The other, of course, would be sneaking around behind him. He patted the hood.

*Everybody ought to have an elvensteed*, he thought—

Rhellen radiated satisfaction and chuckled in agreement.

:*Ready?*: he asked the elvensteed. He waited long enough to catch Rhellen's assent, and then made the single step forward that changed him from target to missile.

As he rounded the front of the car, both men lunged for him. The driver's door swung open and flung the first one back, and Rhellen edged forward just enough to knock the second one down. Mac slipped into the seat to find "Jewelene" trying with all her strength to open her door and get back out. He grinned. His door closed, the car started itself up, and "Jewelene's" head jerked around.



“The weirdest things have been happening around here lately,” he told her, as he drove Rhellen away from the two bewildered goons, who were scrambling for their own car. She stared at him, wild-eyed and open-mouthed. “I’ve found out it never pays to let your guard down.” He laughed. “So, beautiful, are you ready to get your interviews?”

She was staring behind them at the dwindling parking lot. Mac glanced into the rearview mirror; there, two hairy guys in jeans, t-shirts, and ball caps were jumping into an incongruously clean, expensive navy-blue sedan. They came tearing out of the parking lot like they’d been bitten by denizens of the Unseleighe Court.

She nodded slowly. “Yeah. Yeah, let’s go.”

“Okay, Rhellen,” Mac drawled. “You heard the lady. Let’s go.”

Rhellen accelerated to his top speed. They launched into Raeford Road’s six-lane roller derby, shouldering aside a steroidal poser-mobile and causing the owner of a brand-new Mercedes to jam on brakes to keep from marring its expensive paint job.

Mac rested his hands lightly on the steering wheel but let the car do the actual work. “Jewelene” yelled, “Jesus, slow down!” and started fumbling around the seat and the doorframe.

“What are you doing?” Mac asked.

“Looking for the seatbelts. Slow down! Where are the damned seatbelts?”

“Honey, this is a mint-condition fifty-seven Chev-ro-let,” he drawled. “There ain’t no seatbelts. They were an-*option* back then.”

Rhellen dodged a Porsche, weaved on two wheels past a semi, darted into a hole exactly two inches longer than he was, then bolted in front of a cop car and accelerated. Mac casually took one hand off the wheel and flicked on the radio.

“Come on, baby, come on! You’ve just got to release me—” Wilson Phillips sang cheerfully.

His passenger was white beneath the painted blush, and looked as if she agreed wholeheartedly with the trio. “Jesus God! Mac, slow down or let me out of here!”

He chuckled, exuding machismo. “Relax, baby. I’m a professional. I do this all the time.”

She turned to him, pupils wide with real fear. “Not with me in the car!”

He gave her his best impression of a man whose masculinity has been called into question. “Look, baby, if you don’t like my driving, you can walk.”

She grabbed his arm and shook it. “Dammit, that’s what I already said! Let me walk!”

Rhellen whipped out of traffic into a Kwik Stop parking lot and hit the brakes so hard he almost stood on his grille. “Jewelene” was flung against the dash, then back into her seat. The contents of her purse erupted into the -interior of the car and bounced everywhere.

Mac hid his delight. Under the auspices of throwing things back into the bag to get her out of his car, he managed to pocket her driver's license and also got a look at some very esoteric toys she was carrying.

*Voice-activated tape recorder, stun gun, brass knuckles, Mace, thumbcuffs, little packet of fake ID's . . . all sorts of neat stuff—plus the mysterious little black box. Interesting. I'd love to get a look in her closet sometime.*

Then he shoved her toward her door—which opened smoothly.

He sneered at her. “Have a nice walk. It's too bad about your attitude, baby. You would have had a terrific time—but it's your loss.” He slammed the door on her heels. “Have a nice day, bitch,” he called after her.

“Arrogant pig!” she screeched. Or at least, that was part of what she screeched. The rest was incoherent, and probably not Webster's English. She spun away as he laughed at her, then flounced toward the road.

Several G.I.'s leaned out of the windows of a passing car and yelled. She shot them the bird, and they retorted with a jeering obscenity. Another car full of G.I.'s right behind them slowed and tried to offer her a ride. He saw her take out her can of Mace. The driver of the car shrugged and grinned, and he and his friends drove on.

Her goons would probably find her soon enough. And if they didn't, Mac figured she would enjoy her little hike in the nice April weather. Especially *in this* neighborhood, and with sunset coming on—and looking the way she did. That wouldn't be the last offer of “temporary employment” she'd get before she found a cab. This was a G.I. town, and G.I.'s have two things on their mind when they get off base. . . .

And “Jewelene” was certainly dressed for the part. Between The Hair and the Spandex, she'd be lucky if the cops didn't pick her up and run her in just on general principles.

Mac looked at the driver's license he'd stolen. “Rhellen,” he told the elvensteed, “I think Ms. Belinda Ciucci of Berkeley, California, is going *to love* Fayetteville—what'cha think?”

The '57 Chevy rumbled a deep chuckle of affirmation and cruised on.

## Chapter Three

*Thank heavens it's only an hour till lunch.*

Lianne eyed her students with weariness that bordered on desperation. *And I'll have several minutes of blessed silence while we do the spelling test. Of course, I could have a lot more silence if I just shot them. Nice idea. I like it a lot.*

The three-minute pencil-sharpening break was over. It was time to get everyone back in order.

“Sit down *in your seats, facing forward.* Be quiet, get out your pencil, get out your *paper.* Use your

pencil to write on the paper—write the following things. Your name—yes, Keith, when I say your name, *Ido* mean the name your parents gave you, not any name you think is really cool today. The date. Today's date. It's on the board. Look at the board. Copy the date. Get it right. Your life depends on it.”

Lianne tapped the blackboard with a piece of chalk for emphasis and counted mentally to ten. The fifth grade Mafia had apparently declared that today was Silly Day—every simple chore required detailed instructions. Even usually well-behaved kids like Latisha McKoy and Marilee Blackwell were misbehaving. The first time she told the class to sit down, almost all of them sat on the floor. It was a bad moment—for the continued existence of the kids, as well as for her.

She hadn't done anything to them—yet—that would lose her this job. Her guardian angels were probably taking bets on how much longer that could last, though.

“Fold the paper neatly in half, *longwise*. Write the numbers one through twenty-five, down the left side of the paper—Arabic numerals, William, not Roman numerals—no, Snyder, you may not go to the bathroom during a test—I don't care if your big brother *did* tell you it's your Constitutional right. He lied. Write the numbers twenty-six through fifty down the fold in the center of the paper.”

*Because we have learned never to say the words - “center fold”—in any context—in a room that holds fifth-grade boys, haven't we, Lianne?*

“Jennifer, Latisha, you *do not* talk at any time during a test. Not even if you dropped your pencil, Jennifer—getting it back does not require conversation. Maurice, close the book!”

Ten minutes of orders. Now, finally, she could give the test.

“Number one—concentration. CON-cen-TRA-tion. School work requires *concentration*.”

*Not murdering you little monsters requires CON-cen-TRA-tion.* Lianne felt her teeth grinding and tried to -relax her jaw before she splintered something. Crowns were expensive, and they didn't come under the heading of “injuries in the line of duty.”

She studied her charges. Twenty-six heads bent over their papers. Twenty-six hands wrote out creative versions of the spelling words, some that would bear no relationship to any word ever written in the English language. The Death Row Five snuck surreptitious glances in her direction to see if it was safe yet to use their microscopically handwritten cheat sheets. If they spent half the time studying that they did in cheating, they'd be straight-A students. Beth Hambly sat primly in the front row, carefully guarding her (surely perfect) answers from the prying eyes of less perfect classmates. William Ginser, foiled in his plan to number his paper with Roman numerals, was misspelling his words in some ornate style that bore a striking resemblance to German Blackletter.

*If he'd just put that kind of energy into learning to spell the damn words in the first place—She sighed. Then he wouldn't be William.*

Amanda Kendrick, sitting in the back corner of the classroom, stared out the window.

“Eight. Contradiction. CON-tra-DIC-tion. If you say something that means the opposite of what I have said, that is a *contradiction*.”

Amanda didn't move. Lianne had noticed, on and off during the morning, that Amanda was quieter than usual—but *usual* was awfully quiet. Now, though, she looked closer.

The total absence of expression on Amanda's face made Lianne shiver. *Is she breathing? Yes, she is—a little. Good God, she looks dead. She is breathing—but she sure as hell isn't here. And I don't think I'd want to be wherever she is right now. She hasn't done a single spelling word—no, screw the spelling test. I don't want to call her down in front of the rest of the class. Not right now. She doesn't look like she feels too well.*

Lianne cruised through the words on the test, making up sentences on autopilot. She couldn't stop looking at Amanda.

The dead look is in her eyes. They're glazed—could she be having some sort of a seizure? Maybe I need to call a doctor. But she doesn't look physically sick. And the few times I've called on her, I have been able to get an answer out of her—she just drifts away right afterward.

*Lianne bit her lip.*

*We're going to take a break after this test, and I'm going to talk to her.*

“Thirty-nine—” Decision made, her attention snapped back to the rest of the class. Her loss of vigilance had not passed unnoticed. “Snyder, Maurice—I'll take those papers, gentlemen, and you may sit out the rest of the test. You've just earned yourselves F's. Anybody else like to try? No? Thirty-nine. Interception. In-ter-CEP-tion. What you have just seen, folks, was the *interception* of two cheat sheets.”

The rest of the test went without incident.

Lianne got everyone started reading Thomas Rockwell's *How to Eat Fried Worms*, a book she had fought long and hard to get on the fifth grade required reading list. It proved to her students that reading really was fun—she'd converted more book-haters with that—plus *A Light in the Attic*, and the *Alvin Fernald* books—than with anything else she used. They wallowed in the gross-out joys and Machiavellian plotting of a kid who got dared into eating a worm a day and the friends who'd bet him he couldn't.

With their attention fixed on their books, she was free to take care of Amanda.

She walked to the back of the room, squatted down beside Amanda's desk, and waited. Amanda kept staring out the window. There was no sign that the child knew she was there.

“Amanda,” Lianne whispered. “I need to talk with you.”

She got no response.

Lianne rested her hand lightly on Amanda's shoulder, and said, “Amanda, is something wrong?”

The girl's whole body shuddered, and her face turned toward Lianne—and Lianne pulled her hand away, horrified. Pale, pale jade-green eyes stared back at her, stared *through* her, lips pulled back from teeth in an animal expression of fear, or rage—or both. The face was not Amanda's face, not a child's face—if it was human at all. The expression was fleeting—there, and gone so fast Lianne wondered if she'd really seen it—then one of the girls behind her and towards the front of the class started shrieking. Others yelled, desks squeaked, and something hard hit Lianne on the back of the neck. She spun towards the front of the class, started to yell at the kids to stop fighting, and froze.

*Impossible.*

Loose chalk flew from the chalkboard as if thrown by an angry child. Closed chalk boxes opened themselves, spewed their contents into the air—the liberated chalk rained against walls and ceiling and floor and kids. Bulky blackboard erasers pelted students and furniture, fell to the floor, and leapt up to attack again.

The neatly stacked spelling tests on her desk launched themselves into the air, to join with piles of loose construction paper from the bulletin board corner and reports on *The Planets of Our Solar System* that had suddenly come to life.

Books fell off of desks to the floor. Pens and pencils leapt from desks to smack against the windows. The classroom door opened, then slammed shut, then opened again to allow a stream of paperwork to escape out into the hall.

The children's screams didn't cover the sound of paper snapping in the nonexistent wind.

Lianne had just enough time to realize that what she saw was *real*; it actually was happening. Then it stopped.

Projectiles in mid-course slammed into some invisible wall and dropped to the floor. Papers swirled downward like rainbow-colored autumn leaves. The door shut with a soft click.

There was silence.

Everyone waited. Scared, big-eyed kids looked at her for direction.

She didn't know what to do. So she cleared her throat, bent down, tentatively picked up a piece of chalk, then another. They didn't attack. She picked up a handful of paper.

"Okay, folks—everyone all right?" There were tentative nods from the kids as they looked themselves over and made sure they were still intact. "Good. Then let's . . . let's get this mess cleaned up." She tried to sound brave. God knew, she didn't feel it. "Whatever happened, it's over now. When we've finished, you can all read until the lunch bell rings."

Lianne's knees felt weak. She made her way to the front of the class, put all the chalk and loose erasers around her desk back on the blackboard, then sagged into her seat and rested her head in her hands.

Two days in a row. Right now, I could be convinced to give up teaching forever. The racing accident, the Attack of the School Supplies, Amanda's weird behavior—

*Amanda! I forgot about her!*

Lianne looked up, expecting to see Amanda frozen at her desk. Instead, she saw the girl chatting with Brynne Lassiter as the two of them cleaned up one corner of the mess.

Amanda glanced in her direction, saw Lianne watching her, and smiled brightly. She bounced up to the desk, and handed the young teacher her gold Cross pen.

"Your pen fell beside my desk."

Lianne tried to smile. “Thank you, Amanda,” she said.

“That was really strange, wasn’t it, Ms. McCormick?”

“Strange doesn’t begin to describe it.” Lianne looked closer at the girl, then closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the back of her hand.

“Are you okay, Ms. McCormick?” Amanda asked. She sounded so normal!

“I’ll be fine, thank you. Just—just go back to your desk now, please.” Lianne felt herself struggling to breathe, felt the room starting to reel, but her skin felt cool to her touch. *No fever.*

She was light-headed—certainly sick. She had to be.

*Amanda’s eyes are blue.*

Mac woke up with sunlight streaming through the sheers in the window of his hotel suite.

*Dammit. Forgot to pull the drapes again. What time is it?*

He looked at his clock on the tacky vinyl-veneer almost-Scandinavian dresser that sat in a puddle of sunshine. Green digital numbers, muted to pastel by the light, glowed reassuringly back at him. He stretched with feline grace. *Eleven-fifteen. No hurry. I’ve got plenty of time for room service.*

He rolled over to the phone that rested on the equally cheap nightstand and dialed. A bouncy-sounding girl at the other end took his order for French toast and bacon and orange juice and the fruit plate. It would be up shortly, she assured him.

Mac smiled and rolled over on his back. *A nice hot shower, I think, while breakfast is getting here—then maybe a little TV. Out in time for the maid to straighten the place up, take Rhellen for some exercise down Bragg Boulevard, drive over to the school to see where Lianne works. Then a stop by the track so Mother doesn’t think I’ve vanished into the ozone. I’ll tell her about the outcome of the Belinda Affair. She’ll enjoy that.*

It felt like the start of a wonderful day.

Of course, any day that started out with room service and a maid couldn’t go too far wrong. Maclyn approved of room service.

He lolled in bed, not quite ready to plunge into the pounding spray of a shower, when he noticed a flash of blue and a dull gleam of gold on the other side of the open door that led to his usually-dull-beige suite living room. Curious, he crawled out of the bed and went to take a look.

*.Not a very early riser, are you?.* The Mindspeech was female, frosty—condescending, too.

Felouen—beautiful, irritating Felouen—lounged on his couch. She wore a cobalt blue silk Court jerkin heavily embroidered with gold over a soft, pale-blue silk blouse. Gold-and-sapphire chains draped around her neck and wove through her pale amber hair. Her long legs—in matching blue trews—were thrown indecorously over one of the couch’s overstuffed arms. She hadn’t bothered to take off her

knee-high blue leather boots. She lay her head back on a cushion and stretched, sending a languorous, sexy smile in his direction.

“A little overdressed for the area, aren’t you?” Mac remarked.

*:And you’re a little underdressed.:*

It was a legitimate comment. Mac was stark naked. “You didn’t make an appointment. You don’t let me know you’re coming, you take your chances.”

She smiled.*:And this time I won.:*

Mac refused to be amused or flattered. “I have plans for the day, Felouen. Go home.”

*:I have plans for the day, too, Mac. I want you to come Home with me.:*

He glared at her. “What is this? You can’t get me to play warrior for the Court by guilt, so you fake lust? I don’t believe you, dear.”

She laughed out loud, delighted.*: Fake lust! You’d suspect that, with every other elvish maiden sighing after your broad retreating back? My bonny lad, I needn’t fake lust.:*

She sat up.*:But the Unseleighe Court—:*

He blanked out her Mindspeech and turned his back on her. “I won’t play defender of the lands with you, Felouen. The lands don’t need a defender.”

Unable to continue her conversation in the more compelling Mindspeech, she shifted with bad grace to physical speech. “It isn’t play,” she snapped. “The minions of the Unseleighe Court surround you, even now.”

“Ooooh,*minions*,” he mimicked. “I’m terrified.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “They don’t bother me, I don’t bother them.”

If anything, her voice grew colder. She sounded like his old sword-instructor, Siobhan: deadly, deathly serious. “You know evil doesn’t work that way, Maclyn. The Unseleighe Court grows stronger with every back that’s turned to it. The darkness has spread to our corner of Underhill—the filth is leaking through even there. Soon enough, it will be able to conquer even the strongest and best of those who could have defended against it. If you don’t face it now, you will face it later—on its terms.”

There was a knock at the door. “Room service,” someone called.

“Yeah—just a minute.” Mac pointed into the bedroom.*:Get in there—then vanish.:* he told the elven warrior. He pulled his bathrobe off of its hook on the coatrack, put it on, and opened the door.

A smiling busboy pushed the cart into the room. “Mornin’, Mr. Lynn,” he said. “All ready for the race Saturday?”

“You bet, Sam. You gonna be there?”

“Nah.” The young man shook his head, disgusted. “Cain’t. I’m scheduled to work. I’m pulling for you,

though.”

“Thanks.” He signed for the food—on the Fairgrove account, of course—and grinned as the busboy left. But the grin vanished with the closing of the door. Mac turned and stalked into his bedroom, expecting to find Felouen waiting for him.

She was gone. *Good*, he thought. *The day is looking up.*

But the feeling of Presence hadn’t abated—

On his bed, gold gleamed. He could feel it. He didn’t need a closer look. He knew exactly what she’d left.

*Shit. The day is looking down.*

Mac felt pretty much the way someone who’d just found a leaking radioactive canister in his house would feel. He stared at the lovely gold circle and swore creatively.

Finally, he picked it up. *Uh-huh. I should have known she’d pull something like this. One of the Rings.* He pulled a scrap of silk out of a drawer, and carefully wrapped the bit of jewelry in its insulating folds. Then he shoved it into the leather pouch he kept with him. *Well . . . maybe D.D. will take it off my hands.*

*In spite of Mr. Race-Driver’s machismo, he doesn’t drive so damn-all fast. That stupid shit yesterday must have been to impress me. Ooooh, ooooh, I wassoimpressed. Gonad-brained jerk-off!*

Mac Lynn’s ’57 Chevy with its custom colors was about as easy to keep track of in traffic as if it sported strobe-lights. She’d always been good at tailing—this was so simple it was dull.

*My commission is the same whether I have it hard or easy. I guess I shouldn’t knock it.*

Belinda downshifted and slipped in behind a pickup as her target slowed and turned into the elementary school parking lot. She chose an unobtrusive spot about a hundred yards down the road, U-turned, and parked. Then she settled back with a bottle of mineral water and a packet of fresh sliced vegetables to wait Mac out.

Her old partner in the Berkeley P.D. had given her endless grief on her choice of stake-out munchies. Ed had hated rabbit food. His idea of stake-out rations was a cold Philly steak sandwich, a stack of Domino’s pizzas, and a carton of Mountain Dews. Of course, Ed had given her good-natured hell about almost everything. Sometimes she even missed him.

She missed him at that moment. He would have loved trailing a race-driver with a classic car. He would have known Mac’s racing stats and would have tried endlessly to get her to be interested in them. They could have had a wonderful argument about racing, and what it did to the environment. That argument would have segued into -solar versus fossil fuel, and Middle Eastern politics, and even—she grinned thinking about it—psychic phenomena. Ed wouldn’t have believed the accident yesterday was anything but an accident. He would have argued until his last breath—in spite of her neat gizmo, in spite of the lack of casualties, in spite of everything. Ed had loved to argue.



Debate, he'd called it.

She bit her lip, and glared out the window.

In the end, he had died arguing—debating. He'd had a lot of practice, and he was very convincing, too. She'd wanted to believe him. But he hadn't had as much practice lying as he had at arguing. He'd caught her with the dead mark in the alley, taking her cut to look the other way, and no matter what he said, old Honest Ed could not have meant it when he said he wouldn't turn her in.

She'd hated killing him.

The job wasn't the same after that—it was ruined for her.

She bit viciously at the carrot stick.

*Damn Ed, anyway!*

She could have been happy in the police department for years.

It was Moonchange, tide change, sea ebb at Fayetteville's Loyd E. Auman Elementary, where the thundering outrush of the pounding surf of children battered against the lone swimmer-to-shore, who was Mac Lynn, Mighty Racecar Driver—

*Or maybe it's more like the charge of the lemmings,* Mac thought, as he watched small children trample all over each other in their race to leave.

Fascinated, he stopped to watch.

Teachers bellowed and directed and commanded in voices that would have done a drill sergeant proud—Mac wondered how many of them joined the Marines following a few years of teaching so they could get a vacation. Parents leaned out car windows and screamed for their youngsters to hurry up. Kids shrieked and yelled insults and questions and promises to call each other, fighting to be heard over the general uproar. The school bus engines rumbled bass counterpoint.

The odors of asphalt and bus fumes and new-mown rye grass mingled with the smells of books and stale baloney sandwiches and sweaty gym clothes. Noise, commotion, odors: all were overpowering. For a moment, he wished he was Underhill.

*But if I went there right after all of this, it would feel like someone had plugged my ears and my nose, muffled my brain in silk, and put dark glasses on me. It would be too subtle, like that awful French food.*

There was rarely anything subtle about the world of humans.

The buses filled slowly, then, abruptly pulled away—little pockets of traveling riot. Parents drove off with their young, the few walkers vanished into the distance—and quiet returned suddenly, like the descent of the theater curtain. Mac watched as teachers sagged with relief against the building or their cars, or turned with slow and tired steps to head back inside.

He went inside after them.

Lianne's head rested on her desk. Her eyes were closed and her hands were locked over the back of her neck. To Mac, she looked pale.

"Bad day, huh?"

The teacher looked up at him, blearily, too exhausted to register surprise at his appearance. "Hell day."

Mac grimaced by way of showing sympathy. "I'm sorry. You want a back rub? Or maybe you'd prefer that I drive you home?"

Lianne buried her head in her hands again. "I want to crawl into my bed and die."

Mac shook his head. "The first part of that idea doesn't sound too bad. Tell you what. We'll go over to your place and crawl into bed, and I'll bet I can get you to change your mind about dying."

"I doubt it," Lianne groaned. She sounded sincere. She sounded *frightened*.

Mac leaned his palms on her desk and waited until she looked up, then stared intently into her eyes. "It can't be that bad. What's wrong?"

Lianne pushed away from her desk and started gathering up her things. She turned her back to him. There was a long pause, filled mostly with the sounds of her stacking papers and breathing rapidly. Finally, she said, in a small, hesitant voice, "Mostly, it seems that my classroom is haunted."

Mac started to laugh, but stopped himself when he noted the tension in her shoulders. "You aren't kidding."

"God, Mac, I wish I were." She sighed and turned, and he could see the brightness of impending tears in her eyes. "You're—you're going to think I'm crazy, but it happened! All the kids were so scared—"

*And so were you*—"Tell me," he urged. "Lianne, I've seen plenty of things that seemed crazy at the time." He grinned at her, the lopsided, *very* Celtic grin that always won women's trust. "I may not hang crystals in my car like Bill Gatlin, but I'll go along with Will Shakespeare."

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy?" She managed a tremulous smile. "You know, I think I believe you. . . ."

Mac said nothing, only continued to smile encouragingly.

She took a deep breath and relaxed, just a little. "Partway through reading today, papers and chalk came to life and started flying around the room on their own, attacking people. The door opened and slammed shut—it was a madhouse in here. Then it just stopped. I was terrified."

"I'll bet." He put warmth into it, so much that Lianne smiled at him. Mac felt a twinge of excitement. Something was up—it seemed a bit of a coincidence that he should be hunting a telekinetic kid when inanimate -objects suddenly came to life in that kid's homeroom teacher's class. Mac was willing to bet

that something about the visit to the track had triggered the girl. Maybe the -accident.

*Time to do a little fishing,* he decided.

“What were you doing when it started, baby?” he asked, urging her to keep talking. “Do you remember?”

She nodded. “Oh, yeah. It was weird. One of the kids in my class had been lost in space all morning—I’d assigned everyone to read, and I went back to her seat to talk to her. I didn’t get the chance to, though. I hadn’t any more than gotten Amanda’s attention when the classroom just—blew up.”

That name sounded familiar. “Amanda . . . is the name of the kid?”

Lianne didn’t notice his increased interest. “Yeah. You might remember her from our little disaster yesterday. She was the skinny blond girl who wouldn’t get down behind the bleachers. She’s an odd kid.”

Mac felt a surge of triumph. *There are no coincidences. I knew it. Same child—and the accident was the trigger.*

He nodded casually. “I remember her—she always act like that?”

Lianne picked up jacket, bag, and papers and headed out the door. Mac followed.

“Yes, no, and maybe,” she told him. “Nothing about her makes sense. Her aptitude tests indicate that she should be one of the smartest kids I’ve ever taught. . . .”

“And?” he prompted, taking her elbow.

Lianne sighed. “And sometimes she is. One minute she’s sweet and chatty and willing to discuss the lesson, and the next she doesn’t even seem to realize there is a lesson. Her spelling tests are a trip. She’ll either slaughter the words entirely, or she’ll get them all perfect—and sometimes she’ll kill the first half of the test and ace the second half. As far as I can tell, she has no attention span. And sometimes she really likes me, and sometimes she really hates me—and I don’t have any warning before she goes from one attitude to the other.”

Mac frowned; there was something about those symptoms. . . . “That is strange.”

“She has parents that care—they have lots of money, she has all the advantages—” Lianne shrugged. She waved to another teacher who was coming down the long hall -toward the stairs from the other direction. “I’m not the only one she’s this way around. Her health teacher says she went into a rage during sex ed the other day. Said that she started screaming that anyone who could do something that disgusting was a whore or a slut or worse—I guess Amanda used a few words Nancy had never heard before. What’s funny was, they were talking about where babies come from. Really low key, really mild—and all of a sudden, there goes Amanda, right off the deep end.”

A sick feeling had started in the pit of Mac’s stomach when Lianne began describing Amanda’s behavior. It grew worse with every detail. By the time she’d finished, he was sure something was horribly wrong with the child. He just didn’t have any idea what.

They walked out of the hot hallways, redolent with chalk dust, ink, schoolgirl perfume, and sneakers, into baked-asphalt parking lot heat.

Mac held onto her elbow as she started towards her own car. “Let me drive you home,” he urged. *I have to find out more about this child—or better yet, get Lianne to take me to her.*

But Lianne shook her head with a stubborn determination he was beginning to know well. “Mac, I appreciate it—but I’ll be fine. I have to get some groceries, and I want to go home and just soak in the tub and think for a while.” A bit of breeze touched the little tendrils of hair that had escaped from her French braid. Not enough breeze to cool, just enough to be annoying.

*Azaleas, dogwoods, and a goddamned heat wave, all blooming at the same time. Welcome to April in North Carolina,* he thought.

He persisted, in the forlorn hope that she had been worn down enough to give in to him. “Are you sure?”

This time her nod was quite determined. “I’m sure.”

Mac shrugged. “Okay. I really guess I ought to stop by the track before D.D. sends out search teams, anyway.” *Try a different tactic.* “May I see you tonight?”

She finally gave in to his persistence, yielding with a willing heart, if the smile that answered his was any indication. “I’d like that. But—how about just an evening in? I’m too tired for anything that involves going out in -public.”

He pretended to consider it. “Hmm. Never tried one of those before. . . .”

She lifted a skeptical eyebrow, and he laughed. “It’s a date,” he said, and gave Lianne a tight hug and a kiss. She returned the kiss with startling enthusiasm, and Mac caught his breath.

*They are so warm, so bright . . . so enchanting—*

*And so fleeting—*

He pulled away quickly and forced a grin. “Gotta run, babe. See you tonight,” he told her, and turned away. He didn’t want her to see the pain in his eyes.

*—And they die so soon,* he thought. *So soon . . . and anyone who loves them dies a little bit with them. Not again. I won’t ever let myself hurt that way again.*

\* \* \*

Redmond Something-or-other was pawing Mac’s mother again, back in the corner behind the tire stacks. Mac heard D.D. giggling and whispering, and her young lover’s erratic breathing. It was, he reflected, a hard life that gave a man a mother who looked ten years younger than he did—when she was nearly two hundred years older.

“Hey, D.D.,” he yelled. “You’re never going to get my car ready doing that. Chase your stud-muffin off with a nice big tire iron and get out here.”

“There’s more to life than cars,” she yelled brightly, but she and the stud-muffin appeared. Redmond,

looking flushed and flustered, was struggling with his buttons. Mac suspected he'd gotten the zipper back in place before he came out of hiding.

D.D., of course, was unfazed. "I didn't think you were going to join us poor peons today," she said, flaunting her pony-tail. "And Redmond and I didn't see any reason to waste a perfectly good day if you weren't even going to show up."

"Mmmm-hmmm." Mac looked over at the dark corner of the garage. "Fooling around on the cement behind the tires has got to be one of the more romantic ways I could think of to spend a day."

She laughed at him. "We pump grease our own way, we do. You're too stuffy, Mac. You wouldn't know a good time if it bit you on the ass."

Mac smiled agreeably and made a tsk-ing noise. "That's the difference between you and me, D.D. If it bit me on the ass, I wouldn't call it a good time."

D.D. laughed and flipped him the finger. "You'll never know what you're missing."

He cast his eyes up to heaven, as if asking for help. "Gods, I hope not. You're one short step above delinquent, and if you weren't such a good mechanic—"

"But *I am*," she replied impudently. "So you indulge me."

"So I do. Hey, D.D.—I just remembered. A friend of yours stopped over at my place this morning—she had a present for you, but she couldn't find you, so she left it with me." Mac fished the scrap of green silk out of the bag in his pocket, and started to hand it to D.D. . . .

But D.D. kept her hands shoved firmly into her -pockets. *:Bullshit, Maclyn, my love.: "What friend was that?"* she asked out loud.

"Felouen," Mac said. He saw no point in lying. *:I'd appreciate your help here, Mother.:*

*:No doubt—but I'm not going to interfere in your relationship with the Court. You have some responsibilities that you're evading—I won't force you to live up to them. I also won't help you get out of them.:* Out loud, D.D. lied for Redmond's benefit. "Felouen and I can't stand each other. I wonder what she's up to."

*:She stuck me with a Ring, Mother. Won't you please take it off my hands? Before it calls too much attention to me?:* Mac proffered the silk again. "She wants to be friends, D.D. Why don't you just take her present? You can always give it back to her later if you don't change your mind about her."

*:You deal with it, kiddo.: "If she wants to be friends, she can find me herself. If you see her again, give her present back to her. And tell her what I said. I'm sure she'll be seeing you again."*

Mac muttered, "I'm sure she will."

He held the Ring in his fingers and wished that it would go away. It radiated warmth, power, assurance—and a broadcast beam that would tell every Unseleighe thing in the area that a Seleighe warrior was among them.

*Just exactly what I needed for Christmas.*

## Chapter Four

*Elementary school. The racetrack. Penney's at the mall. Barnes' Motor and Parts. Three—count 'em, three—fast food joints. No—she thought, watching with disbelief as Mac pulled into a Kentucky Fried Chicken, Make that four fast food joints.*

“You sure know how to show a girl a good time, fella,” Belinda muttered. “If this is how hot-dog race-drivers spend their days, I’ll pass.”

She’d never tailed anyone duller in her life. She’d spent her entire afternoon driving in circles around Fayetteville, watching Mac gorge on junk food and run apparently pointless errands. It was getting dark, she’d put monster miles on her little silver Sunbird, she had to go to the bathroom, and she was, for the second time, almost out of gas. Mac hadn’t taken a potty break or fueled up his accursed Chevy once. Belinda would have given anything to know how he’d accomplished that second trick. Those beasts were supposed to guzzle gas, everyone knew that. His gas tank couldn’t *be that* big.

He hadn’t spotted her. She knew he hadn’t spotted her. Except a suspicion kept nagging that nobody, absolutely nobody, could or would spend a day in such a boring manner unless he was trying to mislead a tail.

But finally, at about seven-thirty, Mac’s aimless wandering ceased, replaced by apparent commitment to a single -direction and increased speed. *Now we’re getting somewhere*, Belinda rejoiced.

She had to fall further and further back as they left the center of Fayetteville and traffic thinned. For twenty minutes, they sped along roads that became increasingly deserted. Suddenly, on a narrow country lane, Mac left the pavement entirely, bounced along a sand two-rut through a fallow field, and screeched to a halt in front of a stand of stunted hardwoods along the field’s back perimeter. There were no buildings anywhere around. There were no cars passing by.

*This is going to be good*, Belinda gloated. *If he has something going on back there, I’ll make sure he finds a nice little surprise waiting for him the next time he drops by.*

Belinda saw him creep out of the Chevy and sneak into the woods. She turned off her headlights, drove in as close as she dared, then rolled down her window. She left the keys hanging from the ignition in case she needed to get out fast, crawled out of the window to keep from making any unnecessary noise, then trailed him on foot.

*Bless him for wearing light colors*, she thought. His white windbreaker nearly glowed in the dark. She edged past the Chevy—*cautiously*—she still couldn’t explain the incident with Stevens and Peterkin—and slipped into the trees. She moved quietly. She’d had plenty of woods experience. Mac apparently hadn’t. He sounded like a buffalo dancing on potato chips—she’d never heard such a racket from one person. She could have followed him blindfolded.

He worked his way up a rise and into a clearing. She saw him plainly. He stopped, illuminated by the light of the half-moon riding almost overhead. Then he turned. Fifteen yards behind him, she froze.

With preternatural clearness, she saw him look right at her. She saw him grin. His eyes fixed on hers, he

mouthed the words “Hi, babe,” and he waved at her—

Then he vanished. Poof. He didn’t hide, he didn’t move, he just—plain—vanished.

For one stunned moment, she couldn’t think at all.

Then her mind started working again, beginning with a long list of things she’d like to call the sonuvabitch.

*The boss, Belinda thought with some bitterness, ought to be thrilled by this.*

From back where she’d parked, she heard a whinny and the sound of horse’s hooves on dirt. She heard the “ding, ding” sound that could only be caused by someone opening her car door with the keys in the ignition. Still in a state of shock, she listened as a motor—her motor—kicked over.

*What?*

Mac had vanished and now someone was stealing her car!

Released from her trance, she turned and broke into a full-out gallop, screaming, “Get the hell away from my car, you thief!” as she ran. Branches slapped her face and tore at her clothes. Thorns ripped at her hands and tangled in her braid. Full-sized trees seemed to jump in front of her. She arrived in the field in time to see her car, headlights on, back out into the highway. The driver flipped the interior light on for a moment, just so she would be sure to recognize him. It was Mac. He waved, and tooted her horn, and drove off.

There was a light-colored horse running behind him. Pacing him, she’d have said.

“Give my car back, you bastard!” she shrieked. She pulled her gun out of her shoulder holster and fired one shot in sheer frustration. She heard the crack of shattering glass, and a laugh. Red tail lights disappeared in the distance.

Now her nice little rental car had a bullet hole in it. And a broken window. For which, no doubt, she’d be charged the worth of the entire car.

*Shit! But, no—it doesn’t matter. He stole my car, he didn’t have anyone with him—therefore, he had to leave his. The Chevy. He’ll have taken the keys—but I learned a lot from the P.D. I’ll just hot-wire his damned Chevy.*

She turned to walk back to Mac’s car—and found hoof-prints and emptiness.

There was no car.

\* \* \*

Mel Tanbridge grinned and fished out a pen and a yellow legal pad from his desk. He’d just mined a new sure-thing cash-crop angle out of his latest issue of *Science News*, and he wanted to get it down on paper while the idea was still fresh. The members of Nostradamus Project’s auxiliary organization, Nostradamus Foundation International, paid well to get their pseudo-science -delivered to their doorstep, and he worked hard to make sure it arrived full of juicy tidbits that would keep the money rolling in.

He looked over the *SN* article, which, in very careful terms noted a variance in the ability of rhesus monkeys to pick symbols shown on a computer screen when the symbols were chosen by a human researcher compared to random assignment of the symbols by the computer. The article, “High-Level Pattern Recognition in Rhesus Monkeys,” noted that the monkeys picked the correct symbol from a random stream about 13 to 17 percent more -often when the human researcher was choosing the symbols. The article noted that this happened even when the monkey was not able to see the researcher, eliminating the chance of visual cues from the human. The article suggested that the human researchers’ attempts at randomness displayed a subconscious choice pattern picked up by the monkeys, and noted that the rhesus monkeys had a strong affinity for pattern recognition.

Mel snorted.

“Telepathic Contact Between Humans and Monkeys Confirmed In Independent Studies,” he scratched down on the legal pad. “Rhesus monkeys are the first non-human species to demonstrate telepathic abilities—reading the minds of researchers in carefully controlled double-blind experiments conducted by—” He paused. One wanted to be very careful about naming names in these things. Some of his pet flakes, he suspected, also read *Science News*. “—by an independent simian research facility in Florida.” He carefully copied in the statistics and a few, slanted quotes, referred to *Science News* as a “professional journal for scientists,” and hit his pitch.

“Nostradamus Foundation International must raise—” He thought about it. How much did he want to raise this time? A couple million dollars would be nice. A couple million dollars would permit him to put out glossy four-color fliers and advertise in all his favorite magazines and expand his carefully cultivated list of fools who could be parted from their money. It would also permit him some breathing room to continue with his covert and highly illegal, but real, search to acquire a stable of TK’s and other psi talents. “—two point four million dollars to continue its exciting research into projects like this.” “Like” was an important word in Mel’s vocabulary. He used it a lot. With that one little word, he could infer, without actually stating, that his foundation was involved in simian psychic research. *My ass!* Simian psychic research. What an angle. God, I love it.

“Finally, paranormal phenomena have become a legitimate domain of scientific exploration, and NFI is spearheading that exploration. Your participation has been essential to NFI’s research in the past. We need your help now.”

He drafted out a series of boxes, starting with twenty dollars and ending with a thousand, and noted that he wanted a place at the bottom of the fund sheet for “participants” to check “current areas of research” they would particularly like to see expanded, with a write-in line for “other.” Those little mini-surveys were great. He’d been on the lookout for an animal project ever since some lady had written requesting that NFI expand into “telepathic research with other life forms.” She’d added a long, handwritten letter (on pink cat stationery), with her check for twenty dollars, stating that she firmly believed her cats could read minds. Mel made sure she got a nice note back stating that NFI thought psychic cats were a good subject for research. He’d added “non-human psychic research” to his list immediately.

Mel loved New Agers.

He spun the soft leather executive chair to face out the window, leaned back, and laced his fingers behind his head. The taste of success was sweet. The last letter, scavenged from a *National Geographic* article on Eskimo shamans, had netted him about a million-five. This one, his instincts told him, was good for easily that much.



“Fran!” he yelled.

His secretary leaned in the door. “Yes?”

He indicated the legal pad. “Get Janny to set that up in bulletin format—yellow paper and black ink, a line drawing of a telepathic monkey—tell her to keep it under-stated and scientific-looking. Make sure the drawing is of a rhesus monkey,” he added. He closed his eyes and sighed. “Some of these people might notice.”

“Okay. Mel, do you want to look at your mail? You have a FedEx package, some bills, some junk, and a few -responses from the last mailer.”

“Bring ’em in.” The bills would wait, the responses he loved to open personally—money in the mail was a wonderful thing. And the FedEx package ought to be Belinda’s TK film. He felt a rush of adrenalin. There might be nothing to what she had—but Belinda wasn’t one of the true believers. She thought the whole Nostradamus Project was a dodge. If she was convinced she had something real—

He suppressed that line of thought. No sense setting himself up for a disappointment. “Bring in the VCR from the conference room while you’re at it.”

Lianne opened the door, wearing an oversized pink t-shirt with Garfield on it and a pair of tight blue jeans, minus knees. Her deafeningly pink socks bagged around her ankles, and her hair was tucked behind her ears and held in place by barrettes. She looked about twelve. Mac had really been hoping she’d be wearing something from Victoria’s Secret—or maybe nothing—but he hid his disappointment bravely.

“Hey’ya!” She looked him over and grinned. “You look like a man who expected to be greeted by a woman wearing Saran Wrap.” She winked. “I don’t go to the door that way, you know. If I did, my mom would be on the other side.”

Mac squeezed her to his chest and kissed her passionately. “That wasn’t what I was thinking at all,” he lied. “I was just thinking you were the prettiest bag lady I’d ever seen.”

He followed her into her apartment, admiring the way she walked, and kept close as she led him to her -television set.

“I went for comfort, I’ll have you know. I had a very bad day.” Lianne gave him a wan little smile and a tight hug. “I’m glad you’re here. I rented a couple of movies, got a huge bag of popcorn, and I’ve got all the makings for daiquiris—unless you’d rather have diet soft drinks—?”

“Decaffeinated?” he asked cautiously.

“Nah—I like my caffeine.” She made a face. “Why have a cola without caffeine? You might as well not bother.”

He answered her face with one of his own. “Whereas I like to sleep at night. No, really, I’m allergic to caffeine. Daiquiris will be fine.”

She pointed out the bag on the TV cabinet. “So. Pick the movie you want to see and get it ready—I’ll

do the daiquiris.”

She vanished into the little apartment kitchen. Mac pulled three clear plastic boxes out of the paper bag she’d indicated and studied the titles. He grinned as he peered at the first label. *The Man With One Red Shoe* .

He’d seen that one at least a dozen times. He closed his eyes, replayed the opening credits, recalled the slinking, skullduggerous beat of the score, and chuckled softly. *Tom Hanks, Lori Singer, Carrie Fisher, Dabney Coleman, Charles Durning and Jim Belushi. A casting miracle, and a great script, and hilarious, too; elvish nominee for an all-time Oscar.* He put the movie on top of Lianne’s VCR. *Probably that one*, he decided.

Violent machinery sounds ground out from the kitchen. Mac’s smile took on a bemused air. What was *shedding* in there? Was that making daiquiris? It sounded more like chainsawing down a Buick. He shrugged. The ways of humans were inscrutable.

He glanced at the next title she’d rented. He liked Bette Midler a lot, and Danny DeVito—*nasty little man, in this one at least*—was well cast. *Ruthless People* wasn’t quite in the same league as her first choice, but on the whole, he approved.

When he saw what her third pick was, though, he dropped the other two movies back in the bag without another thought. He put that cassette into the VCR’s slot, checked to make sure it was rewind—gloating all the while at his competence with human machinery—and flashed a Cheshire grin at Lianne when she came out of the kitchen with a mammoth bowl of popcorn balanced in the crook of her elbow and a bright pink daiquiri in -either hand.

“Strawberry,” she said. “Fresh strawberries my mom picked and dropped off yesterday.”

“Sounds tasty.” It did—and it smelled tasty, as well. The fresh strawberry-smell was mouthwatering.

She smiled at his expression. “I already tried mine. It’s pretty good. I can’t think of a better combination than strawberries and popcorn. So—what are we watching?”

He set the bowl of popcorn and one of the frothy pink drinks on her coffee table, and hit the on button of the remote. “Just wait and see.” He favored her with a sly smile.

“I rented them, you doofus. I already know what the choices are.” When he still wouldn’t tell her, she rolled her eyes and snorted. “Mysterious men just give me goosebumps.”

Belinda sat on the berm of the dark, lonely road, -reloading the chamber of her handgun and wishing Mac were standing in front of her so she would have a target. Reloading was mostly an excuse to sit down for a minute. After all, she’d only used the one bullet. But she’d been hiking along the road for nearly an hour and a half. Her feet hurt, she was tired, she was pissed off, and she -really would have liked to have taken time for a good long scream, but that wasn’t practical.

Besides, police training had left an indelible mark on her subconscious when it came to firearms. She firmly believed that one empty chamber would be the one she needed—so it would never, never stay empty.

*I hate him, she thought, rage coloring everything she did. If he wasn't worth a ruddy fortune to me alive, I'd kill that two-bit jock just for the fun of it.*

But he'd proven to her that he was exactly the person she was looking for. His psychic tricks verged on the magical—that vanishing act, even more than the business he'd pulled with his car doors—had guaranteed his fate in Belinda's book. That slimy little shit Tanbridge would be willing to pay through the nose for Mac Lynn. And soon. Real soon—because her patience wasn't going to hold out much longer.

She sighed and got up. She was spending a lot of time walking on this job—something she would pay Mac Lynn back for. At least *this* time when he stranded her, she hadn't been wearing high heels and tight leather pants.

Ten minutes further down the road, after a wide -detour past an abandoned house that would have to be repaired before it would even be suitable for ghosts, she spotted a gleam of silver off to her right, reflected in the moonlight. As she drew nearer, the gleam resolved into the shape of a Sunbird.

*My car! she thought. I don't believe it!*

Suspecting a ruse, she dropped into the woods and edged up to the vehicle from the passenger side, working her way through grass and weeds that reached to the Sunbird's door handles. He hadn't locked the car. She checked for booby traps, held her breath as she opened the passenger door, and—heart racing—eased herself onto the passenger seat and across to the driver's side.

*My God, the keys are in it. And the tank still shows half full. She smiled, bemused. I'll be damned. Maybe I won't have to skin the soles of his feet with a rusty knife after all.*

She turned the key in the ignition, and the motor kicked right over. She put the car in gear and gave it some gas. It moved—sluggishly—onto the pavement.

*Flop-flop-flop-flop, flop-flop-flop-flop.*

She hit the brake, turned the motor off, and leapt out.

She stared for a full minute at the car's tires, tires that had been completely hidden by the tall grass. Her anger grew to monumental proportions. In a blind fury, she kicked the door, and screamed “*You son-of-a-bitch!*” into the empty night.

“I'll kill you,” she ranted. “I'll kill you, I'll kill you, I'll kill you! I don't need the money this bad—I don't need anything this bad. You bastard! You rotten, stinking, stupid, sneaking *bastard!*”

She stared at her car again, and hot tears of pure rage rolled down her cheeks. The tires—all four of them—were flatter than soggy pancakes.

After the ordeals of the day, Stranger watched the children with apprehension. They huddled, separate and isolated, in the darkness of the beautiful little-girl room and wept in silent, tearless rage. Her heart went out to them.

*Och, if there was but a way to show them each that they are not alone—she thought.*

She knew all of them—Anne, battered and abused, always angry, who lived only to deal with the Father in all his giant horror; Abbey, the sheltered, the brilliant, charming scholar who loved learning; Alice, the repressive -puritan who hated everything that failed to meet her impossible standards of righteousness—and the silent, frozen, tortured husk that was all that remained of the original Amanda. Each of the first three would acknowledge *her* presence—none would admit that their “sisters” existed. The three-year-old Amanda was unreachable, hiding forever inside her frozen shell of fear. Amanda would never come out, without a miracle.

*But they need each other sa’ badly—if they could only come t’gether, they’d be whole again. And then—Stranger stared up at the milky reflection of moonlight on the wall—then they could fight back, couldn’t they? For all that they’re only children.*

*Well, then, it’s up to me to introduce them, isn’t it? A bloody nightmare that’s likely to be, but best begun is soonest done.*

Abbey was the easiest to reach. She stayed in the frilly pink bedroom, and did not ring her world with guards and traps. Alone of all the girls, she still retained the childish wish to please. She would listen to the ancient voice of Stranger.

*:Abbey, can you hear me?:*

Abbey, blue-eyed and blond, sniffled and nodded. *:Yes, Stranger. Wh-what do you w-w-want?:*

Cethlenn made her thoughts as gentle and persuasive as she could. *:I have a surprise for you.:*

Abbey perked up a little. *:Is it good?:* she asked -hopefully. She alone of all of them retained the ability to hope.

Stranger reflected on the answer to that and sighed. Was it good that there were four little girls and one ancient Celtic witch living in the body of one child? Probably not—but it felt necessary. Stranger had come late to this little drama. She had her own ideas about what had shaped the weirdling child in whom she found her own spirit suddenly awakened. She had ideas, too, of what cures there might be.

*:Och, it’s good enough, I suppose. I’ve a giftie for you, little Abbey. Secret sisters, hidden from all the world save you. Would you like to be meeting them, then?:*

The child pondered. *:Are they little kids like Sharon?:*

*:Not at all,:* Stranger assured her. *:They are like you—almost magical.:*

That was the key word. Abbey’s eyes widened. *:Oh, yes, Stranger. When can I meet them?:*

Cethlenn, the Stranger, smiled grimly. *:Come with me, child. I think now would be a good time.:* She enveloped Abbey’s spirit in her own, and with some difficulty slipped both of them through tiny cracks in the barrier that grew between the children. On the other side, Anne curled in a ball, silent, rocking back and forth, staring at nothing. Anne’s world was unremitting gray, with all the shifting featurelessness of unformed nightmare—except for the walls. Everywhere in Anne’s world, walls crawled up and up and up until the eye couldn’t see any further. They were brick or stone or shiny black glass, but they were everywhere.

When Stranger and Abbey appeared, Anne looked up and shrieked with fear. Her eyes dilated, and she

jammed herself up against one of her omnipresent walls.

:*Anne, I've brought a friend for you.*: Stranger said, her voice soothing.: *You don't have to be alone anymore.*:

Anne cowered and stared.: *A-lone.*: she crooned.: *A-lone, a-lone, a-lone . . .*: Objects materialized in the hazy space that surrounded the three of them and began to spin through the air. Lit cigarettes and burning matches, ropes and riding crops—all took up a stately waltz around Abbey's thin body, then darted in one by one, charging closer and closer to the other child's face. Abbey winced away.

:*Stop it, Anne.*: Stranger demanded, and moved next to the child under attack.: *This is Abbey, your sister.*:

:*Sis-ter, sis-ter, sis-ter.*: the green-eyed child chanted.: *I—don't—want—a—sis-ter.*:

The flames grew bigger, the coals at the ends of the cigarettes brighter and more menacing. The riding crops became bullwhips that cracked like thunder. The ropes coiled and struck out, serpents of hemp. All of them wove around Stranger and Abbey in a tighter and more lethal dance, faster and faster, until Abbey began to scream.

:*Out!*: Cethlenn commanded, and with the flick of her fingers, she and Abbey were through the barrier, back in Abbey's safe haven.

Abbey sat on her bed and sobbed, while Cethlenn sat next to her and stroked her hair.: *I don't want any more surprises, Stranger.*: the child told her gravely.

:*No.*: Stranger replied softly.: *I rather imagine you don't.*:

Cethlenn sat, the tearful child cradled in her arms, and stared off into space. *Well then, lassie, she thought to herself, will ye be havin' any more bright ideas this evenin'? Let's hope not.*

"I love *The Princess Bride*. I could watch the sword fight scene all by itself a million times." Lianne snuggled deeper into Mac's shoulder and munched popcorn. On the screen, the fight raged. Inigo made a remark about Bonetti's -defense. The Man In Black laughed. The swordsmen battled across the rocks, near the cliff—Inigo switched the sword from his left hand to his right, and the tide of battle turned.

"Probably reminds you of your job," Mac drawled.

Lianne's left eyebrow flickered upward, and she snorted. "I should have it so easy. Even the Fire Swamp and the Rodents of Unusual Size would be a piece of cake compared to fifth grade at Loyd E. Auman."

Mac punched a button on the remote and the TV went off.

"Hey," Lianne yelped. "You can't turn off *The Princess Bride*!"

He turned to her wearing the most serious expression he could muster. "We've already watched the whole movie once and the sword fight three times. Lianne, I want to hear about what happened in your class today. This is important."

Lianne sighed. “I know, but . . .”

He shook his head. “No ‘buts’.”

She considered his expression, then stiffened her shoulders. “Okay. It just sounds ridiculous, but it was real. Stuff was flying around the room, Mac—books, chalk, pens and pencils, paper—it couldn’t have been a draft or a breeze. I don’t know what it could have been. I have no logical explanation for what happened.”

“Life doesn’t require a logical explanation, Lianne,” he replied as persuasively as he could.

But she shook her head, violently. “Yes, it does. I refuse to sink to the level of the Shirley MacLaines of the world. I don’t flitter after every goofball anti-intellectual guru who promises the keys to universe—no math required. I don’t approve of all this New Age mumbo-jumbo. The real world doesn’t need it. The real world needs mathematicians, scientists, artists, builders, writers, teachers, nurses—the real world doesn’t need any more flakes.” She drew a deep breath. “There are already enough of those.”

Mac grinned wryly and hugged her closer. “Oh, I don’t know, baby. I think the real world could use a bit of magic. You know, a few elves and fairies, some bogans to play the bad guys, some ghosties and ghoulies. . . .”

“Life’s too short to waste on fantasy,” she said, but he could tell she was weakening.

*This, from a woman who watches The Princess Bride?* “Life’s too short to waste on math. Anyone who tells you otherwise is selling something.” He grinned.

She frowned. “You’d make a great fifth-grader.”

“The world will never know.” Mac kissed her cheerfully on her nose, then took a more serious tone. “This morning you were as upset by your student, Amanda, as you were by the stuff flying around in your room. Why?”

Lianne rolled over and looked directly into Mac’s eyes. “I want to understand what’s the matter with her. As a matter of fact, I’m going out to her house on Friday to talk with her folks. You’d know the place, I’ll bet. Kendrick’s Bal-A-Shar Arabian Stables. I know it is -going to sound silly—but you know what bothered me most today? I just had the craziest feeling, with that *poltergeist* business going on in my classroom, that *Amanda* was really the one responsible.” She stopped and pursed her lips. She was watching him for a reaction. “Now I really sound nuts, huh?”

Mac brushed his finger along the line of her eyebrows and slowly shook his head. “Nope—you sound like you have good instincts.”

“You think *Amanda* might have had something to do with—oh. Stupid me. You’re humoring me.” She turned her back to him, grabbed the remote control, and turned the TV back on. The Man In Black leapt from the cliff, did one great swing from a vine, followed up with a back-flip, and landed next to the sword he’d tossed point-down into the sand.

“Who *are* you?” Inigo pleaded.

The Man In Black smiled. “No one of im—”

—Click.

“Don’t turn the TV off, Mac,” Lianne snapped. “I want to watch this.”

He snapped back. “Don’t pout. I can’t talk to you with the TV on, and I want to discuss this.”

She rounded on him, fury in her eyes. “Well, I don’t! I don’t want to be patronized, I don’t want to be -humored—I don’t want to be remembered as that amusing little schoolteacher you dated once upon a time who had a problem with poltergeists in her classroom and bats in her belfry! I’m going to watch the movie. If you don’t want to do that, you can just leave.”

*I don’t want to leave. I had a lot of other plans for this evening, Mac thought, and sighed, mentally. Give up on the child for a moment. Now that I know who and where she is, there are other ways of reaching her.*

He slipped his hands under her giant t-shirt and nibbled gently along one side of her neck. He felt her shiver, then start to pull away.

“I wasn’t making fun of you. *I believe* in poltergeists and fairies and—” he dropped his voice to a low whisper “—even elves. I think that part of the universe is real, even if you don’t. But you’re tired, and you probably want to forget about work for a while. I’m sorry I brought it up. Let’s find something else to talk about.”

“Like what?” she asked, suspiciously.

He breathed into her ear. “Oh, you—and me—and maybe a little snuggling.”

Lianne smiled and rolled over against him. “I have a better idea,” she whispered. “Let’s skip the talking entirely.”

It was painfully early. Mac stared at the dull green glow of the alarm clock, then rolled over to look at the woman asleep by his side. She slept on her stomach, the sheet tangled around her knees, her face buried in the crook of her left arm. Her breathing was soft and regular, almost inaudible. Even asleep, she glowed with vitality.

Fascinated, Mac stroked the soft skin of her back and lightly caressed the smooth curves of her buttocks.

She wriggled against his touch, moved closer—and her breathing told him she was awake.

“Hi, there,” he chuckled.

She squinched one eye open, smiled at him, and sighed. “Hi, yourself,” she said softly. “It isn’t time to get up yet, surely?”

“Not really. And don’t call me Shirley.”

“Oh gawd. It’s too early for Zucker jokes.”

He softened his smile and caressed her cheek. “I was just watching you sleep.”

“And so you decided to wake me up.” Lianne giggled. She had a charming giggle. “Mac, you are such a fink. But, boy-oh-boy-oh-boy, I don’t want to get up yet—”

An idea occurred to Mac. “Tell you what. I’m completely awake, and I won’t get back to sleep again. Why don’t you go back to sleep, and I’ll put together a terrific breakfast for you—you can eat in bed, and then the two of us will take a nice long shower together, and then we’ll go off to work. Okay?”

Her muffled response reached Mac through the baffling of her pillow, under which she had buried her face. “How could I refuse an offer like that?”

He laughed. “You can’t, so don’t try.”

Mac rolled out of the bed and started to walk to the kitchen.

Lianne’s voice stopped him.

“You didn’t really mean it about the elves, did you?”

He looked back at her. She was propped up on her elbows, studying him intently.

“Mean what about the elves?” he asked carefully.

Her eyes were wary. “That you believed in them.”

Mac grinned at her and winked. “Of course I meant it.”

She snorted and buried her head back under the pillow. Mac laughed and went on into the kitchen.

*Bacon, an omelet, hot croissants, some waffles—or maybe crepes covered with powdered sugar and fresh whipped cream—fresh-squeezed orange juice . . . mmmmm. Sausage. Link sausage. What else? Mac’s imagination reviewed the possibilities. I think I’ll do this one without magic. No point in wasting the power when there is a kitchen full of -human food to use. He flipped on the light in her kitchen, wandered over to the fridge, and opened it. Wonder where she keeps the croissants*

None were evident. In fact, he didn’t see any bacon or link sausages either. No waffles. No crepes. The orange juice was plainly marked, but when he tasted it, it most definitely wasn’t fresh-squeezed. He found eggs, but the steps necessary to change them from raw egg to tasty omelet eluded him.

He did see a Betty Crocker cookbook. *I’ve seen June Lockhart making breakfast for Timmy and his dad on Lassie. How hard can it be?*

He picked up a cookbook at random, opened it, and paged through the index.

*Eggs And Cheese—page 101.* He thumbed through the pages until he found comprehensive descriptions on how to buy and store eggs, how to measure and use egg equivalents, and a mass of information on



cheeses. There were pictures of a woman's hand over a big, flat pan, and instructions that described the making of poached eggs, shirred eggs, fried eggs, scrambled eggs, souffles, egg foo yong, and dozens of varieties of omelets.

Good enough. He rummaged through the kitchen -until he found a pan that resembled the one in the picture. He put together as many of the listed ingredients as he could locate. He couldn't find any fresh green peppers, but he did find a jar labeled "Hot Red Chili Pepper—Ground." In the tradition of the cookbook, he substituted a cup of red peppers for the suggested cup of green peppers. Lianne had an eight-ounce can of tomato sauce in her cupboard, but it didn't have a pop-top on it, and Mac couldn't figure out how to open it, so, with the competent smile of a man who can adapt, he added eight ounces of tabasco sauce—which, he reasoned, was bright red and should be the same thing. He broke the three required eggs with enthusiasm, and very carefully picked out most of the pieces of shell. There didn't seem to be enough omelet for two people though, so he added -another three eggs.

Satisfied, he stirred his ingredients around in the little flat pan, and following instructions, located the knob on the stove that said "oven," and checked the instructions. It was supposed to take forty minutes to cook an omelet, but he really didn't want to spend that much time on it. He thought for a moment. The instructions called for 350 degrees. If he doubled the temperature, he should be able to halve the time. But the oven wouldn't go any higher than 550. Well, actually, it did go to BROIL. *That must be about 600–700 degrees.* He turned the knob to broil. Carrying his embryonic omelet carefully by the pan's plastic handle, he placed it into the oven.

*Nothing to that. I might as well see what else I can whip up.*

He paged through the cookbook. Pictures of delicious roasts and beautifully prepared fowl caught his eyes. He read down the instructions for some of the dishes. *I could do that*, he thought, fascinated. The world of humans was amazingly accessible, if one simply knew where to look. Page after page of substantial human dishes—that anyone could make.

He became absorbed in pictures of London Broil and Sweet-and-Sour Meatballs, Broccoli-Tomato Salad and Swedish Tea Rings. The time slipped past.

The sudden shriek of the smoke alarm brought him out of his reverie. The kitchen was redolent with the stench of burning plastic. Smoke roiled from the front of the oven.

"Shit," Mac muttered, admiring the succinctness of human vernacular. With a glance, he silenced the smoke alarm. With another, he formed the smoke into a compact ribbon and sent it trailing out the entryway in a neat, steady stream. He pulled open the oven door, surveyed the melted ruins of the skillet handle and his prodigiously grown and dreadfully blackened omelet with dismay. He made a gesture of dismissal, and skillet, omelet, and mess vanished.

Lianne called from the bedroom, "Was that the smoke alarm?"

*So much*, he thought, *for doing a fabulous breakfast the human way.*

"That was your imagination."

"I suppose it's my imagination that I smell smoke, too."

"Absolutely. I'm bringing breakfast in now." *To blazes with it. I'll do it my way.* Mac visualized his own breakfasts from the hotel, and out of thin air and elven magic, recreated an exact duplicate of the

best one he'd ever had, down to the little rose in the cut crystal bud vase. Then he doubled it. He lifted up the heavy silvered serving tray he'd materialized, and trotted into the bedroom with it.

Lianne rolled over and sat up, and her eyes grew round. "Wow! When you talk about breakfast in bed, you aren't kidding." She looked over the steaming croissants, the huge, cheese-filled omelet, the two steaks—broiled, medium rare, the big crystal glasses full to brimming with fresh-squeezed juice, and the bowls of fresh fruit. "And where did you get fresh cherries this time of year?" she asked.

Mac shrugged and grinned. "You like?"

"I like." She took one of the cherries and bit into it, and closed her eyes with ecstasy. "God, that's good." She looked at Mac with eyes that seemed to see right through him. "I'm beginning to realize why you believe in magic, though. The fancy trays and the cut crystal aren't a bad trick, considering I've never owned anything like them in my life, but these—" She indicated the little bowls of rich red fruit. "There won't be any cherries available around here till the middle of June. I know, because I haunt the grocery stores for 'em every year. If you found these—that's magic."

"You bet it is." Mac dug into his omelet and steak. "Stick with me, kid. You ain't seen nothing yet." He grinned at her. The wincing he saved for inside.

*Carelessness like that, he thought ruefully, eyeing the out-of-season cherries, will blow your cover all the way to Elfhame Outremer. And beyond.*

## Chapter Five

D.D. had MIX 96 turned way up. She was sprawled under the engine of the disassembled Victor, tinkering with something, singing along at the top of her lungs with a Creedence Clearwater Revival cover of "I Heard It Through The Grapevine" that Tank Sherman had dug out of the Golden Oldies box. Mac grinned. He wouldn't admit it to her, but D.D. didn't sound too bad on backup -vocals.

He waited until the song was over and something odious by Madonna started to play—then he turned the -radio off.

"Hey!" D.D. yelled without looking up. "Turn that back on. I'm listening to it."

*:Mother, Mother, what would they be sayin' back home if they could see you right now? The shame—och, the shame of me own fair mother disgracin' herself so.:*

*:Can it, kiddo.:* Dierdre was unfazed. She stood, wiped her hands on her overalls, and turned to face her offspring. "I'm not believin' me own eyes," she said for the benefit of everyone. "Mac Lynn, the perennially late, is in here at eight o'clock in the morning. Ye gods, man, fetch me water before I faint."

*"Ha-ha.": Stopping in to let you know—I found the homebase of our little TK. I'm going by there later today to see if I can talk to her.:*

D.D. turned back to her engine block and returned to her tinkering. Mac sat down on a stack of tires to

watch her.

*:Good, the pony-tailed terror remarked as she loosened bolts.: 'Bout damn time. I may graduate you to nearly-competent.:*

Mac grinned.*:Actually, there is something you can do that would be a lot more help.:*

*:If you're still hoping I'll talk to Felouen for you—:*

Mac snarled out loud, and realized a comment was necessary for the benefit of the non-elven who were present. “While you're working on the steering, D.D., tighten it up. It felt like you had it patched together with rubber bands and wishful thinking on Wednesday.” Inwardly, he added another snort.*:Not even close, Mother. I think I know how to take care of Felouen. This is something else entirely. I suspect Belinda Ciucci will be back. And after last night, she's going to be looking for my hide nailed to a board. Unfortunately, that might put an edge on her. Entertain her and her two goons for me, if you would. I don't want her getting close to the kid.:*

Dierdre chuckled.*:She still haunting your backtrail, is she? That'll be happy to help you with.:*

Maclyn was out on the track when Belinda showed up. D.D. spotted her making nice to Brad Fennerman from the SpelCo team, batting her lashes and leaning forward just enough to give him a really clear view of her -cleavage.

D.D. wrinkled her nose with disdain. The woman was a menace—and an embarrassment to both her species and her gender. She decided to watch, though, to see what Belinda's angle of attack would be.

It was only when she caught the girl's gaze skim past a point in her own pit area that she noticed a pale, hulking shape hovering in the shadows over Mac's thermos holding a little baggy full of something white and powdery.*Interesting. No doubt Mac's young admirer has a Borgia event planned here. Probably not true poison—I suspect they want darlin' Mac alive.* D.D. grinned and made sure the intruder thought she was far too involved in her work to notice him.

White powder went into the Gatorade. She saw a steady stream of it pour in—saw the man carefully twist the cap back on the thermos, then slink out along the row of stacked tires—saw him signal Belinda. The girl didn't acknowledge the signal, but she abruptly looked at her watch, gave a dramatic sigh, and wriggled away on her high, high heels.

*She'll be around a while yet, D.D. figured. She's got to have some plan for draggin' him out of here under every-one's noses. Och, this ought to be delightful.*

Mac did three more laps before he roared in.

*:She's been by, D.D. informed him without preamble.: Such a sweet, innocent lass she is, too, I canna imagine why you're suspectin' her at-all. Be sure to drink all your Gatorade—your friends went to such trouble to drug it for you.:*

Mac smiled slyly.*:Did they now? Well, then—:* He went straight to his thermos, groaned, “God, it's so hot out there today, I could drink almost anything,” and drained the contents in two long gulps.

*:Now, Mother, do I pretend that it affected me and bug the hell out of them when I disappear from their car—or do I just go about my business and drive them really nuts?:*

D.D. shrugged and grinned. *:Your call.:*

Tucked into a dark corner of the pits, Belinda waited. Mac had swallowed every blessed drop in his drugged drink—she tried to keep her glee in check, and failed—and Peterkin had dumped a whole twelve hundred milligrams of Seconal into the stuff just to make sure the jackass got enough to knock him out even if he only drank half. In fifteen to thirty minutes, according to Belinda’s drug reference, Mac should start getting sleepy. In an hour or two, if they didn’t get him to a doctor, he’d end up in a coma. In between that time, she needed to get him out of town.

She had her story worked out to perfection. The line would be that she and the boys were one off-duty EMT and two friends who just happened to be racing fans—they could take good care of their hero, the big racecar driver, and get him to the E.R. faster than an ambulance could hope to arrive. They would claim expertise and supplies on hand. There would not be anyone who would doubt that Mac Lynn was on his way to the hospital. There would be no interference from the airhead mechanic or any of the other crew. The first of several switch-cars was waiting outside. The plan was perfect. She didn’t doubt that Mel had a doctor on his payroll somewhere—she wondered, however, how long she could leave Mac in a coma without Mel considering the package he received “damaged goods.”

She entertained herself with images of what she was going to do to Mac when he was helpless and in her care. She wondered briefly about the mechanics of castration. The idea appealed to her, and it wouldn’t damage his TK ability any—would it? *With my luck, it would finish his talent off for good. After all, that’s where men’s brains are.* Maybe she should leave his balls alone and just cut off his head.

Feeling more cheerful, she glanced at her watch. With a shock, she realized that almost an hour had passed. Mac was still working—and there was no visible sign that the drugs were affecting him. She looked over at Peterkin and Stevens in their hiding place across the pits. Both shrugged.

She bit her lip and stared at the wide-awake driver. *He drank it, dammit! I know he did. I saw him with my own eyes.*

Could Peterkin or Stevens have double-crossed her? Yes, obviously—but why would they?

Unknown. However, the easy way to tell would be to try an equal dose of Seconal on them and see how it worked. If there was something wrong with the prescription she’d finagled out of the doc-in-a-box in LaJolla, Peterkin and Stevens would be fine. If they had double-crossed her, they would get what they deserved. Either way, she didn’t lose anything.

She made a curt signal and slipped away from the pits. Her two stooges followed her out to the parking lot.

Felouen, in a cream silk blouse and tailored cashmere skirt and blazer, her hair pulled back in a classic chignon, appeared behind Maelyn and D.D., smiling wryly. “What charming friends you have. No wonder you’d rather spend your time here than in Underhill.”

D.D., her face and overalls dirt-smudged, torque wrench in one gloved hand, smiled politely. “We all have our little hobbies, dear.” Her smile widened as she watched Felouen wince away from the Cold Iron wrench. Mac wished he dared smile.

Instead he sighed. “Still overdressed, hey, Felouen? Why don’t you go home and change into something more -appropriate?”

She frowned. “I’m here on business. Dierdre, you’ve served your time on Council—I really do not need to speak with you. But I must speak with Maclyn for a moment.”

D.D. nodded, and lost the smug smile. “I’ll leave you two, then.” Whistling a Killderry reel, the delicate mechanic moved back to her prized auto, leaving her son to fend for himself.

*:Thanks, Mother.:*

*:You know where I stand on this.:*

Mac shrugged and turned to glare at Felouen.

The elegant warrior gifted him with a frosty smile. “I need your company for a few moments, Maclyn. Please come Home with me; I’ll show you what you need to see, and then, if you still feel that I am imposing needlessly on you, I will take back the Ring and the Council will decide on your standing within the Court.”

Maclyn didn’t quite grimace. “More signs and portents?”

Felouen didn’t change her expression by so much as a twitch of her eyelid. “Please—just come with me. If you choose to scoff*after* you have seen what I have to show you, so be it.”

Maclyn sighed. “You are so damned irritating—you and your bogeys and doom-crying.” But he followed Felouen into the office, and through the temporary Gate she’d formed there.

They appeared at the border of Elfhome Outremer, where the edges of order collided with the infinite black Unformed, next to the Oracular Pool. The border, usually firmly fixed and still, billowed unsettlingly while Maclyn watched, pushing dark tentacles into the shield that walled the Ordered Land. The effect looked enough like -something big trying to break through that Maclyn cringed when one tentacle brushed within a few inches of his thigh. More tentacles pressed suddenly from the same spot, as if they had become aware of his presence.

“What’s doing that?” Mac asked, more disturbed than he cared to admit.

“There’s nothing out there that I or anyone else can find,” Felouen said. “That’s all just unformed energy—and a feeling of fear and rage and hatred. It’s been getting worse.”

“I see where you might be worried,” he admitted.

She shook her head. “Not yet, you don’t. I’m afraid there’s more. Look into the Oracular Pool.”

Mac turned and studied the flat, deep blue sheet of water nestled in its shallow concave of mossy rock. -After a moment, his reflection disappeared, replaced by darkness. For a long moment, nothing was visible in the Pool; then, with jerky, shambling movements, blood-spattered horrors streamed out of the

Unformed—misbegotten nightmares with gape-jawed lopsided heads jammed neckless onto narrow shoulders, sticklike arms and legs terminated by terrible claws, sketchily formed bodies that bore no resemblance to anything Maclyn had ever seen, or ever heard of. They bared monstrous fangs and ran screaming after tall, blond, graceful runners that fell before them, bleeding from jagged, terrible wounds—and the Pool dimmed, and once again Maclyn looked at his own reflection.

He stood, speechless, staring into his own eyes.

“It’s time to let go of the memories, Maclyn,” Felouen whispered. “It’s time to stop pretending that you’ll find her again, and come back to your own kind. We need you here and now. *I* need you. Those humans do not, nor do you need anything of theirs.”

“I still love her,” Maclyn said, still staring stiffly into the Pool. *That isn’t the only reason I stay, but it’s a reason. I know you wouldn’t understand the others.*

“She’s dust these last two hundred years, Maclyn,” Felouen said, reasonably, calling up a despair he’d begun to forget. “Sure and she loved you—’twas your own folly you loved her, too. You were both young, but she grew old and died, and you’re still young—and still searching for her among mortals who are destined to leave you just as she did.”

Despair turned to anger, and he turned on the source of that anger. “Have you ever loved anyone, Felouen?” he snapped, restraining his wish to strike that impassive face. “Has anyone ever really gotten through to you?”

For a time, Maclyn got no answer. Finally the slender warrior responded, turning a face full of a loss that matched his own, speaking in a dull, lifeless whisper. “Yes. I’ve loved without hope for more than two hundred years—” Her voice cracked, and she fell silent.

Maclyn turned and studied her. She had her back to him; her shoulders were stiff and her spine was rigid and erect. His hands clenched and unclenched. “I’ll hold on to the Ring, Felouen. I have something else I need to take care of now—and it may be important; I don’t know yet, and I’m not taking on anything else until I do know. The fact is, I’m not sure what this thing I’m involved with means, or how much trouble it’s going to entail for all of us. There *is* a child involved, and you know I can’t turn my back on a child. I’m not promising to get involved in this problem here. But I won’t say that I won’t, either.”

Felouen nodded but said nothing, and kept her back to him.

Maclyn Gated back to the garage, and the Gate closed off behind him.

In the office, he stared at the plain round wall clock that ticked off the seconds and minutes and hours that formed the limits of humans’ lives, and he bit his lip. He could not keep himself from remembering that one of the elves that fell to the shambling things in the Oracular Pool’s vision had been Felouen.

Amanda-Anne slipped off the bus and hurried down the lane, between the long lines of neatly painted fence, the gentle green, clovered swells of pastures, black and bay and glossy chestnut Arabs who stood head to tail, grazing peacefully and swatting flies from each other’s faces. She detoured around the stables, moving carefully along a route that not only hid her presence from anyone working in the barns, but also from anyone who might be in the house or the yard. Sharon was still in primary and got home from school half an hour before she did; it was essential to keep close watch for her. Sharon would tell

the Father and the Step-Mother where she went. Sharon was a big tattletale, but she couldn't help it. The Step-Mother made her that way.

The grass grew taller back of the stables. It edged a woodland dark and cool and quiet even in summer, with stands of pines marching in long, neat rows, bordered and filled in by scrub oak. Amanda-Anne moved across the beds of pine needles in near-silence, being sure she went a different way than the times before, consciously leaving no path. The pines merged with swamp on the right, full of snakes and cypress, with older hardwoods on the left—not first growth, but large, sturdy trees nonetheless: oak and magnolia and sycamore, ash and gum. Amanda-Anne went to the left, up a gentle incline.

At the top of the little hill sat an immense, ancient holly. Patches of pale green moss spotted its dappled silver-white bark, a few red berries still hung on in defiance of the season. The old tree's branches bent so low they touched the ground, and spiny evergreen leaves formed a screen so that the base of the tree became a fortress, well protected, with only one narrow entrance. That entrance, invisible except from a difficult approach through a stand of scrub oaks and blackberry canes, was formed from a branch that arched higher than the others and left a narrow gap that could be crawled through by a small, determined child.

Amanda-Anne, experienced in the delicate negotiation of thorn and thicket, got inside without snagging her school clothes or getting dirty. Once inside, she breathed deep and stood up straight. Amanda-Anne retreated to the background and Amanda-Abbey came out.

Things sparkled under the tree—decorations hung on bits of thread and string that decorated Amanda-Abbey's magpie nest. Tiny glass beads scavenged from an outgrown pair of Sharon's moccasins and a green carved glass bead saved from a broken necklace that was the only token she had of her real mother hung next to little round mirrors glued back-to-back, rescued from a favorite sweater that Daddy had ripped apart when he was mad once. Bluejay feathers, bits of fragile shell brought back from trips to the beach house at Ocean Isle, a broken, but still pretty, stained glass suncatcher of a hummingbird, the cut glass baubles from a pair of discarded earrings, one rhinestone pin—all swayed and glittered and turned with every scant breeze. There were comic books wrapped carefully in plastic and hidden in the tree's only reachable knothole. A worn saddle blanket served as a rug.

Amanda-Abbey leaned against the tree trunk in her secret home and watched her collection catch the light. Amanda-Anne's fingers stroked the cool, almost smooth bark, her ears drank in the hushed murmurs of safe, isolated, protected woods. No one would find her; no one would hurt her—not while the tree guarded her.

The child closed her eyes and felt the warmth of the sun on her face and studied the cozy speckled yellow glow of the inside of her eyelids. A few birds chirped and fluttered; squirrels raced along aerial thoroughways and chattered pointed squirrel insults at each other.

The light that flickered through her closed lids grew brighter—much, much brighter.

She opened her eyes.

Something was happening in front of her. Her green carved bead was glowing with warm, glorious inner light. A swirling mist began to curl out of it, emerald-green shot through with flecks of gold bright as tiny suns. The mist stretched and grew, and within it a form took shape—a form wrapped in rich green-and-gold tapestries, taller than anyone Amanda knew and handsome and smiling, with eyes bright as new leaves, long blond hair held back by a gold, jewel-studded circlet, and the neatest pointed ears Amanda had ever imagined.

“Wow,” Amanda-Abbey whispered. “That’s really cool.”

Amanda-Alice sensed something that required her attention. From her white, pure castle, she stretched out -feelers, then, finding what she sought, withdrew them again in shocked disgust. *It’s magic. Magic is evil.*

\* \* \*

The green man produced a shimmering wand and waved it in a circle in front of her. Sparkles of light scattered and danced in front of the child, weaving patterns in the warm spring air.

“Magic,” the child whispered. Then, *There’s no such thing as magic*, she thought. Amanda-Abbey was sure of this. *So this isn’t a real elf. It’s just imagination.*

Amanda-Anne kept quiet, watching, paying close attention, taking notes. Appearing out of thin air was a good trick. If she could learn it, she could hide from the -Father. The magic lights were pretty, but they didn’t look useful. Even so, Anne could sense power in them. Power was something she wanted.

The amazing man seemed to look right through the scrawny child in the tartan plaid skirt who stared at him—and then, silently as he had come, he folded into the scintillating fog from which he had emerged and was drawn back into the glowing bead. The light in the bead gleamed an instant longer, and then flickered and died.

“Gone,” Amanda-Abbey said, wistfully. “I want him to come back.” She thought. *If I can figure out why he came here, maybe I can bring him back.*

She inched over to where the bead hung. She blew on it once. Nothing happened. She walked around it, staring. It remained just a bead on a string. She pushed it once with a single index finger, and watched it swing in a few short arcs, then stop. Still, nothing happened. She closed her eyes and wished the magic back into the bead again, without luck. Tentatively, she reached out and broke off the fine strand of thread at the branch, then tied the makeshift bracelet around her wrist. Almost immediately, the single bead on its weathered thread sprang back into glowing life, and the mist spiraled forth once more.

The green-garbed man reappeared right in front of her and winked at her, then laughed soundlessly and hid -behind the holly’s trunk.

She walked around the tree, stooping under low branches and her dangling decorations. He was gone.

A flash of green light from behind her alerted her, and she turned to see him again, this time on the outside of her tree-fortress. He waved, and she waved back and watched him, but she did not follow him beyond the protective circle of the tree’s branches.

Stranger’s voice broke into her thoughts, making herself known.: *Don’t fear him, lass—’tis good luck to meet one of the Fey folk.:*



*:He isn't real, Stranger.:*

There was gentle laughter in her head. *:Of course not, child. 'Tis still good luck.:*

Amanda-Abbey giggled at the apparent nonsense in that, and when the green-garbed elf vanished again, she rubbed the bead on her wrist, like a waif summoning a genie from a bottle.

The bead glowed again, and the elf reappeared in his gorgeous robes and glowing green cloud, but this time he settled cross-legged in front of the girl, floating an inch off the ground.

He smiled shyly.

Amanda-Abbey smiled back. "Can you talk?" she asked.

"Of course," he answered. "Can you?"

She giggled. "What a silly question. I just did."

"And so did I," he retorted, and winked.

"But you aren't real," she pointed out. "So I thought maybe you couldn't talk. Do you have a name?"

The elf pulled back his shoulders and in solemn tones, announced, "I am Prince Maclyn Arrydwyn, son of the fair Lady Dierdre Sherdeleth and of the Prince of Elfhome Outremer. I am rider of great metal steeds and horses of air and magic, guardian of the Twilight Lands, immortal walker among mortals." Maclyn bowed slightly from the waist. "And who are you?"

"Everyone calls me Amanda—but my name is really Abbey." Amanda-Abbey returned the bow gracefully.

The elf—Maclyn—nodded seriously. "I see. So then, shall I call you Amanda, as everyone else does, or shall I call you by your true name?"

The child grinned. "Call me by my true name. Nobody else but Stranger knows it."

"Very well." Once again he bowed, gracefully. "And who, by the way, is Stranger?"

Amanda-Abbey giggled. "If I knew that, she wouldn't be Stranger, now would she? Do you grant wishes, like in fairy tales?"

He considered her request. "Hmm. I do magic. Would that be good enough?"

"Magic isn't real," she insisted.

*:Magic is wicked, wicked, wicked!:* A voice screamed in Amanda-Abbey's head, but Amanda-Abbey refused to listen to it. Magic was just silliness and tricks with mirrors. Everyone knew that.

"Isn't it, now? Let me show you, and you be the judge." Maclyn touched the string that held the bead to Amanda's thin wrist, and it glowed softly. When he pulled his hand away, the bead was strung on a beautiful, intricate gold chain.

*Yes-s-s!* Amanda-Anne watched closely and whispered to herself. The elf pulled energy from somewhere, made it do things. *I can . . . almost . . . see how—but . . . whe-e-e-re?*

“Oh,” Amanda-Abbey gasped. “How beautiful, and how wonderful. Do something else.”

But Maclyn smiled and vanished.

“Wait!” Amanda-Abbey cried.

The elf reappeared in the woods a little way off. He beckoned, and the girl hurried out of her hiding place, heedless of the thorns and the briars. Her blouse snagged, and she got some pulls in her sweater, but the elf had vanished again and reappeared still farther off, and she couldn't take time to be worried about mere clothes.

She darted through the woods with the elf always -appearing and disappearing in the dimming light just ahead of her. Suddenly Amanda-Abbey noticed that she was moving through fog that got thicker with every step she took, and that she didn't recognize anything about the part of the woods she was in. The trees were farther apart, and taller than any trees that she had ever seen, and incred-ibly beautiful. Leaves of silver and gold brushed against her and rang gently with every touch or puff of the faint breeze. Lights in soft greens and muted blues, gentle reds and bright yellows, flittered and danced through the branches high overhead, and the sound of a tiny waterfall somewhere nearby tinkled merrily in her ears. Voices whispered from above her, and at a distance, there were sounds of laughter, and dancing, and a jig played -inhumanly fast by virtuoso performers.

*:I know where this is,:* Stranger told Amanda-Abbey with a satisfied voice.

Amanda-Abbey whispered, “Really? Where are we?” Suddenly she was no longer so certain that elves and magic were impossible. She was no longer certain of anything.

From right beside her, Maclyn said, “Welcome to Elfhome Outremer, Abbey. This is my home.”

“It's beautiful,” the child whispered, in a voice full of wonder.

*Evil, evil, evil,* thought Amanda-Alice. *Only the devil does magic; that's what the Sunday-school teacher said. This green man is the devil, and this place must be hell. I'm telling Father about this. He will know how to punish the devil—I know he will.*

Amanda-Abbey felt a vague sensation of disquiet. It seemed as if part of her mind wanted to rebel, to run away from the lovely haven in which she found herself.

“Yes, it is beautiful,” Maclyn answered. “I thought a special girl like you would be able to appreciate such a magical place.”

Amanda-Abbey raised her eyebrows. “Why me?”

He spread his hands wide. “Because of the magic you do,” he said, and his words had a ring of sincerity about them.

She stared at him, puzzled. “I don’t do magic. Magic isn’t real.”

He shook his head. “Wasn’t it magic that kept the race car from hurting anyone at the track the other day? Wasn’t it magic that sent all the erasers and papers in your classroom flying?”

Amanda-Abbey giggled; where had he gotten these stories? Race cars? Erasers? What was he talking about? She didn’t remember anything like that. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Amanda-Anne, satisfied that she had figured out the elf’s magic tricks, looked up and noticed the darkened, twilight sky. Fear gripped her. The Father would be furious—the Step-Mother would tell him that she was late. She shoved her way to the front, grabbed control of the body, and stood, rigid and trembling. Her eyes met those of the elf, and she shivered. “Home!” she wailed, suddenly terrified. *Late! I’m . . . late! Home!* She used the information she’d garnered from watching the elf to draw in the earth--energy that pulsed through Elfhome Outremer, and promptly removed herself to the safety of the holly tree hide-out.

Amanda-Abbey was back in control and back in familiar surroundings. She didn’t even flinch. “Wow!” she whispered, crawling out of her nest in the muted sunlight of early afternoon, still impelled by a powerful urge to get home, “What a neat dream.” She studiously avoided -noticing the green bead on the gold filigreed chain that hugged her wrist, or the dirt and snagged threads on her school clothes.

Amanda-Anne took over control as Amanda walked through the woods. She trotted home by a different route, alert for watchers of any kind.

Cethlenn had been aware of the elf’s presence, but she had been unable to wrest control of the body away from the children long enough to beg for help. Now, hurrying back to the child’s terrible home, she swore softly and wondered what she could do to save her child host.

Lianne drove up the long, winding lane past carefully tended fences and manicured pastures, well-maintained, picturesque old barns, and a riding ring set up for trail training, with jumps and bridges and barrels. Over to her right, a young man put one lean gray filly through her paces on a lunge line, while two hawk-faced men in tweed jackets and caps watched and commented.

She noted the exquisitely kept ornamental gardens, the flawless landscaping, the elegant half-timbered home that bespoke good breeding and old money—and she shook her head in bewilderment. This Eden

was more than she could ever hope to aspire to. In her whole life, she could never hope to live so well, to have so much. Where was the worm that gnawed away at Amanda? And how could it survive in such a place?

She parked her little yellow VW bug to one side of the house, clambered out of the car, and smoothed her skirt nervously. She felt suddenly shabby and plain—and on very shaky ground.

Stomach in knots, she strode up the walk and rang the bell. After a long wait, she heard the click of heels in the hall. The door swung open noiselessly, and Lianne pasted a confident smile on her face.

Merryl Kendrick gave her a cool, polite nod and said, “Won’t you come in, Miss McCormick? Amanda is upstairs doing her homework—I can call her if you would like.”

“Not just yet, please,” Lianne answered, and found herself following Merryl through a long, perfectly kept maze of glossy mahogany halls and decorator-perfect rooms. She studied Mrs. Kendrick’s back and winced. Merryl Kendrick would have been a good six inches taller than Lianne in flats. In heels, the other woman towered over her. Amanda’s step-mother was casually dressed, the elegance understated—but every article of clothing spoke of more money than Lianne could put into her wardrobe in an entire year. She shouldn’t let all that money have a psychological -effect on her, Lianne knew, and knew at the same time that *should* was a meaningless word. All that money, all that power, did have an effect on her. It weakened her position, it weakened her credibility. As much as she would like to pretend otherwise, she was not an equal among peers in this world. And she would have to act as if she were, for Amanda’s sake. Because whatever was wrong with Amanda was wrong in spite of all these evident advantages.

“Tea?” Merryl asked.

“Thank you.” Lianne took the seat the other woman indicated and glanced around the sun-room. It seemed to her that she had seen it in a *Better Homes and Gardens* spread. With its Mexican tile floor, hand-adzed timber-framed beams, and walls of glass looking out over a scenic view of the estate and a lovely, wild patch of woods, it was breathtaking.

And sterile.

There were no family pictures, no knickknacks, no personal touches whatsoever to mar the carefully conceived vision of the designer. As she ran her memory back over what she had seen of the rest of the house, she realized it was all the same. The house was lovely, but it looked as if no one lived there, or ever had.

*That’s a middle-class prejudice, she told herself. Only the middle class insists that a bit of disorder is healthy.*

Merryl returned and placed a heavy pottery teapot and a matching cup in front of Lianne.

“Thank you.” The young teacher poured herself a cup of tea and sipped at it gratefully.

“Of course.” Merryl Kendrick nodded gracefully. -“Andrew will be home any time. In the meantime, we can drink our tea, or you can fill me in on what you perceive to be the problem.”

*What I perceive to be the problem. That's nicely put. The problem is no doubt going to be my perception, and not the problem. Ah, well, face it right out .*

She decided on a frontal assault. "To the best of your knowledge, Mrs. Kendrick, is there any history of mental illness in Amanda's family?"

The other woman's lips curled in a faint smile over her own cup of tea, and one eyebrow raised slightly. She leaned back in the peach-and-mint wing-backed chair and crossed her legs. After a moment, she chuckled. "Well, that's certainly getting to the point." Merryl Kendrick sipped slowly at her tea. "Actually, yes—there is. Funny you should ask. Andrew's first wife had a long history of psychological problems—paranoia, delusions, depression, psychoses. She was hospitalized—Andrew obtained a -divorce, but made sure she was well taken care of until her death."

At Lianne's startled expression, Amanda's step-mother nodded slowly.

"You see, she died about two years ago. Suicide. I -understand these problems are sometimes . . ." Merryl picked delicately around the word ". . . hereditary."

Lianne held her breath, closed her eyes, and let it out again, slowly. "Sometimes," she agreed.

"Dana's parents—Amanda's natural grandparents—aren't quite normal, either. We've done the best we could for Amanda—limited her contacts with them ever since her mother's death. . . ." Merryl Kendrick seemed to be -actually relishing this. "It doesn't seem to be helping, does it, Miss McCormick?"

Lianne blinked, choosing her words with care. "Amanda is having serious problems in school this year, behavioral as well as academic. I'm not the only teacher that has noticed this. It's in her records, if you'd care to see them." *There. So much for "my perception."* "I can't say that her problems stem from her mother, or her mother's death, or heredity, or anything else. All I can say is that she needs help, and I don't know that I am able to give her the help she needs."

There were thundering feet on a stairway, and Amanda burst into the room. Her sweet, blue-eyed face lit up when she saw her teacher, and she ran over and hugged her vigorously. "I didn't know you were coming over tonight, Miss McCormick. Don't you like my house?" The child turned to face her step-mother, still smiling. "I got all of my homework finished, Mother. May I go outside for a while?"

"Not now, Amanda," Merryl said. "I'm expecting your father home any minute."

"As well you should, darling," Andrew Kendrick said from the doorway, slipping a cigarette pack into his crisp breast-pocket. "I'm sorry I'm late—one of my clients was quite distraught and needed a bit of extra time."

Lianne had been watching Amanda, bemused by the girl's cheerful countenance and normal manner—so she didn't miss the change. Amanda's face turned from her step-mother to her father, and a series of unreadable expressions flashed across her features. Her mouth fell slightly open, giving her a dull, witless look.

And her pale, pale green eyes stared at the man in the doorway with a cross between canny hatred and stupefied terror.

The flesh stood up on Lianne's arms, and chills raced up and down her spine.

There was a crash from another room. Andrew and Merryl looked at each other, and Merryl cleared her throat. “You evidently let one of the cats in with you again, -Andrew.”

His eyes focused on his child. “No doubt,” he agreed. “Amanda, I see you’ve been playing in your school clothes again. You’ve soiled them and ruined the fabric. Please go upstairs and change into your stable clothes, then go clean your pony’s stall. I’ll be out to check on your work when your mother and I have finished speaking with your teacher.”

“Yes-s-s . . . Father,” the child said. Her voice grated; low, animal-like. She was as much a different child as if Amanda had been picked up and physically replaced.

Lianne felt her pulse begin to race. *Wrong*, her mind screamed at her. *This is wrong! It’s weird! It’s awful!* It took every bit of control for her to keep her seat, to keep smiling while Andrew Kendrick crossed the room, took a seat next to his wife, and smiled at her and said, “Well, ladies, what solutions have you reached?”

His voice was cheerful, his eyes bright and kind and concerned—so why did every nerve in Lianne’s body -insist that some invisible force was dragging monstrous talons across a giant blackboard?

“Miss McCormick deduced Dana’s problem from Amanda’s classroom behavior.” Merryl looked into her husband’s face. Her body posture and gestures indicated sincere concern. “She says she isn’t the only teacher to have seen problems with Amanda.”

Her husband dropped his eyes. “Dana,” he said, and Lianne would have sworn she could hear real anguish in those two labored syllables. Her instincts told her that, no matter what she saw, or thought she saw, Andrew Kendrick was a phony. Merryl was the perfect foil for him, and the two of them had snowed her from the beginning—would have kept her convinced that the problem was in other directions. But Lianne knew kids. She’d been well -acquainted with thousands of them in her eight years of teaching, and she’d seen that unguarded expression of Amanda’s before. The look in her eyes, the little girl’s actions, the abrupt change in her attitude—those things had given Lianne a name for the sick feeling that weighted her down and dragged on her every breath.

Child abuse.

She needed to get out of the house, get help—but first, she needed one more tiny reassurance that she’d really seen what she thought she’d seen.

“I think Mrs. Kendrick and I have stumbled across the problem. And I think I may have thought of a solution.” She had to have parental permission for this first step. Unless the child revealed something on her own, or there were physical evidences, there wasn’t anything that could be done that Andrew Kendrick with his money and influences couldn’t counter. “I can’t promise anything, but I’d like your permission anyway. I’d like for Amanda to be seen by one of our counselors. I think there are a great many things troubling her, probably related to her mother’s death, and I think that having some time with the counselor, starting on Monday, would give her a chance to talk those problems out. It would at least give us an idea of what we’re dealing with.”

Lianne waited. She watched concern crawl across Merryl’s features like a spider, watched Andrew’s eyes harden, watched them glance at each other—we *have to keep our secret* expressions that gave the teacher her answer.

“I don’t think so, Miss McCormick,” Andrew said, still smiling—but with the smile artfully

condescending. “I think you may be right, that psychological help would be in order for Amanda—but I don’t think that a school counselor who works for peanuts and sees his, ah, *clients* in the sardine-can atmosphere of public education would be of much use. While we want Amanda to be mainstreamed in a public school, and not sequestered away in a private and privileged academy, I don’t think my open-mindedness runs to welfare-quality counselors. I’m sure we can find someone much more suitable through our contacts.”

*Bingo*, Lianne thought. *And dollars to donuts she’ll never go to see anyone, because they can’t take a chance of Amanda talking to anyone.* Outwardly, though, Lianne kept her expression neutral. “Of course, Mr. Kendrick. I wasn’t suggesting that our counselor could provide therapy—only that she might be able to give us a direction in which to look for the problem. However, I’m sure that *your* choice of counselor will be even better. Just let me know when you come up with someone.”

The teacher stood. “I’ve taken enough of your time. Thank you for talking with me. I think we’ve come up with some positive avenues to explore, and I’m sure Amanda will benefit.”

Merryl and Andrew walked her back through the maze to the front door and showed her out, making small talk all the while.

*And when I get home, you creeps, I’m calling Social Services. And we’ll see if you get away with blaming your kid’s behavior on your ex-wife to them.*

## Chapter Six

“You didn’t ask to be excused,” her step-mother called from the dining room.

“Amanda Jannine Kendrick, get back to this table at once!” yelled Daddy.

Amanda-Abbey, halfway up the steps to her room and running headlong, reluctantly turned and plodded back to the dining room.

“Where were you going in such a hurry, young lady?” her daddy asked her.

He glared at her from the head of the table. Her step-mother, lingering over hot tea and a wafer-thin slice of pound cake, shook her head with annoyance. Sharon sat next to her real mother, looking secretly pleased that Amanda was in trouble again.

Amanda-Abbey looked from one adult to the other, and her fingers twisted against each other. She took a deep breath.

“May-I-please-be-excused-I-have-to-go-clean-the-pony’s-stall,” she said in a rush.

Her step-mother nodded curtly. “Wear your coveralls. I don’t want those clothes ruined any more than they are.”

Her daddy just smiled, playing with his lighter, tumbling it end-over-end between two fingers.

“I won’t get them dirty. Promise.”

Amanda-Anne took over, hurling the child's scrawny body out of the dining room and up the stairs two at a time and into her room at breakneck speed. She grabbed worn coveralls from their spot behind the hamper and darted into the closet, closing the door behind her. Trembling and breathing hard, she flung on the coveralls in the darkness, then crept to the door. She listened, soft ear pressed against the cool, white wood. On the other side, there was nothing but silence.

Silence, Amanda-Anne knew, was very bad.

There were two sets of steps, one on either end of the hall. Both had landings halfway, and closets at the top and the bottom—

Amanda-Anne closed her eyes and *thought*. No answers came to her, no pictures. And every minute she wasted gave the Father one more minute—

She bolted out her door and to the left, heading for the front stairs, which were farthest from the dining room, praying that she had guessed right.

Past the top closet and down the stairs—safe.

Around the landing—still no sign of Him.

Down the rest of the stairs—only a little further to go.

Past the partly-open door of the closet at the bottom of the stairs—and an arm shot out and grabbed her and dragged her into the closet.

“Boo,” the Father whispered. He laughed softly in the darkness of the closet, and his hands pinned her against the smothering piles of coats. “You’re lucky I’m not a monster.”

Amanda-Anne struggled to get away from him. The Father tightened his grip until her arms hurt. “Monsters wait in the dark for bad girls, Amanda. Getchells and morrowaries, slinketts and fulges. Big, drooly monsters with bloody red teeth and sharp claws and white eyes that glow. Slimy, slippery shapeless things that slither and drip burning goo and won’t even leave your bones behind for anyone to find you, *Amanda*. And it’s almost dark outside, *Amanda*. They’ll be there any minute. Hungry monsters. When you go outside to clean your pony’s stable, be sure the monsters don’t get you.”

\* \* \*

Someone picked up after the seventh ring. A masculine voice said, “Hello?”

Lianne closed her eyes and leaned her head against the wall next to her phone. Getting through to the government agency after-hours had been a morass of answering -machines, people who were home but not on call, and people who were on call but not at home. The hospital emergency department’s Cumberland County Social Services’ after-hours emergency phone numbers were one week out of date. The person she’d finally reached, -after an hour of trying, had given her four numbers that *might* put her in touch with the person she needed. She had tried three of the numbers, and they hadn’t. This was her last hope, and she clenched the receiver in her hand until her knuckles went white. The real live voice on the other end of the line wasn’t getting out of this until Amanda’s rescue was guaranteed.

“Hello,” she said. “This is Lianne McCormick—I’m a teacher at Loyd E. Auman Middle School.”



“Don Krocowski. What can I do for you?”

Lianne took a deep breath. “I suspect that one of my students is being abused. I want her family checked out.”

“What kind of evidence do you have of the suspected abuse?” The man on the other end of the line sounded tired; bone-tired and heartsick.

Lianne’s voice went tense on her. “Evidence?”

“Do you have reason to expect imminent danger to life or limb?” he asked—or rather, recited.

This wasn’t what she had expected. “For example—?”

Krocowski sighed deeply. “For example, does the kid say either of his or her parents said they were going to kill him or her? She or he have any old cigarette burn scars, rope burns, broken bones, bruises on the face or body, brothers or sisters who have died or been hospitalized in the last few weeks—anything like that?”

Lianne’s stomach contracted at his list of horrors. “*She*. Her name is Amanda Kendrick. And no. Nothing like that.”

The voice on the other end of the line sighed. “You got any reason to think the kid will be dead tomorrow if I don’t go over there tonight?”

The teacher bit her lip. “No,” she said softly. “She shows psychological damage—personality problems—but nothing that makes me think her parents will murder her.”

“Okay. That’s a problem, Ms. McCormick. I know that you know your students. I understand that you probably can tell when something is wrong, and I trust your judgment and your instincts, but I have to have something tangible. Bruises, something the kid told you, something I can show a judge. I can’t walk up to her parents’ house and tell them they are being investigated for child abuse because their kid’s teacher has a bad feeling.”

“But I know something is wrong.”

“Ms. McCormick, I believe you, but let me give you an idea of how wrong things can be. I have a neighborhood outbreak of syphilis among three- to nine-year-olds that I’m investigating; I just got a call from the Cape Fear Emergency Room about a little girl whose mother dumped hot oil on her because she wouldn’t be quiet. I have a five-month-old baby with broken arms and broken legs that the mother’s boyfriend threw across the room and whose four brothers and sisters have to be gotten out of that situation. I have a dead kid who showed up in the morgue whose body hasn’t been claimed. I have a list of call-in’s from concerned neighbors and teachers and relatives as long as my arm with complaints that may or may not end up with a bunch of little bodies in little body-bags if I don’t take care of them yesterday—and it’s already almost tomorrow. Child abuse is the year’s biggest growth industry. I understand *wrong*—I really do. You give me something to go on, and I’ll be out there to check on your kid in a heartbeat. Okay?”

Lianne’s throat tightened. “Okay,” she whispered. “If I can find anything, I’ll call you back.”

The voice sounded even wearier. “Day or night.”

Tears started down Lianne’s cheeks. “Okay. Thanks.” She hung up the phone. Images of infants with arms and legs in plaster casts, little children with burns given to them by the people they wanted to love, with bruises and cuts and old scars and new wounds—kids who’d been shaken, beaten, screamed at, starved, tortured, raped, neglected—those images swirled around in front of her eyes, blurred by tears. And all those children began to have Amanda’s face.

Amanda’s pony was not kept in the main barn with the pedigreed Arabians Meryll Kendrick raised. It had its own quarters—a neat little doll-house version of the bigger barns, one Andrew Kendrick had ordered to be built for Amanda when she was five. It sat next to the main stables but did not connect with it in any way. Its cheerful, red-painted sides and white trim gleamed in the twilight; warm, yellow light spilled out of the opened top half of the front Dutch door. The neat, cedar-chip path crunched under Amanda-Alice’s feet as she scurried down to finish cleaning the pony’s stall.

“Lazy slut,” Amanda-Alice muttered under her breath. “You should have cleaned the barn when you got home from school. Then he wouldn’t have made you come down here now. Stupid, wicked, worthless tramp—out chasing evil elves when you should have been working. You deserve to be punished. You deserve it.”

Amanda-Anne didn’t have time for guilt. In the near-darkness, things moved. Shambling phantasms pressed close, deformed grotesqueries chittered in her ear, and—“Come to us, Amanda—we’re hungry,” unseen things whispered from the shadows, while their awful stomachs growled.

*No!* Amanda-Anne thought, and lurched into a gallop.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw that the darkness gained. The horrors were almost upon her—she could feel their breath on the back of her neck—

“No!” she shrieked, and heard them laugh.

And then somehow she was through the barn door, intact and uneaten, and the door was closed behind her. The heavy wooden bolt dropped into its brackets, and Amanda-Anne was safe from the monsters.

In the stall, she picked up the pitchfork and began loading manure and straw into the little wheelbarrow. Her pony, Fudge, poked his head into the barn from the pasture entrance and whickered.

“Vile, filthy beast,” Amanda-Alice snarled. “You leave these messes to get us in trouble, don’t you? You don’t deserve supper.”

She ignored the bin of sweet feed in the corner, avoided looking at the little Shetland, and continued mucking the stall with short, sharp, angry jabs.

Andrew Kendrick paced the living room floor. Meryll curled in one of the overstuffed chairs, contracts spread on the floor around her.

The man punched one closed fist into the palm of his other hand. “That child is a disgrace. When I was a

child, my behavior was excellent. I never had a visit from one of my teachers. And for that woman to suggest school psychiatrists—”

“Counselors,” Meryll corrected. “Only counselors. Public schools don’t keep psychiatrists on staff.”

“It doesn’t matter. How dare that child cause me this sort of humiliation? How dare she?” A scowl carved itself deeper into Andrew’s face, and his complexion flushed a hotter, uglier red. “She obviously hasn’t had enough discipline,” he growled.

“Jesus,” Meryll muttered. “Leave the kid alone for once.”

Andrew turned his anger on her. “Stay out of it, you bitch! She’s my child, my responsibility. As you keep -reminding me. It’s up to me to make sure that she grows up to be a useful adult. She won’t if you ruin her with your lax attitude. Look at Sharon. She’s getting old enough that she needs firm discipline, and you let her run wild. She’ll be worthless when she grows up.”

Meryll’s voice went flat and dangerous. “Leave Sharon alone.”

Andrew stiffened and glared at his wife. “We’ll see,” he told her. He walked heavily toward the outside door. “I’m going to make sure Amanda does a good job on that stall. She’s going to clean it until it’s done right, even if she’s out there all night—she’s going to learn that I’m in charge around here. And she’s going to learn that she has to do what I expect.” He stopped and stared at his wife with cold, ugly rage. “That’s something you could stand to remember, too, Meryll.”

He stalked out, slamming the door behind him.

\* \* \*

Belinda sat cross-legged on the bed in Peterkin’s shoddy hotel room, two decks of cards spread in front of her on the cheap polyester bedspread. “Black three on the red four . . . okay, and that opens up the red jack to the black queen . . . hah! Moves that *tothere*—yes!” She briskly restacked, completed, and removed piles of cards.

A rustle from the foot of the bed distracted her. She looked over from her game of Napoleon’s solitaire to the floor, where Stevens and Peterkin were turning blue. “Oh—hi, guys.” Her voice was bright and cheerful. “I thought you were dead already. Would you mind hurrying it up a little? I have plans for the evening.” She grinned—perky, sexy, and charming, obviously a woman having a good time—and turned back to her cards.

She played a few more moments and sighed with -minor annoyance. “Dammit! I almost won that one.” She riffled the cards together, staring at her two thugs.

“Seems my prescription was okay, huh? At least it’s working pretty well on you two. Well, fellas, I don’t know why you wanted to double-cross me, but I guess we’ve proven that wasn’t a good idea.” She smiled at the dying men and began laying out the cards again. “Jerks.”

She spread out a deck of poker cards and began another game of solitaire, latex-gloved hands shuffling with some difficulty.

Peterkin made strangling noises, then quit breathing. Froth foamed out of his mouth. Belinda smiled and flipped her hair back out of her face.

“That’s good—that’s very good. You did that nicely, Joe. One down, one to go, Fred-ol’-buddy. Let’s see if you die well, too.”

Fred Stevens lay on the dingy green carpet, sucking air like a beached fish for over half an hour after his partner threw in the towel. When his breathing ceased, Belinda folded up her cards, took both men’s wallets, changed the ID’s and other important papers, and dumped the wallets back on the dresser. Then she walked down to her car. When she came back, she carried a large shopping bag. She emptied the bag onto the bed and strewed her purchases around the room: a small packet of crack cocaine and the attendant drug paraphernalia, a white feather boa and a large, skimpy leopard-spotted negligee, a queen-sized pair of fishnet hose and patent leather shoes with six-inch spike heels—sized 12EE—a black leather men’s bikini, battered handcuffs, and a well-worn bullwhip.

Then she cut the clothing off of both men with a pair of heavy-duty bandage scissors, the kind EMT’s and paramedics used, rolled the clothes into a ball and stuffed them into her now-empty bag. She rolled Stevens onto Peterkin in the best “compromising position” she could manage, considering he was the smaller of the two corpses and weighed more than twice what she did. But police training came in handy. When she had them more or less posed, she put the shoes on Peterkin’s feet and the handcuffs around his wrists, and draped the feather boa once around Steven’s neck. Then she stood, breathing hard, and chuckled softly.

“That ought to amuse the investigators for a while,” she whispered, and grinned cheerfully. She looked at her watch. *Time to see what my race-driver is doing. I need to be able to collect him tomorrow.*

The front doors of Amanda’s barn rattled. The child was busy shoveling manure into the wheelbarrow and didn’t notice the noise the first time. The second time, however, she stopped and cocked her head to one side, listening. The noise did not recur a third time, and after waiting a moment, she nodded with satisfaction and resumed her cleaning.

She didn’t realize the Father had come into the barn through the pasture door until she heard the top Dutch doors click, and the heavy thud as he carefully dropped the door-bar into the brackets.

Inside the pony’s stall, all the Amandas stiffened. Cethlenn noticed the change in their attitudes and froze, listening.

A series of light clicks followed—the sound of a key in a lock, the sound of light furniture being moved, the clink of metal.

Suddenly, Cethlenn realized that Amanda-Alice and Amanda-Abbey were gone. The only one who remained with her was Amanda-Anne.

*Thud, thud, thud*—the Father’s heavy steps left the storage room, walked slowly closer—

Then the Father was right there, standing in the doorway of the stall, completely filling it. Cethlenn watched with Amanda-Anne, staring up and up and up at the huge form of the man.

“The stall looks very dirty, Amanda,” the Father said. “What a very lazy, nasty, dirty little girl you have been.” He smiled, his lips pulled back across his teeth so that they gleamed in the light of the naked, dangling light bulb.

Inside their head, Amanda-Anne made a mewling sound that died before it reached their lips. Cethlenn shuddered.

“I ought to make you lick the floor clean,” the Father said. “Would you like that?”

Knives and whips and ropes and sharp, hot things danced in Amanda-Anne’s head, and dull red rage blurred the child’s vision. Cethlenn was forced back by the spreading fury, and fear clutched at her.

The Father’s smile got bigger, and he took a step -toward them. “I said,” he whispered, “*would you like that?*”

*Oh, gods, just answer him, child,* Cethlenn thought.

“No,” Amanda-Anne said.

“No,” the Father mimicked, his voice a chilling falsetto. “Oh, no. You wouldn’t like that. But you’re a dirty little girl, aren’t you, Amanda?”

The child stared at him, silent.

“I said, you’re a dirty little girl,*aren’t you ?*”

“Yes,” Amanda-Anne said.

“And we know what dirty little girls really like, don’t we, Amanda?”

Amanda-Anne wrapped her frail arms around herself and stared up at the Father in silent terror. Cethlenn felt sick.

“Don’t we, Amanda?”

“Yes,” Amanda-Anne whispered.

“I can’t hear you.”

“Yes,” Amanda-Anne said.

“Dirty little girls like to make their Daddy happy, don’t they?”

Amanda-Anne’s throat tightened, and she nodded.

“Good,” said the Father. “Then come here. I know what you like, don’t I, you dirty little girl? Tell me you like it.”

Amanda-Anne walked forward, moving like a creature drugged.

“Say, ‘I like it, Daddy.’ ”

The child was silent.

The Father grabbed her and shook her. “Say, ‘I like it, Daddy.’”

“I like it . . . D-D-Daddy,” Amanda-Anne croaked.

“I know you do, you little whore.” He picked the limp child up and carried her into the storage room.

*Oh, gods, Amanda, I’m sorry—I can’t stay here—I can’t watch this!* Cethlenn shrieked, and vanished.

Lianne sat at her little kitchen table and dried her eyes. She had done what she could for Amanda for the time being. It was Friday night—she couldn’t do anything else about the child until the next morning at the earliest—so she needed to get herself under control.

*I’ve been under an awful lot of stress lately, she thought. It isn’t like me to cry like this. There have just been too many unexplained things happening in the last few days.*

She leaned back in her chair. *I’ve taken care of this now, though. Things will get back to normal. I know they will.*

Her eye strayed to the kitchen sink—to a rainbow sparkle and a flash of white metal.

And the feeling of otherworldness returned. She got up and walked over to the sink, and picked up the crystal carafe that Mac had produced—seemingly out of thin air—for their delightful breakfast in bed. She hefted it in both hands, studying the flawless faceting of the crystal and the incredible quality. One eye closed, she gnawed on her lip as she appraised it, and a whole number followed by a surprising quantity of zeros ticked off in her brain. She fingered the silver serving tray, and then picked it up and studied it. It was *real* silver, and solid, too, not plate—and Lianne pondered the odds of finding such exquisitely crafted silver with nary a maker’s mark on it. She picked up a cherry pit and studied it as if it were something likely to burn her fingers. She tilted her head, and her eyebrows furrowed, and then, with a thoughtful expression on her face, she turned out the kitchen light, went into the -living room and plopped down on her couch and stared off into nothingness.

“When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever is left—no matter how improbable—is the truth,” she said softly to no one.

Amanda-Anne lay in the bathtub, staring up at the ceiling. Steam swirled around her, and a thick layer of sweet-scented bubbles pressed against her skin like fat kittens. Amanda was oblivious to the warmth and the sweetness and the light. Her mouth still tasted of oily cotton, her wrists and ankles still stung and chafed, and she *hurt* .

And in her mind’s eye, nothing existed but the storage room, with its little cot and its dim light, and its supply of ropes and rags, and its awful locking door.

She rubbed absently at her wrists—and her fingers brushed across her real mother’s bead, still strung on the lovely gold chain.

And the image of the elf pouring himself out of the bead in a stream of green mist came to her. She sat

up in the tub and stared at the bead. Let Abbey pretend that the elf wasn't real. Let Alice complain that he was evil. And let that goody-two-shoes Stranger think that the elf would help them. They didn't know about Anne, but Anne knew about them. And she knew better than to believe their silliness.

Amanda-Anne knew that Alice was stupid, that Abbey was wrong, and that Stranger meant well but was looking for help in the wrong direction; the sweet-faced elf was too soft and too gentle to do what was needed. But he had shown her the trick of his magic without meaning to. Without even knowing that he had done so. Her eyes narrowed as she considered the possibilities of the scene that played itself out in her mind, and softly, the child began to laugh.

*Don't want . . . the elf, she thought. Just . . . the smoke. And the wind.*

She stared at the bead, forcing unfamiliar patterns into the rhythm of her will, and slowly her green eyes glowed.

For a moment, nothing changed.

Then a flicker of light came to life in the heart of the bead—not the pure green light of earlier in the day, but a throbbing, pulsing, angry red light. Without words, Amanda-Anne spoke to the red light and carefully explained to it exactly what she wanted. Then she waited.

The bead grew brighter, and the bathroom was suffused with the ugly, bloody red glow. Then heavy smoke poured out of the bead and hung over the bathtub. It swirled around the child, threatening, menacing.

Amanda-Anne's eyes grew lighter, her pupils constricted to pencil-points of darkness in the centers of the white-green, and as if it had suddenly seen something to fear, the red cloud recoiled. With a kind of reluctance, it crawled in a thin line up the wall and out of the bathroom through a slight gap in the window high overhead.

Amanda-Anne held her breath as the last traces vanished from the bathroom. She listened, every muscle tense and straining to catch the slightest sound in the still night air.

Then, from the direction of her barn, there came a very satisfying crash, followed by thunderous clattering and the scream of a full-sized hurricane compressed into a tiny box. The noise and the destruction raged for as long as Amanda-Anne could maintain her concentration.

When she reached the point of exhaustion, she released the storm she had summoned, sending it back to wherever it had come from. Then, a diamond-hard smile on her tiny face, Amanda-Anne settled back into the bath-water and relinquished her place to Amanda-Abbey, who actually liked stupid, childish bubble-baths.

Mac left the track late and with too much on his mind. There was Felouen, with her strange and completely -unexpected intimation of unrequited love, and the Oracular Pool, with its images of terror and disaster. There was the sensation of intangible evil at the border of the Unformed World, and the turbulence of the shield. There were his problems with the Seilighe High Court, and with that low and vile woman who had tried to poison him. There was beautiful, ephemeral Lianne, whom he suspected was falling in love with him. And last, but certainly not least, there was the child, Amanda, who had followed him into Underhill without flinching, and who had then promptly returned to her own world on her own power and of her own accord—in spite of the fact that there was no way she should have been

able to do that. Maclyn was tense, and unsettled, and somewhat scattered.

And so, for the first time, he failed to notice a sleek brown Ford Thunderbird that maintained its position four cars behind him all the way from the street beside the racetrack parking lot to Lianne's apartment.

Lianne answered the door with an unnervingly perceptive expression in her eyes. "Hi," she said, gave him a brusque kiss, and immediately asked, "Where's the movie?"

"The movie?"

"The movie. C'mon, Mac—just this morning you said, and I quote, 'I'll pick up the movie tonight. I think I'll get *The Man With One Red Shoe*, since we didn't watch it last night.' After breakfast, and before we headed out the door. Remember?"

"Of course I remember," said Maclyn, who remembered no such thing.

"So where's the movie? You forgot it, didn't you?"

"I just forgot to bring it in with me. It's in the car. I didn't forget to rent it."

*Like hell, I didn't forget*, he thought while he trudged back to Rhellen. *What in Oberon's name was I thinking this morning?—I burned breakfast, I fixed something else, we rolled around on the bed awhile, we took a shower, we ran out the door—I still don't remember anything about a movie. At least, he mused, I promised one I've already seen. Be a bitch to pull it out of thin air if I hadn't.*

He opened Rhellen's door, concentrating hard, and a VCR cassette in a clear plastic cover appeared on the seat. He picked it up and returned to the apartment.

Lianne's expression as he handed her the tape was decidedly weird. He started to ask her what was wrong, then thought better of it.

She walked over to the VCR without a word, and pushed the eject button. A movie popped out. She opened the plastic case of the tape he'd provided for her, and turned her back to him.

She stood silently for a long moment, while Mac grew more and more tense. "Jesus, that's a neat trick," she said finally, and turned around. "Who are you—really?"

Maclyn hedged. "Why do you ask?"

She smiled. "You were very close with this. Your label is almost perfect, except you're missing the copyright date, and there's only a gray box where the small print would be—if I hadn't had an original here to compare, I bet I never would have noticed the difference."

He nodded, maintaining a calm exterior while his brain raced wildly. In her hands she held two copies of *The Man With One Red Shoe*. One of them had been obtained from a video rental store. The other—well, *it hadn't*. He felt the tempo of his pulse increase. "Maybe the copy I picked up was pirated."

"Oh, I'm sure of it," she said with a wry smile. "Out of thin-fucking-air. We never said anything about movies this morning, Mac. I only said that to see what you would do—because there is something very odd about things that have happened in my life since you showed up. It strikes me as uncanny, for



example, that neither of us said a word about you picking up this movie, and yet, when I asked you about it, you happened to have it in your car. Wherever this came from, Mac Lynn, it wasn't a rental place."

He stalled for time, trying to think, but unable to make his mind work. This wasn't the way it was supposed to happen—it wasn't supposed to happen at all, actually. "I see. So I was correct in thinking I hadn't said anything about movies in our rush this morning? How interesting. You see, I have an imperfect memory for minutiae. It usually isn't a problem."

Her arms were crossed in front of her chest. "Perhaps more of a problem than you realize. There is, of course, the silver tray—real silver, of incredible quality, with no maker's mark. I don't buy it. There are the out-of-season cherries. And of course we can't forget your willingness to believe that papers were indeed flying around my classroom of their own accord." She took a step toward him. "You are very interesting, Mac Lynn. You are charming, you are handsome, and you are great in bed. But you are not what you seem to be. Now I want an answer on this, and I want it right now. Who—or what—are you?"

\* \* \*

Finally, she was getting somewhere.

From her position behind the shrubs outside of the apartment window, Belinda stared through the slatted mini-blinds at Mac Lynn and his girlfriend. She recognized the girl—had seen her before, in connection with Mac Lynn. She frowned, determined to remember where she had seen that face, and suddenly she recalled the girl striding across a parking lot—

*Bingo! She's one of the teachers at Loyd E. Auman. I followed him there that one time—and that explains why he was over there in the first place. That's where his piece of ass works.*

Belinda's face lit up with a beatific smile. His girlfriend could give him to her. Just grab her and stash her someplace, then tell him his girlfriend was dead unless he did exactly what she said, and have him follow instructions that would deliver him voluntarily to Mel's doorstep.

*Voila, she thought, a nice paycheck for me and a well-earned vacation that doesn't involve chasing spookies—preferably someplace far away, with mountains and ocean and deferential waiters .*

*Cozumel, she decided, or maybe Greece.*

They appeared to be arguing. That was good from Belinda's point of view. *He might stomp out, leaving her alone tonight. In which case, I'll just knock on the door and grab her when she answers it, thinking he's come back to apologize. If he stays the night, of course, I'll just pick up Little Miss Teacher sometime tomorrow—or after school Monday.*

That seemed like a good, sound, workable plan, and much less complicated than trying to drug him again. It also meant she didn't need to sit in the damp shrubbery catching a cold. Belinda stood up and headed back to her new rental car. Stake-outs were much more pleasant when accompanied by Perrier, Bach, and croissants.

She moved into the area of darker shadow that lay between the teacher's apartment and the parking lot, and noticed two disturbing things as she did. The first was that Mac's car wasn't in the parking lot anymore.

The second was that what had seemed, out of the corner of her eye, to be laundry hanging out between

the apartments, wasn't. It was a big, light-colored horse.

And no sooner had she identified the horse for what it was than it had her jacket between its teeth, and she was flailing through the air to land on the beast's back. She reached for her gun, the creature bucked, she grabbed the beast's mane to keep from hitting the ground—

And things got a little hazy from there.

Belinda decided pretty promptly that she must have fallen off the horse anyway and knocked herself silly and wandered around a bit. It was the only explanation that made any sense. Otherwise, she would have had to -admit that the horse had turned into a car that drove itself, and that it had driven her onto the street in front of the old abandoned Fox Drive-In, and dumped her by the side of the road before cruising off into the night. It would have implied that the car had *chosen* to abandon her where hookers plied their trade and G.I.'s and out-of-town businessmen and restless locals went looking for -action.

It would have implied that the fight Belinda got into with the pimp and the big buxom blonde and the transvestite and the two horny guys in the red Camaro was the fault of a goddamned '57 Chevy.

And no matter how spooky things got, Belinda wasn't ready to admit that.

Mac faced Lianne, and swallowed hard. Humans weren't anywhere near as gullible as they'd once been—at least some of them weren't, he decided. The room felt uncomfortably warm.

"I'm a racecar driver," he said with an ingenuous smile.

Lianne nodded, her expression grave. "A racecar driver is the least of what you are, Mac Lynn. I've always made it a point to date within my species before this, but I think I've not even managed to live up to that one simple rule this time. Have I?"

Maclyn stood, studying her, thinking fast.

Lianne saw the evasion coming and headed it off. "Mac, I'm to the point where I won't believe anything but the truth. And please give me credit for being able to tell the truth from a lie—remember, I deal with ten-year-olds on a daily basis." She smiled wryly. "Besides, I doubt that the truth is going to be anywhere near as ludicrous as what I've suspected."

"Wanna bet?" Mac muttered.

Lianne heard him. "No," she said. "But lay out your cards anyway and let me take a look."

"Okay." He took a deep breath and studied her. "You've heard of Faerie, of course."

"One of my best friends is one."

"Not that kind of fairy."

"I was being facetious. I've heard of Faerie. Up to this point I've found its purported existence likely to be the product of hallucination and overdoses of wheat-smut, but I'm a logical soul. Presented with sufficient proof, I'll believe just about anything. I suppose you're going to tell me you're the elf-king of

Fairyland or something.”

Mac’s right eyebrow arched up. “I’m an elf. Not ‘or something.’ And I’m fairly high up in the line of succession, but I’m not the king, or even the prince.”

Lianne sighed and said to whatever higher powers inhabited the ceiling, “I’m taking this rather well, aren’t I?” She studied Mac for a long, silent moment, then said, “Granted I’ve already seen enough to convince me that you aren’t normal—but would it be too much to ask for some proof that you are what you say you are? Seeing that we’ve been sleeping together and all?”

Maclyn gave her a very Gallic shrug—and his human seeming faded away. He presented himself to her in his full elvish glory, from the gold circlet on his head to the sweeping white folds of his ermine cloak, to the rich white-on-white textures of his silk-embroidered tunic and velvet leggings. He showed her himself, pointed ears, pale green slit-pupilled eyes, and inhuman smile.

“My lady,” he said, inclining his head with courtly grace. “Is this sufficient proof?”

Lianne sat down sharply on the coffee table. Her eyes went round and she whistled softly. “I’ll be damned,” she whispered. “An elf. A damned sexy one.”

She cocked her head to one side and studied him closely. “A question, then.”

“I’ll answer it if I can.”

“What are you doing hanging around me?”

*And isn’t that just the question? Maclyn thought. I wish to hell I knew the answer.*

## Chapter Seven

Andrew Kendrick heard the first sounds from the barn just as he was locking up the house for the night. He ran to the window and stared out at the hellish red glow in the dark that held the stable area. It was clearly coming from the pony barn. At first his mind couldn’t recognize the disaster for what it was—but then he shook himself out of his paralysis and reacted.

“Fire!” he shouted to Merryl. “There’s a fire down in the pony barn! Call the fire department, *now!*”

He pulled on boots and sprinted out the back door. If anything, it looked and sounded worse now that he was outside. He could barely hear the terrified whinnies of the pony above the roar that came from within the shed.

He goaded himself into a run, heading down to the barn, wondering if he would be able to get into the secret storeroom and thinking of the money that was going up in smoke in there. Thinking of all the—special things—that were going to be destroyed, and that were going to be even more difficult to procure the second time than they had been when he’d first obtained them.

Merryl passed him on the path, flew to the right and to her own barn, full of pedigreed mares and foals, her prize stud, her champion filly—the objects of her real passion and her love. Andrew heard her throwing open her barn doors, chasing the horses out into the pasture and away from the impending disaster. He clenched his fingers into tight fists, outraged at her care for the animals and her indifference toward him.

He watched her working frantically, momentarily distracted from his goal. *She has a lot of nerve, ignoring me. Amanda's mother learned what happens to people who ignore me. I've been too easy on Merryl.* He fumed with smoldering rage as he raced towards the pony barn, wondering if he could save anything without Merryl seeing it. He wasn't really thinking about the barn, nor about the fire—not, at least, until he was nearly at the structure.

Realization that there was something very strange -going on stopped him like a stone wall. *I don't smell any smoke,* he thought. It sounded like there was a war going on down there, and it certainly *looked* as if the place was being overrun by the fires of hell—wind that screamed like a damned and tortured thing, the crash and thud of heavy objects hitting against the walls, the screech of nails ripping loose from beams—and the terrible red light still gleamed through cracks, but there were no tongues of flame visible and no smoke to smell.

*What the hell—?* he wondered.

A piece of board blew past him, and some unidentifiable bit of shrapnel grazed his cheek—and Andrew watched dumbfounded as gaps appeared, as if something or someone from inside battered away at the barn. The night air was thick with a sense of rage, of hatred so dense and palpable he could feel it brushing against his chilled skin like damp, drowned hands. His heart pounded with fear that was not even his own, and his mouth went dry and his breath came fast in spite of his struggles to control his emotions. He found himself backing away from the barn, and found that he could not stop himself, could not make himself walk back toward it.

From behind him, he heard the wail of sirens and the squeal of tires turning into the lane. The fire engines' flashing red lights joined the peculiar illumination that came from the barn—the night pulsed red. *Blood,* he thought, clutching his arms around himself. *The world is bleeding.*

The firemen were unrolling their hoses, shouting to each other, pointing out their target. Merryl was still loosing horses out into the field.

Andrew saw none of it; instead, he had been inadvertently thrown back to his own childhood.

He saw the little beagle puppy he'd "bought" when he was eleven from the kid down the road—bought with marbles and a brand-new baseball glove and a brand-new football. The puppy he'd smuggled home and made a wonderful soft bed for and hidden under the house -because his father had said, "No dogs," but he'd wanted it so bad—

*His puppy,* laid out on a board, belly up; its little muzzle wired shut, its eyes wide and staring, its paws nailed into place. And his dad, furious, shouting at him, "Now you'll know to listen to me, won't you, you little bastard! Next time you disobey me, this will be you!" And the knife, in his father's hand, slitting the little beagle's white belly open, and the pup's eyes rolling in terror and pain—

And the blood pulsing red and redder around his father's fine doctor hands, pulsing like the lights from the fire engines—and again he tasted the anguish and the fear—

And the red glow in the barn just—went away.

Thick, suffocating silence crowded in to fill the void and darkness. The firemen paused, and stared. The horrible noises that had been coming from inside had stopped, abruptly, almost as if a switch had been flipped. The terrible feeling of rage and fear made the same abrupt -departure.

Then sounds rushed back and revived the night: the chirping of crickets and the whinnies and stompings of the horses out in pasture, the stamp and crunch of one fireman's boots as he walked, flashlight in hand, down to the barn, and pulled the battered and sagging door open.

And his voice, awestruck as he aimed his flashlight into the dark recesses of the structure—"Je-e-e-ZUS, Johnnie, get a load of this!"

The rippling motion of the border had lulled her into a near-trance. Felouen sat, her back pressed against the smooth rock base of the Oracular Pool, staring into the nothingness, and she worried. Maclyn might come around. He might help against whatever was coming. Then again, enchanted by his other interests, he might leave her to fight and die alone.

There had been more to the visions of the Oracular Pool than the one brief glimpse it had shown Maclyn. War was coming—a long and savage battle with the outnumbered elvish forces lined up against hordes of Unseleighe unlike anything the Kin had ever seen before. Her friends would fall, and she would fight on, uselessly, would herself be gravely wounded, would flee and be captured, would suffer at the hands of the unstoppable things from the -Unformed. And only then would she die. She had seen her own death. It was not a good one.

She had seen another vision as well, an alternate future in the inscrutable reflections in the Pool. Maclyn would stand at her side, with the battle raging as before—but the enemy would be fewer and weaker, the tide of battle would turn in the Kin's favor, and she would live. So she sat and pondered, staring out into the non-place on the other side of the border with loathing.

Felouen sensed the change before she saw it.

A presence born of fear and rage and hatred swirled into being in the Void, reached out and clawed at her from that nothing-world. It sent her to her feet, recoiling from the tentacles that reached with sudden intent directly for her.

From the Nothing, flickers of blood-red light began to glow.

"... so you see, she was human, and I loved her, and when she died, I thought that everything about me that had mattered had died, too," Mac said. He sat on one side of Lianne's couch, again wearing his human seeming. "Everything about her was so brief and so painfully fleeting, and the harder I tried to stop time, to hold her life in my hands and keep her with me, the faster I saw the years tear her into shreds. She died nearly two hundred years ago, but there are still times when the thought crosses my mind that if I went back to Tellekirk, I'd find her there."

He locked his hands together, and he stared at his shoes. "In you, I see that same frightening beauty, that same—life—that burns so hot and so fast. I cannot stay away from you. And I find myself longing for

your brief, blazing beauty, and wondering how you can burn your life so fast.”

Lianne pursed her lips and blew a soft sigh through them. She got up and walked over to one of the bookcases that lined the walls of her bedroom, and perused the shelves. Finally, with a nod, she pulled down a deep green leather volume and flipped through the pages.

“We’ve done some thinking about that ourselves,” she said, and looked down at the page she’d chosen. “Here—” she pointed, and read aloud.

*“For a man cannot lose either the past or the future: for what a man has not, how can anyone take from him? These two things then thou must bear in mind: the one, that all things from eternity are of like forms and come round in a circle, and that it makes no difference whether a man shall see the same things during a hundred years or two hundred, or an infinite time; and the second, that the longest liver and he who die soonest lose just the same.”*

She paused to let the quote sink in. “Marcus Aurelius—a Roman philosopher and leader from way before *your* time—said that, and I suspect he’s right. Even though I’ll live—at most—a hundred years, and you’ll live God-only-knows how long, we were both born, we will both live the span of our days, and we will both die. I mean, you *will* die *eventually*, won’t you?”

“It’s been rumored,” Mac said, a faint hint of the beginning of a smile at the corner of his mouth.

She gave him a real smile. “Don’t pity us humans, then. Time runs at a different pace for you and me, but my life will be as full as yours. It will just happen faster. It won’t seem to me that I got cheated—I’m doing things with my life that matter to me and to other people. I’m teaching children, and to me, that is an important and meaningful job. I have friends who care about me, and a family that loves me, and I’m doing what I can to make the world a better place. And as for your long-gone love, I guarantee you that if she *lived* her life, and could see where her presence made a difference, she didn’t feel cheated either.”

Lianne sat back on the bed, put the book down beside her, and pulled her knees up to her chest so she could wrap her arms around them. Now was the time for a little noble self-sacrifice, and it made the smile she had given him fade away entirely. “I think you’re doing yourself an injustice hanging around humans, though, Maclyn.” She did her best to hide the tears that brimmed in her eyes; she didn’t *want* to give him up. She really didn’t. But it was for his own good. “Look for someone who exists in your own timeframe—who won’t get old and die between two blinks of those gorgeous eyes of yours.”

She did her best to look brave and happy—but all she could manage was a smile as transparent and empty as a soap bubble on the wind.

Maclyn listened to her words and tried to find some hope or comfort in them. She looked so beautiful. Mac’s gaze roamed from the curve of her ankle to the full swell of her breast, to the plainly-written pain in her eyes, and words surged from his lips before he could stop them. “You don’t have to get old so fast. I could take you into Elfhame Outremer, Lianne. There, you would live at the pace of *my* years.” He faltered, and further brilliant suggestions died in his throat.

What in all the hells of the Unformed Planes had he said that for? Did he love her? Really, truly *love* her—as an equal and a companion with whom he could sustain interest for some significant span of his own long life? Was he infatuated with her humanness? Or was he—even less noble—burning with desire to fix the long-dead past?

An unbidden memory of Allison—fair, dainty, dark-eyed Allison, two hundred years dust—choked his throat and stopped his tongue. To Allison he had said those same words, had begged her to let him stop time for her. Allison had refused him, had told him about her God and her Church and her Bible, about God's demand that only he had the right to count the measure of a man's life. At first he had argued with her—fruitlessly, and then he had stayed at her side, using what time she let him have, while she grew old quickly. Allison had not lived her life fully. She had spent her days railing at an unjust Deity who gave life unequally. He had watched her turn bitter, as she wrinkled and fattened and her tongue went acid. Suffered, as she studied him secretly from beneath her lashes, hoping some sign of age would scar him. Mourned, as eventually she hated him because it never did. Yet, often enough, even in the old woman, the young girl who loved an elven prince could be found. And in those moments, Maclyn had felt his heart ripped to tatters.

He remembered Allison while he stared at Lianne, wondering at his motives, trying to guess what she hid inside her shielded thoughts.

“That’s a hell of an offer,” the young teacher finally breathed. “What’s the catch?”

He shook his head. “I’m not certain. For Allison, it was her religion. She didn’t think God would forgive her for thwarting death.”

Lianne grinned, a devilish, teeth-bared grimace that was half humor and half wry self-deprecation. “Not my problem.” The strange smile vanished, and the woman rested both hands on his thigh and stared into his eyes. “Let me think about ramifications—especially what this would mean to the two of us. And give me a while, okay? I’ve got a kid in school who’s in trouble, and that’s left me with a lot on my mind.”

Mac heard only the first part of what she said and nodded. Then her last statement she’d made caught his attention. “What do you mean, ‘a kid in trouble’? You haven’t said anything about it to me before, have you?”

She frowned a moment. “Sort of. Do you remember Amanda—the little girl from the racetrack who wouldn’t get out of the way of the explosion?” She looked at him, her eyes uncertain.

*Only too well.* “I remember her.”

She grimaced. “Yeah. Probably you do. That was pretty bad. Well, I went to talk to her parents today. Something is very wrong there—I suspect abuse. I called Social Services and reported it, but the guy I talked to said that, since I don’t have any hard evidence, he can’t go out there to check on her.”

Chills ran along Maclyn’s spine. “Abuse?” he asked in a voice gone ominously flat.

Lianne must have heard the change in his tone and laughed without any humor. “That’s how I feel, too. -Every time I see something like this, I want to kill the people responsible. God, I wish I could *prove* she was being abused, to get that guy out there—but I’m on such thin ice. I’ve never seen any bruises, she’s never *said* anything to me about it—although *that’s* normal for abuse cases, actually—she doesn’t miss a lot of school. It’s just, her personality isn’t right. Not right at all.”

What would happen, Mac wondered, if he told Lianne everything he knew about Amanda? Would she be able to believe in Amanda’s magic?

*Why the hell not?* he decided. *She believed I was an elf easily enough.*

“I’m willing to bet Amanda is the reason everything in your classroom came to life on you the other day,” he told her. “I know for a fact she is the reason nobody got -seriously hurt at the racetrack.”

Lianne gave him a long, clinical look. “What—exactly—do you mean by that?”

He licked his lips. “She does magic—controls inanimate objects. Makes them move.”

“Tele—um—telekinesis?” Lianne asked. “Moving things with her mind?”

He nodded. “I think that’s the term.”

Lianne’s expression grew harried. “Aw, *c’mon*,” she snarled. “I bought you as an elf. You don’t want me to believe in that, too! Next you’ll be insisting on the validity of Bigfoot, flying saucers, and the effectiveness of the two-party political system.”

Mac snorted. “No, I won’t. I’ll just want you to believe in your student. She’s special—but she’s hiding something. She wouldn’t admit she could do magic.”

“Mac,” Lianne replied as if she were talking to one of her students, “. . . maybe that’s because she can’t.”

“Sensible, logical theory—except that I saw her,” he persisted stubbornly. “I watched—and sensed—her work her magic.”

“*Ergo sum ergo*,” Lianne muttered. “It is, therefore it is.”

“Don’t get grouchy. While she was looking at Keith’s car, she kept it from exploding. As soon as you pulled her out of the way, it blew—but she was able to see it again at that point, and she controlled almost all of the shrapnel. *I saw her*. More than that, I sensed the flow of power.”

Lianne still looked skeptical, but Mac sensed she was weakening. “So what you’re saying is that if I had left her alone, the car wouldn’t have blown up at all?”

Mac shrugged. “Who knows? I am saying that the SERRA drivers were lucky she was watching the race that day. Keith owes his life to her.”

“Great. Fine. She’s a helpful little brownie. So why did she send everything in my classroom flying?” Lianne set her jaw stubbornly.

Mac sighed. “I don’t know. There are a lot of things about her that I don’t know. But I think we can find some answers. Tomorrow—well, I’m racing tomorrow—why don’t you come out and watch me? You can keep my mom company in the pits—”

Lianne forgot about the child entirely. “Your *mom* ?” she said, her jaw dropping.

“Oh . . .” He smiled weakly. “I forgot to mention that, didn’t I? Uh—D.D.’s my mother.”

Silence for a moment, while Lianne absorbed the information. Then—“She looks five years younger than *me*,” Lianne wailed.



Mac deemed it time to get the discussion back to more serious subjects—or, at least, subjects he could do something about. Getting D.D. to change her apparent age was not one of them. “Don’t let it bother you. She looks *at least* that much younger than me. Anyway, after the race, we can all three go out to Amanda’s house and poke around a little. We’ll see if we can find out anything. D.D.’s been concerned, too, ever since the day of the accident.”

Lianne flung herself backward and down onto the bed and slapped herself dramatically on the forehead. “Gosh, what a brilliant idea! It becomes obvious why elves rule the world. Why didn’t I think of that? I mean, why would Andrew or Merryl Kendrick ever notice two racecar--driving elves and their daughter’s schoolteacher tromping around on their posted, private property, looking for magical mystery clues like something out of Scooby Doo—on a Saturday, no less, when they’re probably home all day?” She scrunched her eyes closed in mock-agony.

Mac formed his will into a familiar shape and draped that shape around himself. “I don’t see the problem,” he said.

“You’re kidding.” Lianne opened her eyes to stare at him, then looked all around the room. She sat up, and her expression became more and more puzzled. “Mac?”

“I’m right here,” he said from the spot he’d occupied since the moment they both sat down.

“I don’t see you.”

He took the little “I’m not here” spell—pirated from a human mage named Tanim—off of himself, and smiled at her as her eyes went round. “And I don’t see the -problem.”

She sighed and flopped back again. “Maybe there isn’t one.”

Mel Tanbridge waited three hours beyond his absolute cut-off time, and still neither of the two calls he was expecting came. With growing disbelief, he acknowledged that they might never come.

He was more than willing to accept the fact that either Stevens or Peterkin could be bought off, if enough sweeteners were added. He was not willing to admit that Belinda could buy them *both* off—not on the money he was paying her, and certainly not at the same time. He knew they weren’t the brightest guys in the world, but he couldn’t imagine them making the sort of world-class bumble that would alert her that they were *both* reporting to him on her activities, even if she realized that one of them was.

And they didn’t realize that he was paying each of them the same bonus to report on the other.

So why hadn’t at least one of them called in?

The answer was fairly obvious.

The three of them had captured Belinda’s race-driver TK, and he was even better than anyone had hoped for. Belinda had seen dollar signs and had convinced Stevens and Peterkin that they could make a lot more money if they joined forces with her and kept their catch to sell to the highest bidder, instead of handing him over to the man who rightfully owned him.

Mel considered that scenario from all angles. It was the only one that made sense. Considering the

healthy mix of bribes, threats and terrorism he'd used on Belinda's two assistants, they should have stayed loyal under almost any circumstances. Therefore, Belinda must have convinced them she was coming into an unbelievable fortune to get them to double-cross him. For that matter, knowing what he had on her, she had to have convinced herself of the same thing, in order to forget how important it was for her to remain loyal.

None of them had stayed loyal. Therefore, Mac Lynn was the biggest telekinetic find ever—and Mel was more determined than ever to own him.

Belinda had only had two days to hide her trail and her booty. However, with both Peterkin and Stevens in her camp, all three of them knew how many bases he'd had covered, and how little he'd trusted any of them. They would be more than careful, they'd be paranoid.

He glared out his smoked glass window at the night and watched the ghost breakers run up the beach, the white of sea-foam all that was visible in the clouded dark. He planned for ten minutes, and when he was satisfied, he dialed a number from memory. Moments later came a drowsy hello.

“This is Tanbridge. Set things up to fly to North Carolina tonight. I'm going to Fayetteville. I'll meet you on the strip in two hours.”

He hung up, then glanced around the office. Not much lying around that he'd need to take with him. As a matter of fact, there were only two things in the office that he was going to need. The TK meter.

And the gun.

Andrew forced himself to walk to the barn. He stood next to the fireman with the flashlight and stared in at the devastation. It was all-encompassing and complete—but his first feeling, on looking in at the destruction, was one of relief. Nothing inside of the barn was recognizable anymore—including his large collection of special items. The pony's stall was ripped to shreds, and the pony had evidently kicked through the back doors to escape; he was out at the far side of the pasture cropping grass. *Lucky for him*, Andrew reflected. *He wouldn't have survived whatever did that.*

Whatever it was, it hadn't been a fire. Vandals? Only if they had come equipped with a log chipper and managed to run every item in the barn, including tack, feed barrels and hardware, through it in a matter of minutes.

The presence of other people around him, talking to him, gradually seeped into his awareness. He turned and found that while he'd been lost in his shocked reverie, two sheriff's deputies and the sheriff himself had arrived.

“Can you think of anyone who would want to do this to you, Mr. Kendrick?” the sheriff asked.

Andrew thought for a moment. “Dozens of them,” he said. “Merryl won't sell her horses to just anyone—maybe someone who didn't measure up to her standards wanted to see if he could force her to lower them. For that matter, I've helped my clients acquire a number of profitable enterprises through hostile takeovers in past years. I've made enemies on the way. However, I can't think of any of them who would be able to *do . . . that.*” He nodded back toward the barn.

One of the deputies said, “We've seen it, sir. It's pretty unbelievable. I don't know how they could have

been so destructive.”

The other deputy said, “The firemen said they saw red light coming from inside the building, but that it went out suddenly.”

Merryl spoke up. “We all saw it. Apparently, whoever did this wanted us to think it was a fire. It looked like one.”

Andrew agreed. “It was a very convincing special effect. The whole setup was very realistic, and very frightening—I’m not ashamed to admit I was terrified. However,” he yawned “it’s over now, and it’s late, and we all will have plenty of time in the morning to hash over the details of this. I don’t think there is anything more we can do -tonight. So if you don’t mind, I’d rather deal with it tomorrow.”

“That’s reasonable, sir,” the sheriff said, “It’s a clear night. Any tire tracks or other evidence will still be available in the morning. We’ll be out first thing. Until then, I’ll be glad to leave someone here overnight to keep an eye on things.”

“Not necessary,” Andrew said dryly. “There’s an old line about horses and unlocked barn doors that seems appropriate right now—”

The sheriff shrugged. “That’s up to you. If you see or hear anything out of place, though, let us know right away.”

Andrew nodded shortly. “I’ll do that.”

Watching them leave, Merryl said, “I think you should have let them post a guard.”

He sneered. “Do me a favor and don’t waste your time on thinking. It isn’t what you’re best at. I had reasons for not wanting them here.”

The knowing look she turned on him made him suddenly uneasy. “I’ll bet. What were you hiding in there?”

He reacted to his unease by issuing threats. “Don’t push your luck, Merryl. Don’t ever forget, you can be replaced.”

From her bedroom window, Amanda-Anne watched the police cars leave, and watched the Father and the Step-Mother trudge slowly toward the house. She smiled. The Father’s secret place was gone. Now he couldn’t hurt her anymore. He would never hurt her again.

She felt the power of her own dark magic coursing through her and savored the sweet taste of revenge. No one, *no one*, would ever hurt her again.

Under the covers, Lianne tossed and turned. Mac’s warmth next to her was, at the moment, more disturbing than comforting. She almost wished that he hadn’t spent the night. She would have liked to sit up, to drink hot tea and stare off into space knowing that she wouldn’t have to try to explain to him why she wanted to. She would have liked to pace—but stalking around the apartment would wake him up.

She listened to him breathe, slow and steady, deep in sleep, and tried not to resent his presence.

*He's not human, she thought. He's very wonderful, but he's not human. No matter how well we get along, there are things we can never see in the same way. His mother is hundreds of years old, he says. She's still young—he says she'll live until she gets tired of it. My mom and dad are nearing sixty, and might have another twenty.*

*What about children? Could we have them? What would they be?* She winced, rolled over and buried her head under her pillow. *That's unpleasant, thinking of your own possible children as "what," not "who." More than likely, from my understanding of genetics, there could be no children.*

He loved children—he said the elvenkind intervened in the lives of battered and abused human children because they rarely had children of their own, and they valued them so. He would want to have them someday, wouldn't he?

He said that time in Underhill was changeable, that a day there could be a minute here, or a day, or a year, or a hundred years. Lianne tried to imagine dropping into Elfhome Outremer for a quick visit with the in-laws, and returning to find everyone she'd ever known dead a hundred years ago. Like the old fairy tales. She shuddered and tried to think of something else.

*When I divorced Jim, I thought I could save myself from stupid mistakes. I promised myself, "I'll never fall for someone who's wrong for me again—I'll never let myself get hurt like this again." I was so goddamned sure that I knew something finally, dammit! I thought I'd learned my lesson, that I was only going to go out with men who wouldn't lie to me, who could be trusted. Now look at me. I'm in love with the wrong person again.*

That was the worst of it—never mind that he wasn't human, never mind that he would live damn near forever and she would be gone in no time, never mind all her doubts and her confusion. The cold, bare fact that scared her the most was that one: she really did love him.

She burrowed deeper into the covers and pressed her back against his. It was going to be a very long night.

Mel Tanbridge surveyed his hotel room with distaste. At four-thirty a.m., anything should have looked good, but the fact was, he expected quality. No, dammit, he expected *the best*. The best he could do on no notice wasn't good enough—he hadn't been able to get the penthouse in Fayetteville's Prince Charles hotel, just a suite—and while it was a nice old hotel, it wasn't a nice old five-star hotel. He hadn't stooped to anything below five-star accommodations in years. The service was good and the suite was clean and spacious, with furniture of excellent taste, but the room didn't have a private jacuzzi—and there wasn't a sauna in the entire hotel. He hadn't had time to check out the amenities in the gym—or even if there was a gym—but he doubted that they would be of the technical level or variety he was used to. After all, this was a military town. He doubted that a military town would have accommodations anywhere that he would find acceptable. That was just the way they were.

There would be a gym somewhere, he decided. And he would find it in the next day or two. After all, he needed to stay in shape. A healthy body equaled a healthy mind—and he had the healthiest. It was his competitive edge.

That edge was important, especially in light of his subordinates' betrayal. Their trail was probably a full two days cold. All the more reason, he decided, not to start down it without sufficient sleep. A healthy body, and all that. . . . He left a wake-up call at the front desk for noon, climbed into bed, and was instantly asleep.

Belinda checked herself out of the Cape Fear Emergency Department and slipped into the waiting cab. She gave the driver the address to the school teacher's apartment complex, then sank into the back seat, thinking ugly thoughts. The stitches in her scalp throbbed, and knowledge of what the wound looked like hurt her just as much. She'd borrowed a mirror from one of the nurses to check out the damage to her hair, and had been appalled. A patch the size of a monk's tonsure had been shaved around the slash that guy in the miniskirt and fishnet hose had made when he brained her with a handy beer bottle. She wore a huge bandage of white gauze and bulky pads that covered the shaved spot for the time being, but when it came off, she was going to be left with an awful mess. She'd been eight the last time she'd had short hair.

Mac Lynn and Mac Lynn's girlfriend, and Mac Lynn's car crew, and anyone else Belinda could think of were going to pay for her hair.

Soon.

However, the anesthetic was wearing off, and she felt dizzy and sick and tense. She needed to find a drugstore to get her pain medicine and her antibiotic prescriptions filled, and then, she had to admit, it would be really nice to take a day off. Maybe even two. The idea of lying in a soft bed taking drugs and not getting kidnapped by horse-cars, beamed by drag-queens, or scalped by bored young doctors was an idea she found appealing right now.

Maybe she could consider her time off the clock as workman's comp. Mel could basically go screw himself if he didn't agree. After all, he was taking it easy out in his beach complex in California. What was he going to do about it?

Her immediate future more or less settled, she closed her eyes and tried her best to ignore the breaking day. *The motel and bed, she thought. And no more stinking adventures, not for a while.*

A few drops of rain spattered on the cab's windshield, mixing the fine coating of dust into thoroughly opaque mud. Belinda looked at the sky, startled. It had been clear the last time she'd seen the sky. The clouds must have moved in really fast.

She smiled. Rain was a good omen for her. People didn't look around when it rained. They ran to their cars and got straight in. They didn't sightsee. She considered revising her morning plans. She'd take a free ally any day.

Mac's car was parked where she remembered it. The cabbie pulled up where she directed him, but suddenly Belinda found that she didn't want to get out of the cab. *I'm almost convinced that damned Chevy is watching for me. Which is ridiculous, except that I don't have any other way to explain what happened last night.*

*I have to pick up my car, though. I need it.*

The cabbie gave her an impatient look. "You're on the clock, ya' know," he drawled. "No big deal for me—but you're gonna find it right expensive. I ain't gonna sit here all mornin' for free."

“Yeah, right,” she answered. The rain was no longer just a few splashes on the windshield. Now it slashed down in sheets, whipped across the front of the car by gusts of wind. “Drive closer to that brown Thunderbird.” She prayed that nothing had happened to the latest of her rental cars. She couldn’t afford to experience too much more of Mac Lynn’s version of fun and excitement.

The cabbie rolled his eyes, but moved his vehicle so that it formed a screen in front of the T-Bird’s driver-side door.

Belinda paid him off, then jumped out of the cab. Once in the T-Bird, she locked the doors. She ignored the cabbie’s raised eyebrow. He hadn’t had her night. He wouldn’t understand.

Belinda sat in the dark safety of her car, watched the raindrops sheeting down her windshield, and listened to their soothing thrumming on the roof. Outside, the world lightened in tiny increments, gray on gray on black, revealing shrubs heavy with water and pines swaying in the driving rain.

The monotonous brick-box apartments were laid out in a grid, with parking lots with separate entries at each square. She moved to the last parking slot three rows away from the teacher’s place, cut off the motor, and watched. She was comfortably hidden behind cars parked in the lines ahead of her, and scattered tall Carolina pines—trees that reminded her of the California palms with their trunks that soared thirty feet before the first limb sprouted. Her position gave her a clear view of anyone leaving the -apartment.

It couldn’t have been more than fifteen or twenty minutes before Mac and his little teacher came flying out of the apartment and dove into the Chevy.

*A good, hard rain will never fail you. I knew it.* Belinda smiled and, when they pulled out, followed them at a discreet distance.

At the Fayetteville International Speedway, the first fat drops of rain hissed onto the tarmac. More followed, faster and faster, and the patterns made by the first drops were obliterated by water that fell in steady streams, and then sheets, and then in waterfalls that whipped sideways in the steadily increasing wind.

Dierdre, already at the track and doing final pre-race work on the Victor, sighed with resignation at the roaring deluge outside of the garage. The weather station had hinted at this—but torrential rains weren’t supposed to be part of the picture until Sunday. She closed her eyes and concentrated on feeling the shifts of air currents and -pressure cells. After an extended time, she opened her eyes again, and surveyed the rich red Victor with dismay. *Surprise*, she thought. *We’re going to have a whole weekend off, whilst the be-damned weather craps on our heads. Oh, joy. ’Tis not a natural rain, either. This has been pulled in by heavy magic somewhere nearby.*

Time to call her son, the slug, and tell him he wasn’t going to have to get out of bed.

She headed to the phone, then stopped. She could have sworn that she’d just heard Rhellen’s familiar rumble from the parking lot—even over the rain. She queried her own elvensteed, who was leaning against the back wall keeping dry.

Afallonn rumbled her surprised affirmation.

D.D. looked up at the wall clock, just to make sure time hadn't slipped past without her noticing. It was six-oh-four in the morning, a good three hours before Mac's earliest voluntary wake-up hour. *Will miracles never cease?* she wondered.

Maclyn swung into the garage, a sheepish grin on his face. Behind him was his schoolteacher girlfriend, and the expression on *her* face was patently unreadable.

"Well, Mac, shouldn't surprise me that the first day you show up early for a race is the day they're sure to cancel the whole show."

"Hi, Mom," he said.

:*Mom?*: D.D. was sure her jaw had hit the floor.: *What the bloody hell—?:* she asked for his ears only.

He sighed. "Rule number one, Mom—never date a pragmatist. Slips of logic and technique convince them that the impossible isn't, whereas girls who operate on blind faith never will believe you're anything but what you appear to be. She figured the whole thing out."

Well. The cat was out of the bag—for now. It wouldn't take but a wee spell to put it back in, but she doubted Maclyn had told his girlfriend that. No harm in waiting to see if she might be a useful addition to the SERRA folk. "In other words, you dated somebody smarter than you for a change." D.D. snorted. "I keep telling you you've not the brains to keep company with any but the dim girls—but you won't listen to me, will you?" She grinned at Lianne. "Sons know everything, whether they're elven or human, I imagine."

"My mom made a few similar remarks concerning my brother," she said.

"All this came as a shock to you, no doubt," D.D. added.

"Oh," Lianne agreed. "Rest assured."

D.D. gave Lianne a wary look and braced herself for what she felt sure was the impending "big news." "Well, if you're here with my brilliant son, and you know our wee bit of a secret, I expect there's something the two of you will be wanting to tell me."

Surprise flashed in Lianne's eyes. "Uh—not really—ah, D.D. Nothing like *that*, in any case. Actually, Mac mentioned that you were interested in a student of mine. Amanda Kendrick. He said you wanted to find her because she was, um, telekinetic."

Dierdre tried not to make her relief too obvious. "Quite," she said. *I sense the need for a spell of forgetfulness, once we have the wee bairn.*

But Lianne's next words drove all that out of her head. "I have reason to believe her father is abusing her. Mac is going out with me today to her house. He thought you might like to come along."

D.D.'s face had flushed at the mention of abuse. She swore softly in Gaelic, then said slowly, "That explains a great deal, my dear. This—wouldna be the first time I've seen something like this. It breaks my heart, lass, that humans who do not appreciate children have them and hurt them because they don't want them, while we, who would give anything to be able to have more, cannot. Aye, I'll go with you. Do you plan to take the child, Maclyn?"

Maclyn frowned.: *Not now, Mother. She doesn't know about the changelings yet.*: “No. Lianne has the Social Service people taking care of that. She simply wants to get information that will hurry them out to Amanda’s house faster. I showed her Tannim’s spell-gift, so we can stay unseen.”

: *Well, we'll see.*: Dierdre told him.: *If the situation's bad enough, we'll take the child and befuddle your light-of-love.*:

He winced.

“This rain won’t stop today, nor tomorrow either, most likely,” D.D. said. “There won’t be a race. So we might as well leave.”

Belinda pressed the button on her little black box as Mac hurried by, and the needle waggled to around nine-point-five and stopped. That was only what she expected. She couldn’t get excited about Mac anymore. He was too-fucking-much trouble. She pressed it again at the teacher, and nothing happened. No surprises there, either. But when she tried a third time on Mac’s little blond mechanic, the needle danced like a fish on a line and dove across to ten.

“I’ll be damned,” she muttered. It couldn’t be any harder to get hold of the mechanic than it had been to abduct that son-of-a-bitch Lynn. Granted, she hadn’t seen the mechanic *do* anything—but after the demonstrations she’d gotten from the driver, she was willing to trust the meter, skip the dog-and-pony show, and just collect the warm body and go home.

She waited as the three pulled out of the speedway’s parking lot, then followed them again.

Visions of herself as Marlin Perkins on safari danced in her imagination, and she wondered momentarily if it would be possible to get Mel to send her one of those hypo-dermic dart guns and a big supply of knock-out dope. *Probably not. Mel was starting to get cranky about finances the last time I talked to him.*

She wasn’t worried about that, either, though. The FedEx people would be trotting in with her next cash payment, as well as Stevens’ and Peterkin’s money, on Monday. Since she didn’t have to pay either Stevens or Peterkin this time—*and since I haven’t mentioned their unfortunate demise to Mel yet*—she could just hang on to the whole thing. Their cash would make a nice addition to her finances.

*That* reminded her that she really needed to call Mel and assure him that things were progressing nicely. It would be a shame if she didn’t keep this job long enough to collect her bonus—especially after all she’d suffered through to get it.

## Chapter Eight

Cethlenn “woke” with no memory of anything since her escape from the Father in the barn. It was early morning, she knew—light came through the bedroom windows in the morning. Whether it was the next day, or a day in the next week, or in the next month, she had no way of knowing. Time was a fluid thing to her in this body; hard to catch, impossible to hold. She wondered if she would ever get used to it.



Rain poured down outside of the little pink-and-white bedroom, framed in the ruffled curtains like an illustration from a child's book. The teddy bears sat on the windowsills, just so—the Step-Mother insisted that they stay in the windowsills because that was where the decorator had placed them. The expensive handcrafted doll-house was filled with porcelain dolls which smiled with sweet insincerity. Everything in the room, in fact, was just so except for Muggles, the terrycloth dog a child had traded to Amanda-Abbey for a small, exquisite porcelain figurine. Amanda-Abbey had smuggled the figurine out of her room for show-and-tell when she was in first grade, and made the deal in the school cafeteria. Muggles looked like the last remaining survivor of a battle between Cethlenn's own folk and the Roman invaders, but he had three advantages none of the other toys in the room had. One, he was eminently huggable. Two, he could be smooshed down to fit in the tiny space between the headboard and the wall, where no one could see him. Therefore, he couldn't be thrown away. And three, he belonged to no one but Amanda, and she could do anything she wanted with him. He did not have to be kept nice—he was not a decorator dog.

Cethlenn liked Muggles, and since she had been left in control of the body, she hid him carefully in the place Amanda-Anne had shown her. Then she slipped into the closet and listened to the sounds from Sharon's room next door. Sharon's television was on, and the chaos of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles reverberated off the walls—Saturday noise. *Saturn's Day. Proof that the gods-be-damned Romans won.* She frowned, briefly wondering at the events that had changed the world from the place she'd known to the place she now found, and wondering what she'd missed. Then she shrugged off her curiosity.

The last thing she remembered from her own life was taking a knife in the gut, and pain. The next moment, she woke in the body of a child a long, long way from home. Even though the devices and customs in this land were alien, it was better being an unhappy child than a woman with a knife in her. Better than being a woman in a world ruled by Romans.

So it was Saturday. Good. Then perhaps it *was* the next day, and she hadn't lost much this time. She dressed in the closet—clean white cotton underwear, blue jeans and a white t-shirt, white socks and red Halston designer hightops. Dressing was one of the things that had -improved greatly since her days with the Druids. Most every-thing else was worse—but houses were better, and so were clothes.

She debated the merits of going downstairs for breakfast versus staying hungry. She decided against breakfast—there was no telling where the Father might be, or what mood he might be in, and she would just as soon not remind him of Amanda's existence. Instead, she nibbled on cheese crackers bought from another schoolchild, purchased with scavenged and stolen change and carefully hidden.

Thinking of the Father brought back fleeting images from what she suspected had been the night before. She wondered how Amanda-Anne had fared in the barn—and was fearful for the child. She could feel bruises and raw spots that hadn't been there before, and dull aches that she knew the meaning of well enough. It was strange that she should wake up “alone” in the body—usually when she was awake, she was watching Amanda-Abbey or looking over Alice or Anne's shoulder, so to speak. She decided to see if she could find Amanda-Anne, just to check on her. Cethlenn peered cautiously into the walled-off space that Amanda-Anne kept for herself.

At first, what she found puzzled her. Over the wall, there were usually more walls, towering constructs of brick that enclosed and protected the child and kept everything away from her. But the scenery wasn't like that this time. It stretched away in all directions, vast nothingness, gray and empty without ground or sky, without markers—except for the single wall to Cethlenn's back.

It was, the witch realized, a part of the Unformed Plane, although how the child had reached into it and made it a part of herself, Cethlenn had no idea. Initially, she couldn't see the child anywhere. Gradually, however, faint movements off to her left convinced her that something was there.

Cethlenn blended herself with the mist. Her last confrontation with Amanda-Anne on her own territory was still fresh enough in her memory that she had no wish to repeat it. As part of the mist, she floated toward the place where the movement seemed to originate.

Sure enough, Amanda-Anne was there, as happy as that child ever got, contentedly humming some monotonous tune in a minor key. There was no sense of fear or -anger—instead, the child gave the impression that she was -extremely pleased about something.

Without doing anything that would alert the little girl to her presence, Cethlenn thinned herself out to a fine thread of pure consciousness and eased closer.

The child was working on something, a sort of a doll, perhaps—

Cethlenn focused on the details of the “doll” until she realized what she was looking at. What had seemed innocent child's play became sinister. The “doll” the child made was nothing of the sort. It was a creature formed of fury, molded out of all the darkness in Amanda-Anne's soul—Cethlenn felt the ancient magic like a fire in her chest, felt a horror from memories burned into her centuries before. It was something derived from the magic of the Sidhe—and it must be linked to the visitation by the elven warrior the other day.

The child had copied the elf's magic by watching him, Cethlenn realized. She had discovered how to use the energy of the Unformed Planes to create a thing of order out of the chaos—but what she formed was horrifying. The user of such energies had to take her will and her experience to form the energy into whatever she desired. Cethlenn knew the strength of will it took to do such a thing—and in Amanda-Anne's short life, she had experienced no joy, no love, no laughter—nothing but pain and humiliation and fear and hatred. The thing she molded between her fingers was a misshapen nightmare formed of those emotions, and only those emotions.

Cethlenn watched the child with growing unease, as she played with the stuff of the Unformed Plane as other children would play with dough. She had molded a round, lopsided, lumpy head, rolling it into a rough ball, poking in eyes and a nose and scratching a gash of a mouth with a fingernail. She had formed the body in the way children made dough snakes, and then jammed the head onto it. The arms and legs she created in the same fashion while Cethlenn hovered and watched. When the thing was finished to the child's satisfaction, the little girl stared at her homunculus, all of her concentration and focus centered on it. At first, nothing happened. Then Cethlenn saw that the seams where the arms and legs and head were joined to the body had become thinner and smoother. The arms and legs began to move with weak, spastic shudders, and embryonic digits grew out of the flattened pancakes that were hands and feet. With a sudden flash, the thing's eyes flew open, and glowed with white light. Red fangs sprang from the wide, grinning mouth; a wet, pink tongue darted between them along the lipless rim. Fingers and toes sprouted black, rapierlike claws, and hair sprouted from the round, neckless head as if it had been scribbled there with a pencil.

Amanda-Anne giggled, and the thing giggled back at her: a high, empty, chittering imitation of a little-girl laugh. The child stood her creation on its feet and sent it walking. As it walked, Amanda-Anne stared after it, muttering “Big-ger—big-ger—big-ger,” in her whining, nasal voice.

And it grew bigger, and stretched and filled out so fast that it seemed the creature, walking away, grew

nearer with every step. First it was tall as a child, then as a small woman, and then as a large man.

The golem shambled off into the mist—and Cethlenn knew that the movement that had led her to Amanda-Anne had come from another of its kind, moving out. Once she knew what to look for, she realized there were more of them moving around in the mist—impossible to mark and count because of their aimless drifting and the perpetual fog of the Unformed Planes, but still . . . many. Cethlenn repressed a moan as, cross-legged and happy, Amanda-Anne began to build yet another one.

*Oh, gods, Cethlenn thought. Oh, gods, I've got to get help.* She left the child sitting in the gloom making her monsters and singing her discordant songs and shot toward the wall that marked the boundary of Amanda-Anne's space.

Once free from the eerie gloom of the Unformed Planes, Cethlenn discovered she was still alone and in control of the body. She would have worried about the whereabouts of Amanda-Abbey and Amanda-Alice if she had more time, but she had to admit there were things she could accomplish more easily if she didn't have company. Setting up a spell that would summon the Seleighe elves was one of those things.

Cethlenn dug through the closet and found galoshes and a neon-pink raincoat in the back. There was a part of her that dreaded the raincoat as too bright, too much of a beacon for the Father, who might see her moving through the woods and follow her. There was another, more practical part of her that insisted that the Father would want no part of the pouring rain, but that she would surely regret whatever happened if she came back into the house soaked to the skin and dirty from the rain and the woods. She decided on a compromise. She rolled the raincoat up in a ball and stuffed it in her black nylon book-bag. Then she gathered up her kit—cords of various colors, a white candle, one of the Step-Mother's filched cigarette lighters, a bright blue crayon, and a vivid green crayon. Last of all, she looked around the room for a gift. The tales she remembered of elvenfolk, and incidents from her own rare dealings with them, all indicated that they were shifty and tricky, and a favor asked had to be a favor repaid. She recalled tales from her childhood in the old world—tales of the fey folk who appeared, offering the heart's desire, and desiring in return the one thing a human had that an elf didn't: a soul. She wanted to have something to offer that wouldn't cost her *that*. Her own continuing existence was proof enough to her that her soul might be a real thing, after all, and worth hanging on to.

Gifting elves was a chancy business by all accounts. Stories indicated that there was rarely anything one was likely to have that the elf didn't already have, and of better quality to boot.

She thought back on her mother's tales. Elves were supposed to be fond of silver and gold, fine fabrics, good music, good drink and good food. She had, quite frankly, nothing to offer in any of those categories—except, she thought with sudden joy, for the giant chocolate bar Amanda-Abbey had bought from one of the band students who was selling them to raise money. The last time Cethlenn had been around, none of the Amandas had yet gotten a chance to eat it. Perhaps it was still intact.

She rummaged through the school pack, and indeed, it was still there. She pulled the blocky gold-wrapped bar out of the pack. It was somewhat wrinkled and battered from its trip home on the bus, and she could tell that it had broken into several fragments, but it was good chocolate. Chocolate, she decided, was a gift worthy of elves, being the *other* thing about this era that was an improvement over the days with the Druids. And since it was the best she had to offer, she hoped any elves she might draw in would give her credit for effort.

With her pack slung across her shoulders, she opened the window on the right side of her room and scooted out of it. Then she pulled the window closed, slid around until she dangled off the sill by her

fingertips, and dropped the final six inches between her feet and the sun-room roof which ran out at right angles from her own room. She scurried like a lizard along the peak of the wet, slippery roof to the very end, then slid down the steeply pitched side and shinnied down the old pecan tree that had grown too close to the house.

From there, she kept under the cover of the evergreen azaleas and the rhododendrons, which took her straight into the woods. The Father hadn't found her escape route yet. She hoped he never would.

Once in the woods, she put on the loud pink raincoat. Her t-shirt wasn't too dirty, she decided. The Step-Mother wouldn't like it, but she wouldn't fuss terribly, either.

Cethlenn beelined for her tree, not following the usual devious route. She didn't have time. Amanda-Anne was still sitting in the Unformed Planes making golems as far as *she* knew, and that had to be stopped. At least the creatures were still *there*, but for how long?

Inside the safe barrier of the holly tree's limbs, Cethlenn took out her prizes. She wondered if the spell she'd learned for summoning the Faerie folk was any good anymore—or if it ever had been. After two thousand years or more, maybe the elvenkind wouldn't pay attention to cords and candles. Maybe they preferred the new technologies—the answering machines and car phones of this strange age. That would be unfortunate, the witch thought—because she didn't have access to car phones or answering-machines. She just barely had access to cords and candles.

She spread out the cords—one green, one red, one black and one white. From the hollow of the tree, she removed Abbey's forbidden comic books. She placed the candy bar and the candle inside the hollow, wedging the candle in so that it stayed upright. She put the cigarette lighter beside it. She lay the blue and green crayons at the base of the tree.

Preparations made, she offered up a quick, sincere prayer to her Lord and Lady, then took the green cord in hand, and took a slow, deep breath to steady her nerves.

While her fingers worked the cord into the patterns of a Celtic knot, she sang in the Old Tongue:

“Fair folk who have danced in the wood, on the green—

I would call, I would beg, to your king, to your queen,

To you who listen, all unseen,

I bind your ears with my knot of green.”

She lay the elaborate knot at the periphery of the tree and pressed it firmly into the dirt with her foot.

Next she took up the black cord, walked one quarter of the way around the tree, and while working the cord into her second pattern, chanted:

“Faerie folk with the strength I lack,

I dare not run, nor dare attack,

But I summon you still, and call you back—

*I bind your eyes with my knot of black.”*

She took up the red cord, walked to the far side of the tree, and with her fingers weaving, sang:

“Fey folk drawn from board and bed,

Gifts I offer to quick and dead,

Think of me kindly whom I have led;

*I bind your oath with my cord of red.”*

At the fourth quarter of the tree, she took up the white cord, and knotted it, and said:

“Old ones come from the long twilight,

Brought to the world of day and night,

I ask your aid to make wrong right;

*I bind your power with my cord of white.”*

When the last knot was in place at the periphery of the tree, she moved back to the candle and lit it.

“Now you who are drawn from your Faerie mound,

And led by my beacon to this ground—

To my circle shall you be bound

*Until my knots are all unwound.”*

She melted the tip of the blue crayon in the flame and drew a protective rune on the palm of her left hand. With the melted tip of the green crayon, she copied the same device on the palm of her right hand. Then she picked up the chocolate bar, huddled on the ground in the incongruous pink raincoat, and began her vigil.

\* \* \*

Gwaryon, one of the original settlers of Elfhome Outremer, sat beside Felouen at the side of the Oracular Pool and stared with her at the ominous changes in the curtain of the Unformed that rippled in front of them. He was going through an Egyptian phase, and was at the moment dressed as an ancient pharaoh—from the massive amber scarab pendant around his neck to the draping see-through robes which Felouen found annoyingly pretentious, though she had to admit they showed his body off to good effect. His gold bracelets jangled with a flat heavy sound as he rested his arm around Felouen’s -shoulders.

She sighed. The effect was so completely—*Gwaryon*.

“I am grateful,” Felouen told him, and rested her head against his shoulder. “Your presence here is a comfort to me—the visions from the Pool these last few days have left me feeling very much alone.”

Gwaryon smiled, happily. “You are never alone, dear one. You know I would be with you always if you would say the word.”

Felouen sighed and studied the lean, sinuous elf with deep sadness. “I know. And I cannot give you reason to hope in vain for that day to come—it will not. You are dear to me, but you are not the one I desire the most.”

Gwaryon laughed and sprawled on his back in the deep, soft grass that grew beside the Pool. “Och, dearest lady, I know that well enough—but still I hope. You cannot extinguish hope, while we both breathe. And even if you don’t want me forever, surely a moment’s dalliance would relieve your mind of the weight of your duties.” His grin broadened, and he arched his eyebrows suggestively.

She tried a smile, but it didn’t feel convincing. “Ah, Gwaryon, you are ever considerate of the weight of my burdens,” she told him with heavy irony, and absently stroked the hilt of her jeweled dagger. She ceased that, point made, and rested her chin in her cupped hands. Gwaryon’s offer of pleasure didn’t fit well with her mood. Her worry was even stronger and more pressing than it had been. The red glittering of the Unformed had deepened and seemed angrier, somehow. And at rare intervals, she was almost sure that she could see shapes moving through that fog-shrouded realm of nothing, where no living things should be. Not even the Unseleighe creatures wandered at will through the Unformed—it was more a state of mind than a place, and it welcomed only madness with open arms.

Something was going to happen—she was sure of it. And soon.

“Ho!” Gwaryon whispered. “Feel that?”

Felouen stiffened. “A pull . . .”

He nodded emphatically. “Human magic. I haven’t felt its kind since long before you were born.”

“I want to go toward it.” She glanced at Gwaryon, and her eyes filled with worry.

He nodded. “Once it would have been very dangerous to do so, but now—” He sat up and shook his head. “The knowledge is there, but not the strength. We aren’t -being summoned by some great mage, nor anyone whose power will overwhelm us. And sometimes these things were calls for help from those who had no other -recourse.”

*Calls for help?* “Should we arm ourselves for battle?”

Gwaryon laughed. “I would guess that the human who dug that ancient spell out of an old tome doesn’t even suspect that it is real—much less that we exist. Such a human won’t be a threat to us. Let’s just go and take a look.”

A stirring in the forces she had woven into her net of hopes roused her from her trance of concentration. Cethlenn turned from her spell-making to find herself staring into the faces of two of the Old Folk, who were studying her with mixed bemusement and disbelief.

*Well, she thought, mouth agape, At least I know it still works.*

Lianne McCormick was keeping a wary eye on her companions, when both of them suddenly started, as if they had heard something she couldn't. D.D., perched on Rhellen's sumptuous back seat, cocked her head to one side, birdlike. "Oh, my," she whispered. "Maclyn, my love, my darlin' boy, do you feel that?"

Maclyn ground his teeth audibly. "All over, Mother. It's coming from out where we're heading, more or less."

She looked grim. "And a good thing, too. I think other-wise we wouldn't be able to go there—it would pull us to wherever it was."

"What are you two talking about?" Lianne asked.

D.D. rubbed both temples with her knuckles, as if she had a headache. "Mac feels something tugging at him, but he isn't old enough to recognize what it is—I haven't felt this particular sensation in so many years, I would have thought I'd forgotten what it was. And I've never felt it on this side of the ocean. I thought such summonings were left behind in the Old Country."

"Summonings?" Lianne asked, startled.

D.D. nodded. "Oh, aye. Someone has cast a spell to draw and bind the elvenkind. Such binding spells were known to a few priestesses and witches in the Old Country long ago, and to even fewer mages—but those who were willing to demand our presence were rare. We grew weary of being drawn into the world of Cold Iron against our wills, and we began to attack first and ask questions later. It took only a few toasted humans before that spell fell out of favor."

Lianne rested her head against Rhellen's door. She stared at the neat subdivisions they drove past, and at the stands of tall pines and the orderly young rows of cotton and soybeans that grew in the square, predictable fields. "Witches," she muttered, speaking to no one but herself. "And spells. Elves and telekinesis. Magic. Did I mention that I never cared about magic when I was growing up? Did I ever say that I was the kid who didn't give a damn about unicorns? I like science: nuclear physics, math, chemistry. I always liked the world when it was rational. Didn't I make that clear?"

D.D. looked at her son with concern.

Maclyn shrugged. "She's had several difficult days. She'll snap out of it."

"*I thought* I was dating a human," Lianne said, as Maclyn turned the Chevy down the dirt road that paralleled the Kendrick's property. "I thought this was a guy I might potentially take home to meet my folks."

"This is bothering you, isn't it, babe?" Mac asked, flippantly.

Lianne quit talking to the four winds and centered her attention on Mac. She glowered at him with disbelieving eyes. "No-o-o-o!" she drawled. "Having elves screw with my brain is just my favorite thing ever. Having my world-view and all of science refuted in two days' time has done *wonders* for my morale. You ought to try it -sometime."

"You're welcome to keep thinking that the world is a nice, logical, rational, safe place," Maclyn said

with a helpful smile. “You’ll be wrong, but that hasn’t stopped anyone else who thinks the same way.”

Lianne growled something profoundly obscene, and Maclyn and Dierdre both laughed.

“If it makes you feel better, Lianne, magic works by laws, too. Think of it as another kind of science you don’t know yet.”

Lianne fumed.

Maclyn drove Rhellen up to the very edge of the woods, out of sight of the road or any houses. Behind them was a fallow field, standing tall with weeds. Maclyn got out of the car, and Lianne slid out after him.

“She would be safer here with Rhellen,” D.D. said, as if Lianne wasn’t there. Lianne hated being talked around.

“I probably would be,” Lianne agreed, studying the woman who would probably not end up as her mother-in-law. “But I don’t intend to stay here with the car—with Rhellen.”

“Only until we see who has summoned us,” D.D. said, placatingly. “Then you can join us and help us find the wee child’s home.”

“No thanks. I’d like to see that myself.” Lianne pulled her gray mackintosh tight, noticing that the rain fell all around her but not on her. The cold and the damp still blew straight through her, and the low keening of the wind gnawed at her nerves. *Great day for this sort of thing, she decided. Make a believer out of even the staunchest pragmatist. Wind sounds like a banshee, and I think I could see ghosts in broad daylight on a day like this .*

She had to remind herself that this was an attempt to find information that would rescue an abused kid—not a midday ghost hunt. *Amanda needs help*, she reminded herself. But it made her nervous that Mac and D.D. were being drawn against their will toward something that called from the same direction as Amanda’s home. Could that bastard of a father be summoning them?

*Bad thought, Li. Very bad thought.*

Lianne watched the two of them walk, faces grim and tense, ducking around the dripping greenery—scrub oak and sassafras and willow; blackberry bramble, grapevine and kudzu—that made up this part of the woods. She walked a step behind them, staying quiet. They did magic, and this was something that frightened them. She was out of her element, way out of her area of experience, much less expertise. It was as if there was something out there that didn’t *want* them to help Amanda and was trying to prevent them from interfering. That made her profoundly nervous.

Cethlenn stood with her back pressed against the trunk of the tree, the chocolate bar in her outstretched hand. Though it still rained all around her, no rain fell on her, nor did any fall on her—guests. She stared at the two elves, the woman in clothing similar to that which elves had worn in her earlier life—the man in a foreign-looking gown of some gorgeous filmy material she would have killed for once upon a time, and covered with gem-crusted gold jewelry.

“Child,” the male elf said, “the last time I heard that bit of doggerel was a good two thousand years before you were born. And it had become uncommon then.”



The female elf shook her head. “I didn’t realize anyone could summon us.”

Cethlenn shivered. She would have preferred to have been less of a novelty. She held out the chocolate bar and wagged it a bit. “I gift thee, lord and lady.”

The female—one with the look of a warrior about her—studied the proffered bar, and shuddered. “Oooh, chocolate. Loaded with caffeine, and you wouldn’t believe the empty calories in that thing.”

“Summoning price has gone down a bit since the old days, Felouen,” the male muttered with dry amusement. “It used to be that they greeted us with baskets of gold and jewels and fine silks and rare spices. But then we needed a bit more placating back then—too many calls for no good reason. No, child,” the elven male added. “We won’t take your candy. There is another gift we will -require instead, for having come when you called us forth.”

*Och, and there goes my soul,* Cethlenn thought with dismay.

Her face evidently mirrored her fear, for the female elf said, “We won’t hurt you. We don’t hurt children.”

The strangely dressed male looked into Cethlenn’s eyes and said, “That isn’t what she’s afraid of—oh, this is rich. Just rich. They used to think we stole souls, and that’s what she is afraid of. *It is* ! Look at her—that’s exactly what she was expecting.” He grinned at the witch in the child’s body, and said, “Kid, if you had a really hot 486 with a VGA monitor, a solid keyboard, and a ton of software, I’d steal that in a heartbeat. But you can keep your soul. *I would* like to know where you found that old string-and-knot song and dance.”

Cethlenn could hardly believe her ears—or her luck. “That’s all?”

The elf nodded. “That’s my trade. Information for our arrival.”

Cethlenn smiled, confidently. “I learned it from the MacLurrie’s first witch, when I earned my place as one of his advisors.”

The elves stared at each other, and the female elf mouthed the name “MacLurrie?”

“An old warrior and rake who was a bit before your time, child,” the male elf said, and nodded to his female companion. “He was a bit before *her* time. I remember the young boaster well enough, but I can’t imagine how you could.”

Cethlenn drew herself up as tall as she could stand—which was not very—and said, proudly, “I am Cethlenn, daughter of Martis and witch at MacLurrie’s circle. I was not always this child, though how I came to be here, I know not.”

The male’s brow creased with thought, and he absently played with a great beetle of amber that hung about his neck. “Cethlenn . . . hmm. I vaguely recall a charming, dark-eyed creature named Cethlenn from around the time of the battles of the Gauls and the Gaels—as a matter of fact, now that I think of it, she was sharing her favors between MacLurrie’s bastard son and one of our folk. Bryothan, was it? Or Prydwyn?”

“Eodain was my other suitor,” Cethlenn corrected. “Eodain. But he wasn’t elven.”

“Eodain . . . Eodain . . . It’s been so long, I’ve forgotten.” He stared off into space, while his long, graceful fingers twined in the many layers of his gold jewelry. “By Oberon’s steed, girl, I believe you’re right. It . . . was . . .” His eyes narrowed and fixed on Cethlenn, and he glared at her from beneath lowered brows. “Eodain. Who was one of our folk, although you certainly couldn’t -expect him to tell a mortal like yourself that. No tales of his little tryst were barded about—it was mere court gossip, which means—”

“That she either made an extraordinarily lucky guess, or she is what she says.” The one called Felouen frowned.

The male gave his companion a somber look. “Then the price is met and our oath is bound.”

“No!” Felouen snapped. “If this is not a child but a witch of the Old Country, then she has not called us in idle sport. She would have known the dangers. No matter how -unlikely, and no matter how innocent she seems, she is a danger to us. You stay, I’m leaving.”

The elven woman shimmered, but stayed solidly within the child’s hiding place. She made another obvious attempt to leave, and when that, too, failed, she turned on her companion with a snarl. “We’re trapped here, Gwaryon!”

The male elf shrugged. “She means us no harm.”

But there was veiled panic in the female’s expression. “I don’t care! I want out of here!”

Gwaryon looked at Cethlenn, and his face grew stern. “I also dislike this spell that holds us here.”

There was no point in acting contrite. Not with those—things—out there, shambling around in the Unformed Planes. “I’ve met your price. Besides, ’twas the only way I knew of callin’ the Fair Folk,” Cethlenn said. “I need help. I am not the only one in this child, you see. . . .”

Cethlenn’s voice faltered in mid-sentence, and a furious presence pushed her back and usurped her control of the body.:*No!:* Amanda-Anne screeched to the ancient witch.:*You . . . c-c-c-can’t . . . tell . . . them about . . . us!:*

:*They could help,:*Cethlenn said, soothingly. :*They could take you away from the Father.:*

But Amanda-Anne was not about to be soothed.:*No-o-o-o! Stopping . . . is . . . not helping! They . . . w-w-w-would . . . only call us . . . bad girl. Make us . . . weak again. They would take . . . our m-m-m-magic.:*

:*No, Anne,:*Cethlenn told the child, her thoughts pleading.:*Let them help you. They can take you away from him, make the bad things go away—they can hide you someplace safe.:*

Amanda-Anne had quit listening. She looked at the elves who were held—trapped—in the circle, and her voice rose in a shrill sing-song. “I m-m-m-made me . . . gletchells and . . . sl-sl-slinketts . . . and m-m-m-morrow-w-waries . . . and . . . f-fulges. F-f-friends of me . . . friends . . . of me. And . . . *you* . . . w-w-want to hurt my . . . f-f-friends,” she wailed on a rising note.

The elves stared at each other, amazement and confusion written clearly on their faces.*Oh, Lord,* Cethlenn thought.*What have I done?*

Amanda-Anne knelt in the dirt, and rubbed her fingers across Mommy's green bead on its new gold bracelet. Without words, she summoned her "friends" and brought them through the bead and out into the charmed circle that was Amanda-Abbey's safe place.

The homunculi spewed into the haven under the holly tree in a cloud of black smoke, giggling as they took solid form. Their wide, grinning mouths split open, and their fangs gleamed red. They shambled and staggered on -uneven legs, ducking gracelessly under the sheltering boughs of the holly. Their scimitar fingers grasped toward the elves.

Amanda-Anne waited until five of her pets were through the bead-gate. Then, laughing, she slipped out of the tree-shelter, and darted home.

To Felouen, her arrival in the child's spelled circle had been discomfiting. The spell was carefully wrought, so that her eyes saw nothing but the world inside of the magical boundaries, and her ears heard nothing but the sounds of the child's voice and the few creakings that the old holly tree made. Its branches blew in a wind she knew to be present, but neither felt nor heard. Her world narrowed to the tree itself, which soared upward, its dark, leathery leaves contrasted with the brilliant light green of new spring growth, and with the startling reds of the few remaining berries not yet picked away by the birds. And in the center of the circle, the child: frail, blond, brown-eyed, with skinny arms and legs covered by wet clothes, who stared at her with awe—but not surprise. All else was hidden in the obscuring darkness of the spell. Her senses and her magic were bound—she could not leave. She was trapped—by a child who, in all sincerity, said that she was a witch from the Old Country.

And then the witch in the child's body changed—no, *change* was not the precise word. The witch, Cethlenn, disappeared, or was abducted, and was replaced by someone—terrible. Felouen felt the newcomer, the child—*for this* one was a child—arrive, full of rage and fear and confusion. This green-eyed human, who was terrified of the elves without knowing fully what they were, knew only that she wanted to hurt them. Wanted to hurt everything. Felouen felt her slashing, unfocused rage like a blow to the face, sensed her hatred and wondered, in the brief instant before the child brought forth her monsters, what could have twisted the youngling in such horrible and deadly ways.

After that, she didn't have time to wonder about anything.

It was not the vision from the Oracular Pool—Felouen wasn't defending the Elfhome Outremer grove. She and Gwaryon fought to save their own lives. There were no armies of elvenkin at her sides; but neither were there armies of the great shambling things.

Her own situation, however, was no less grave than the vision of the Pool.

The Pool had made a true showing of the monsters. They were just as malformed and frighteningly senseless as they had appeared in the glassy surface of the water—and the ratio by which they outnumbered the elves was as bad.

Felouen regretted Gwaryon's casual response to the summons and her own willingness to follow along. Now, between the two of them and the child's nightmares-made-real were only two little silver elven-blades, knives pitifully small when compared to the claws of their opponents. Felouen and Gwaryon scrambled up the trunk of the tree into its upper limbs, hoping at best to escape the monsters' talons completely, and at very worst for a defensible place in which to make their stand.

Unfortunately, the things could climb—and they did. Their glowing, pupilless white eyes gleamed in the pouring rain, and their high-pitched and horribly childlike giggles carried over the pounding rain and the low moans of the wind. They were slow climbers and clumsy, but deliberate, and they seemed to stick to the tree as they moved upward.

The leading monster reached a point just under Felouen's ankles. It screeched with sudden wild intensity and slashed out at her legs. Its talons ripped through the sturdy leather of her boots as if it was silk, and dragged into her flesh. Felouen cried out once at the sharp stab of pain and pulled her feet higher. Gwaryon threw his knife, and Felouen saw the little blade bury itself in the pallid thing's eye.

The monster grabbed for the knife with both hands, lost its balance, and fell. Even falling, it giggled, until the noise was cut short by *thethud* as it hit the ground.

Felouen slashed at the next golem within reach. The blade cut deeply and lopped off three of its fingers, but the wound didn't bleed and the creature showed no signs of pain. It kept climbing, and she was forced to climb still higher, onto a weak, green branch that bent alarmingly under her weight. The golem stopped and looked up at her, and its giggling became shriller. It grasped the branch to which she clung and began rocking it back and forth.

"Stop it!" she screamed. "Damn you!"

Beneath her and to one side, Gwaryon was fighting his own battle. He had wedged himself tightly into a crotch of a sturdy branch and was kicking the monsters in the head as soon as they were within reach. His legs were bloody ribbons, and his sandal-clad feet were unrecognizable as feet. His skin, at least that which wasn't bloody, was gray. Felouen saw the beads of pain-sweat standing out on his forehead—but his face never lost its determination. She watched one golem fall to the ground as Gwaryon kicked it loose from its perch. It hit heavily, lay still for a moment—then rose, and began its climb back up the tree. It had already been replaced by the next monster.

Felouen realized with horror it was the one that had taken Gwaryon's knife in its eye. *They're unkillable*, she thought with sudden, overwhelming despair, and clung tighter to her branch. The monster beneath her kept rocking it, swinging it in faster and further arcs. Its hysterical laughter never stopped.

"Stop it! Damn you!" someone screamed from ahead of them, and the sounds of a desperate struggle and a bloodcurdling chattering made the forest sound like something out of a horror story. In front of her, Maclyn apparently heard it, too. He started to run. "Weapons and armor," he told his mother. Silver swords materialized in their hands, and chased and enameled armor appeared around them.

*God, I wish I could do that*, Lianne thought, breaking into a run behind them.

They were faster than she was. They ran effortlessly, appearing to do no more than jog—yet they pulled away from her at an impossible rate. She ran flat out, putting everything she had into the effort, yet she fell further and further behind. The two elves darted through a thicket without slowing, and she stopped completely to disentangle herself from the inch-long thorns that held her clothes in fast embrace.

By the time she was out of the thicket, the elves had disappeared from sight, but she still heard the fighting, and the—other noises. The sounds came from the other side of the small hill she was climbing. She slowed to a trot, by necessity picking her route more carefully than the elves had. She wondered

now what in hell she was doing out here. What good was she, an unarmed human, in a fight where at least two of the combatants were well-armed and armored elves? She suspected she would be more of a liability—someone who would end up needing to be rescued. By the time she'd reached the crest of the hill, she had decided to find a safe spot in which to wait out the fight.

Close up, it sounded even worse. Unfortunately, she couldn't see much. The holly's leaves blocked most of her view, but a steady green glow from the tree's center backlit shadowy forms; the fight was more terrible than she could have anticipated. In the cramped space under a holly tree's branches, Maclyn and Dierdre battled misshapen horrors that looked from the brief glimpses she got like the most awful nightmares the folks from Industrial Light and Magic could have concocted. She saw two elves she didn't recognize, stranded in the thin upper branches of the tree, fighting more of the things. She saw one of the white-eyed monsters then, and squeezed her eyes shut until she -realized she couldn't wish the nightmare away. The elves in the tree were wounded and bloody—the monsters they fought appeared unscathed.

Lianne saw Maclyn bring his sword straight down on top of one monster's head in a two-handed blow that should have split the thing in half, but the monster never fell.

A scream of pure anguish drew her attention back to the treetop. One of the monsters had overcome the male elf and had severed one of his arms. It dropped like some macabre fruit to land against the tree roots. The elf screamed once more as the horror gnawed through his remaining forearm. Lianne shoved her fist against her mouth to silence her own screams; one last slash of the thing's claws and the elf's severed head hung from its grip.

The body tumbled from the tree, with unreal slowness. The golem threw the head in a lazy overhand toss that sent it soaring in a slow, graceful arc toward Lianne. As it passed beyond the spread of the holly tree, it winked out of existence as if it had never been.

Lianne stared at the spot where it disappeared and shuddered.

It was only the steady repetition of someone calling her name that brought her out of her stunned reverie.

"Lianne? Lianne? Can you hear me?" Dierdre shouted. Lianne could make out her shadowy form, back pressed against Maclyn's, keeping the monsters at bay with a steady barrage of swordstrokes.

"Maybe she ran off," Maclyn yelled. He parried a talon-strike aimed at his face and landed a stop-thrust that did no apparent damage to its victim.

"Maybe we just can't hear her because of this damned spell. I hope that's the case."

"I'm right here!" Lianne yelled from her hiding place.

None of the combatants paid her any attention.

Certain that she was exposing herself to attack by the monsters, Lianne did the bravest thing she had ever done. She stood up and ran toward the fight, again yelling, "I'm right here."

It was if she didn't exist to those battling under the tree. And that was as horrible as all the rest combined.

"Lianne," Dierdre yelled between swordstrokes, "if you're there, listen—a spell traps us in here. Look

for knotted cords around this tree—probably four or five. If you—”

One monster got inside her defense, and the sound of talons raking across armor screeched through the woods.

“If you find the knots, untie them!” Dierdre yelled. “And hurry!”

Lianne heard the elves parrying claws and Maclyn’s voice asking, between panted breaths, “What if she’s not out there?”

She heard Dierdre answer, “Then we die.”

Lianne stared at the headless, armless torso that lay under the tree, and then through the branches, at Dierdre and Mac. Then she looked up at the bleeding, exhausted elf stranded in the upper branches. The one tireless monster who was trying to dislodge her had shifted tactics and was scraping across the branch with his claws. Bits of wood flew away with every stroke. It wouldn’t be long until the branch broke.

*Cords? she wondered. Made into knots that I should untie?*

She could not imagine what good untying knots would do—but she was willing to concede that this was not an ordinary situation, and that the rules she knew didn’t apply. She ran to the periphery of the tree and scouted around the branches.

In a moment, she had located one knot. It was tied in a heavy, glossy black cord, and it wove in and out around itself half a dozen different ways. It took her a bit of fumbling even to discover where the ends had been tucked, and once she had found them, even longer to return the cord to its unknotted state.

As soon as the knot was unraveled, however, Lianne heard Maclyn yell, “There she is!” One of the monsters suddenly noticed her, too, and charged toward her. Mere inches away, it broke through the branches and was brought up short by an invisible barrier. It shrieked in frustration, and charged again.

She backed away frightened.

“Get the rest of the knots,” Dierdre shouted.

“What will happen when they are untied?” Lianne asked.

Dierdre looked puzzled, then shouted, “I can’t hear you.”

Lianne shrugged and hurried around the periphery of the tree. A flash of red caught her eye, and she stopped. The monster that charged at her as she pulled the red cord out from under the branches sent her heart leaping into her throat, and the other creatures’ incessant chittering giggles made it almost impossible to concentrate—but with trembling fingers, she managed to untangle the second knot.

“If we survive this,” Dierdre suddenly remarked, “I’m going to severely damage the person responsible.”

“I know how you feel,” Maclyn agreed.

There was a creak, and the branch that supported the third elf sagged. “Felouen!” Maclyn yelled, “Hang on!”

“I’d figured that out already, thanks,” Felouen shouted back.

Giggles grated along her nerves. *Third cord*, she thought, and refused to let herself consider what would happen when all the cords were unwound.

It took a bit of digging in the spot where she thought it might be, but she did locate the third cord. It was white.

She ignored the crash that indicated the branch had broken through, ignored the scream of fear and pain and the heavy thud that followed. Lianne fumbled with the complex knot and worked it loose.

“Magic works again,” Dierdre muttered, and that terse statement was followed by a flash of brilliant blue light and a loud sizzling sound.

Lianne ran to the fourth quarter of the imaginary circle the unknown magician had laid out, and within seconds had discovered a twisted length of green cord. Familiar now with the permutations the knots had taken, she quickly pulled it apart.

There was a low rumble, and the air around her shimmered like air over pavement on a hot day. For an instant, the situation under the tree continued unchanged. The monsters slashed at the elves, the one who had broken the hapless Felouen loose from her tree clambered down -after her, chuckling evilly. The monster that had been charging at Lianne broke free of its circle and came straight for her, and Dierdre and Maclyn fought their way toward the body of their fallen comrade.

Then, with a resounding “crack,” the monsters and the dismembered remains of the dead elf vanished.

Dierdre looked around as if she couldn’t believe it was over, then sagged against the tree trunk. Maclyn charged to Felouen’s side.

Lianne crawled through the holly’s low-hanging branches with some difficulty and joined him.

Felouen was badly hurt. She lay, unresponsive, on the woodland floor, her breathing ragged and irregular. Dark blood seeped into the fabric of her shirt, and through a tear in the cloth, Lianne could see the white gleam of ribs and the dark bubbling of a large, open wound.

“Mother!” Maclyn’s voice was hoarse. He knelt beside the downed woman, probing for hidden injuries. “Hurry!”

“Do you need me to get an ambulance?” Lianne asked. She felt foolish asking that question when, looking at the woman, the answer seemed so obvious—but she wasn’t dealing with humans, she reminded herself. Elves might have other ways of dealing with emergencies.

“D.D. will take care of her,” Maclyn said.

Lianne watched D.D. moving around the tree toward them. Her armor flickered once, then vanished, replaced by clothes that looked like the ones the other woman wore.

D.D. bit her lip and knelt beside her son. “How bad?”

Mac’s voice was without expression. “We may lose her.”

The elven woman nodded and rested her hand on Felouen's shoulder. "I'm taking her back. You and Lianne find out what you need to about your child. I'll meet you in the Grove when you're done."

Maclyn did—something. He sketched a kind of arch with his fingers, anchored on one side to the holly tree. Lianne watched the air around the two elven women shift and darken.

Something about that arch made her feel queasy.

But beyond that arch were hints of unearthly beauty. Was that the elven world?

The images of wet forest and misty, enchanted grove blurred over each other and shifted disconcertingly until the teacher had a hard time looking at the Gate. D.D. pulled Felouen through, and both of them took on the same hazy, half-there appearance of the world beyond. Then Mac spoke a few quiet syllables, and they were gone.

"Come," he said, turning to Lianne. "We still have to find out about Amanda."

## Chapter Nine

Belinda concealed herself and the entirely too fancy T-Bird along a riding path just out of sight of the Chevy and her targets. There was no way she was going to get out of her vehicle around that hexed Chevy again. There was no telling what might happen to her. She remembered the incongruous picture of a horse trotting through the night behind her first rental car, after the damned race-driver stole it—and the way the Chevy was mysteriously missing when she went back to try stealing it. She recalled the odd behavior of the '57's doors the time she ended up as Mac's captive. Certain pieces of her last few days -began to form a picture—one she didn't like at all.

In a sudden burst of curiosity, and with some trepidation, she took the little black meter out of her pocketbook and flashed it at the car. The needle quivered and moved steadily across the scale, wavering slightly as it hit 3.71 P and came to a halt. Goosebumps rose on her arms, and the hair on the back of her neck stood on end. *A car sitting in a field doing not a goddamned thing rates higher on the psi scale than any people I've ever checked—except that bastard Mac Lynn and his blond bimbo mechanic*

*It figures*, she thought. She panned the psi-meter in a semicircle that encompassed the general direction in which Mac and company had been heading, and left room over for error. Sure enough, she picked up one narrow burst of activity at about 8 P's of intensity—mid-scale, and -another of about the same reading. That would be the two of them, she thought—Mac and the mechanic. She scanned beyond them from force of habit, letting the meter play across the field at the dreary mix of scrub-oaks and long-leaf pines—

About fifteen degrees west of her two identified targets, the needle dove all the way across into the red zone, hitting 30 P, then kept moving until it vanished into the out of range sector. It stayed there.

Belinda leaned her head against the headrest and stared at the little ventilation dots in the car's headliner until her eyes unfocused and the dots blurred and appeared to move toward her. *What the hell have I gotten myself into?* she wondered. *The car, the driver, the mechanic—and something huge out*



*there in the woods. Either this place is a hotbed of psi activity—or something is wrong with my meter.*

Now, *that* was a genuinely comforting thought. She knew she didn't even raise a .01 P blip on Mel's scale—she shuddered to think what might have happened to her if she had—so maybe her meter was screwed or picking up something else. Something cars and normal people and whatever radiated.

She pointed the psi-meter at herself and pushed the button.

The needle didn't budge. *Zip. Nada. Nothing.* Her eyes narrowed, and she pointed at her own car. She obtained the same results. To her left, coming from the same general direction as all the psi activity, a kid in a pink raincoat shot through the woods at high speed. She was heading straight for the fancy house with all the horses and pastures. *Testing, testing*, Belinda thought, and aimed the meter at her.

“Shit. Shit-shit-shit-shit-double shit!” Belinda snarled. The needle had again shot all the way across the meter and buried itself in the out of range zone. She flung the black box across the seat, and stared at the galloping kid. *What are the odds?* she wondered. *Just what are the fucking odds of running into that many TK's in one place?*

She bit her lip. *The odds are probably better than running into them one at a time and spread all over*, she decided after long contemplation, *if their being here was no coincidence. Do psychics attract psychics?* And another thought, straight out of a Spielberg movie: *Do adult psychics track down kids?*

Her head throbbed, and the thinking she was forced to do was making it worse, but the pain pills would make her fall asleep if she took any. *Live with the pain*, she told herself. *You may be about done with it anyway, champ. 'Cause kids are little and weak and naive—and they don't drive haunted '57 Chevys. And I'm betting you can heist a little kid way out here in the sticks without anyone being the wiser.*

A thought occurred to her. *There were kids all over the racetrack the day I did my little set-up. Wouldn't it just be a bitch if the kid was the one I was looking for after all?* She started her engine and pulled carefully out onto the road that led past the kid's house.

“Kendrick,” the mailbox said. And the flowing script on the sandblasted wooden shingle read, “kendrick's bal-a-sar stables—fine arabians.”

*Horses, huh? I can fake it with the horsey set. Oh, yeah, kid . . . I can find you with no trouble at all. A new haircut, and a pair of jodhpurs and riding boots, and I'll be back.*

Mel Tanbridge drove through Fayetteville accompanied by his constant companion, distaste. Military towns annoyed him. The entertainment wasn't classy enough, the architecture was just plain drab, and the people themselves—well, he decided, the less thought about them the better. Rude, crude, and obnoxious were the kindest adjectives he could come up with for these peons.

Take the maids at the hotel Stevens had been staying at, for instance. Stevens' room was paid through the end of the week, and they knew he'd been staying there, but they refused to tell him anything about the man—whether he'd left in a hurry, who he'd been with—anything. They'd told him hotel visitors were confidential guests (the way they pronounced “confidential” positively made Mel's skin crawl), and

even when he'd flashed a couple of twenties in their direction, they'd blinked their stupid cow eyes at him and said they didn't know anything. He was ready to believe them—the bitches. He'd gone on to break into Stevens' hotel room and had scoured it with a thoroughness that would have left the simple-minded maids chartreuse with envy. He came out with more questions than he took in.

The room was beyond nondescript. That fit well enough with Stevens' character. The thing that puzzled him was that most of Stevens' belongings were still in it. The money was not to be found, of course—except for a bit of change on the dresser that made his stomach twitch in uncomfortable ways. Nobody *left* change if they weren't intending to come back—and pretty promptly, too, in cheap hotels. His bags were present, his clothes still balled up in the drawers. The bed was made, and the maids had placed the pile of dirty clothes neatly on the room's single chair next to the ubiquitous round hotel table under the equally ever-present hanging hotel lamp.

He left carefully, feeling that he had missed something important, but having absolutely no idea what that something might have been.

On his way to his next stop, Peterkin's hotel, he puzzled over the scene and came up completely empty. The room was a blank—there was nothing incriminating, nothing that gave him a clue to what might have happened to his employee.

He hoped for better luck at Peterkin's place.

His hopes fell with his first sight of the place. Stevens' hotel had been bland—but Peterkin's was positively tacky. It was one of those “adult” motels with twenty-four-hour hot and cold running movies and beds that wiggled for a quarter—no doubt so the rented rubber dummy would feel like it had a bit of life to it, Mel thought with disgust. While he might have more luck bribing the help, he doubted that he would find anything useful in a dump like the one in front of him. *Then again*, he thought, *Idoubtthey ever sweep under the beds here. I might find something-useful* .

He obtained the room number from the blowsy, rumped tub of a woman who sat at the front desk. He went back to his car and watched until no one was on the breezeway. Then he slipped up the steps and, ignoring the “Do Not Disturb” sign hung on the door, used one of the little tricks he'd learned from the burglar he kept on staff. He broke in without so much as a sound.

He closed the door quietly behind himself and waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. When they did, he wished they hadn't.

“Christ!” he yelped. Peterkin and Stevens were in the middle of something he would never have credited them with having the imagination for—or rather, he noted, as their silence and stillness caught his attention, they *had* been.

The moment that he took a deep breath, he knew that they were dead. What had caused their deaths seemed pretty evident, too. Drug paraphernalia was laid out on the dresser, and they didn't have any visible wounds—

He walked through the room, careful not to touch anything until he'd taken a towel from the bathroom. He used that to open drawers and look over the IDs lying on the dresser. They were false ones, he noted, but not the same false ones Stevens and Peterkin had left California with. *Interesting*, he thought. *Those are the ones Belinda had on hand for emergencies* .

There were only a few low-denomination bills and some change in the room, and Mel left all of the

money. It wouldn't do to make this look like they'd been robbed. He left the false ID's, too. They were very good and very solid—he even had a couple of “widows” who would be only too happy to collect the insurance on their late “husbands.” Best of all, they wouldn't be traced back to him.

Mel backed out of the room and closed the door -behind him. He heard the lock click into place. Immediately, he began beating on the door and yelling, “I know you're in there, Kraft! I want my money, dammit! Open the door! You owe me eight hundred bucks, you flake! Pay up!”

Hotel management, in the form of the overweight woman, appeared at the foot of the stairs. “Sheddup or ah'll call the cops,” she yelled. “Don' you go raisin' hell aroun' my place.”

Mel took on a menacing air. “Lady, that S.O.B. owes my company eight hundred bucks—and he skipped town to keep from paying it. I'm the collector—I tracked him down here, and now I want my money. You see these papers?” He waved several sheets of paper at her from his safe spot at the top of the steps; papers that were actually contracts with his brochure printer back in California. “These say I have a right to collect that money, and if I don't get it, I'm going to call the cops and have them raid this dive.”

The woman studied him from the foot of the stairs, her bright black eyes nearly hidden in the rolls of fat. She grimaced and mumbled, “Aw, shee-it. Ah don' need that again.” She waddled back toward the office, muttering over her massive shoulder-pads, “Jes' wait a dam' minute while ah git my keys.”

After she returned and moved her vast bulk up the narrow cement staircase, Mel took his expectant place half a step behind her.

He waited, feigning impatience while she pounded on the door, then fumbled with the keys when she got no answer. He pretended not to watch her closely as she opened the door and flipped on the light. He noted, however, her absolute lack of shock as her eyes took in the room, its inhabitants, and the attendant sex toys and drugs.

“Oh, my,” she whispered, her eyes gleaming with vicarious pleasure. “Oh my, oh my! Will you jes' look at that! Imagine them doin' that in mah nice clean *mo* -tel!”

“Dammit,” Mel said, making sure she heard him. “There goes my eight hundred dollars.”

Mel slipped back to his car and drove off before the police could arrive. He returned the Lincoln, took the shuttle to the Fayetteville airport, then another to a second car rental agency, where he used an alternate alias to pick up a car as different from the previous one as he could find—a bright blue Geo Metro. He didn't want to be bothered with the police in a town that had the two strikes against it of being military—and Southern.

Then he drove out toward Belinda's last reported -address. The situation so far was not at all what he had anticipated. He didn't think for a minute that Stevens and Peterkin had died in the way they appeared to have. He felt the touch of his favorite redhead stamped all over their dead bodies. But there might be extenuating circumstances. It might be that he wouldn't have to terminate her from his payroll—he chuckled at that euphemism—as soon as he'd anticipated. But he would be careful. After all, she was dangerous—part of her charm—and one never knew.

Mac was as weary as he had ever been. The rain died down to a cold, sullen drizzle, punctuated by

cloudburst exclamation points that showered the woods around them. Lianne and Mac trudged through the ugly weather, -untouched.

“That was Amanda’s hideout,” Mac noted abruptly, breaking a silence that had carried them from the tree to the edge of the woods behind the child’s house.

“Really?” Lianne said, sounding surprised. “How did you—oh.”

Mac did not ask her what the “oh” meant. Perhaps she remembered catching sight of bits of bright junk that had hung on strings from the branches, decorating the tree like treasures in a magpie’s nest. Perhaps she simply deduced—correctly—that he had been here before.

Lianne shuddered. “You don’t suppose she was anywhere around those—things—do you?”

*I would bet she had something to do with getting them here,* Mac thought, but he didn’t say it. There were so many things about the kid that didn’t fit. She knew he was an elf, then she didn’t. She did magic but didn’t believe in it. She walked out of Elfhome Outremer on her own—a pure impossibility. To Lianne, he only said, “I hope not.” That at least was the truth.

He covered the two of them with his “I’m not here” shield, and they moved out of the woods and across the yard.

“God—the police are here!” Lianne froze, then started backing toward the woods.

Mac grabbed her arm. “They can’t see us,” he whispered.

“Are you really, really sure?”

He gave her a half-smile. “Well, don’t run up and pinch them on the noses to test this—but yes, I’m sure. We still show up on film and video, still leave footprints, but someone looking right at us won’t see us. Wonder what they’re doing here—”

“Rummaging through that little barn. Obviously.” Lianne started forward. “Come on—let’s take a look.”

Maelyn lingered back as Power, twisted and sick, hit him like a board to the front of the head. “Gods,” he whispered, “what happened in there?”

Lianne looked up at him and arched her eyebrows in a silent question.

“Are you familiar with the human term ‘bad ju-ju’?” he asked.

She shrugged. “I’ve heard it. Means—oh, black magic, or something.”

Mac watched the police with wary eyes. “Or something, actually. Well, bad ju-ju is stamped all over that little barn in glowing letters ten feet high. Something happened here, but not what the police see.”

She shook her head, obviously confused. “The monsters under the tree again?”

Mac closed his eyes and stood very still, his head tipped to one side. “Funny—” he started to say something, then fell silent. Finally, he shook himself and looked at Lianne again. “You are almost right about comparing this to the battle this morning,” he told her. “The traces of magic in the barn have some

of the same touches as those golems had—but this magic is tied in to someone else as well. It almost feels like some kind of a ritual—group magic, or something involving a group.” He wrinkled his nose and walked toward the barn.

“Bad ju-ju,” Lianne snarled behind him, and followed his lead.

Mac’s nerves screamed with every step that drew him nearer to the barn. The little building reeked of power drawn from pain—but the signatures of the magic-wielders and the victims were so tangled that he couldn’t get a clear picture. When he glanced inside, his stomach twisted like a knife-pinned snake, and he drew in a breath between clenched teeth. The contents of the structure had been shredded apart fiber by fiber—he had seen the results of a food processor on occasion and had no difficulty -imagining that the inside of the barn had been through one. The taint of Unseleighe work reeked through the place. And where, in all of this, did *they* fit in? So far, his dark kindred hadn’t shown so much as a hair.

Mac and Lianne stayed to the shadows and watched the policemen digging through the mess.

“You find anything?” one of the officers asked.

“Sawdust,” the other answered. “Plenty of sawdust. And I’ll tell you something, Sammy—if we rake through this shit till the end of forever, that’s all we’re going to find.”

The first speaker straightened and groaned. “Yeah. I think you’re right. This place gives me the creeps. Feels like something’s watching all the damn time.”

Lianne gave Maclyn a worried look. He grimaced and shrugged.

The cop continued. “Why don’t we check outside—maybe we’ll find tire marks or something.”

“After all this rain?” the second policeman snorted. But then he grinned. “Hell, walkin’ in the rain is a damnsight cozier than pokin’ around in here. Let’s go.” Both policemen headed for the door.

Lianne heard one mumble as they stepped outside, “Wish to hell I knew what could do that.”

Mac leaned over and whispered in Lianne’s ear, “I know what did it—I just wish I knew who’d summoned one up.”

Lianne shuddered under his hand. “So tell me, what *does* do more damage than Hell’s Cuisinart?”

He almost wished he didn’t know. “A banesidhe wind—deadly, borderline intelligent, called up from the lairs of what you might call the Dark Elves. They’re pure destructive energy. Pain and hatred born of torture on this plane create them out of the raw stuff of the Unformed Plane—but to ‘create’ one here, to call it out from its Unseleighe hiding place, the magician has to know it, to know that fear, that hate, that pain. And there aren’t many magicians strong enough to call one out who are willing to be tortured to make one.”

Outside the barn, they heard Andrew Kendrick talking with the policemen. He was not happy. “You mean to tell me you’ve spent all morning poking around in my kid’s barn, and you still don’t know who vandalized it?”

An unhappy voice answered. “Mister Kendrick—we can’t even begin to figure out how they did it. Given a few hours, maybe somebody could wreck things that completely—but not in a few minutes.”

“Dammit,” Kendrick snapped. And after a pause, he added, in a voice thick with sarcasm, “I can tell my tax dollars have been well spent on you two.”

*It's Amanda's barn. It was Amanda's hideout tree. Her classroom. And the magic signatures in all of these places have been the same. They haven't been Amanda—but they have all been the same! Who is with her doing Unseleighe magic? And why?*

A different man walked into the barn and was framed for an instant in the dreary outdoor light at the doorway. He was tall, with sandy hair and light eyes, broad shoulders and the very early signs of a potbelly to come. He would have been a handsome man, but his expression was ugly, his lips clamped firmly on a smoldering cigarette, his demeanor cold and calculating. The man scanned the interior of the barn, his eyes fixing on Mac and Lianne and flicking quickly past them. Mac felt Lianne jerk once beside him.

The feel of this man was in the barn, too. His was the second signature present—and Mac would have taken him for the magician and maybe the torturer—but while the man had strong magical potential, it was completely latent. Still, the man carried a store of repressed hatred so deep-burning and all-consuming that the elf felt it as a physical presence.

*Father and daughter in league with the Unseleighe Court? Maybe—but somehow none of the pieces fit—*

Kendrick walked to the back left corner of the gutted building and started digging through the drifts of debris.

*Father and daughter—and torture . . . there has to have been some kind of torture to have conjured the banesidhe wind. Mac clenched his hands and glared at the man across the little barn from him. It's sure that the child didn't torture her father—but there was torment wrought here, and it has his signature on it. But stress has brought out mage-powers in humans before. . . .*

Latent mage torturing developing mage. That matched. He took a deep breath to calm himself and leaned back against the wall.

*There's my proof of abuse.*

Belinda walked into her hotel room, and reacted an instant too late as the cold, heavy barrel of a gun was pressed against her ribs, preventing her from backing out of the room. A leather-gloved hand clapped over her mouth.

“Don't move or you're dead,” the voice in her left ear said in an equitable and utterly reasonable tone of voice.

“Mel?” The word sounded muffled through the heavy padding of the glove.

A delicate snort, and the gun-muzzle didn't move a hair, but the glove moved enough so that she could talk, at least. “In the flesh. That was quite a nice little tableau you left at Peterkin's hotel. Very artistic. I always have liked your style.”

“Why are you here, Mel?” Belinda couldn’t feel, in her heart of hearts, any deep urge to be chatty.

“You haven’t brought me my TK yet,” he chided gently. “And then Stevens and Peterkin vanished off the face of the planet, and you hadn’t called in days—I started feeling a little lonely. And I thought you might have reeled in the TK and then found a higher bidder.” His hand tightened over her mouth, and the gun began moving in slow, gentle circles over her side, and the glove covered her mouth again. “You haven’t found a higher bidder, have you, dear?”

Belinda tried to clear her mouth of the glove, and failed. “Foo-fif fiff-feff!” she spat.

“Beg pardon?” Mel chuckled softly in her ear and lessened the pressure on her mouth.

“You stupid shithead!” Belinda repeated. “Do I look like I’ve been rolling in somebody else’s money and taking it easy at your expense?”

Mel said, “Stay still.” He released her and moved to one side of her. Now they were both reflected in the mirror across from her. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see that the gun was still pointed steadily at her mid-section. She kept her hands away from her sides and stared straight into the mirror on the far wall. She could see him taking in the bruises, the bandages on her head, the dark circles under her eyes and the gaunt hollows in her cheeks that hadn’t been there when she left California. “Now that you mention it, you look like you’ve been dancing with trucks. What’s been going on?”

She snorted. “You didn’t tell me how dangerous hunting down a telekinetic could be.”

Mel’s eyes narrowed. “I didn’t know. The racecar driver did all that to you?”

She shrugged. “Yes he did, in a roundabout fashion I would rather not discuss. I’ve got you a better prospect. I’ve found a child who is a sure thing—an even stronger talent than the driver. I’ll get her for you—she’s bound to be less dangerous to rope in than Mac Lynn. I’m going to kill him after you have the girl.” Belinda smiled and rubbed absently at the bandage on her head. “Unless I have the opportunity to do it beforehand.”

“You’ve really found someone else?” Mel’s voice sounded eager.

Belinda eased into the Naugahyde chair beside the bed. “Just today—a little girl. Lynn led me to her. Probably, oh, eight or ten years old. A kid would be very easy to work with, wouldn’t she? I figure whatever you have planned, it would be less hassle to do with someone smaller.”

In the mirror, Mel’s eyes brightened. “Check her out. TK ability is supposed to show up right around the time puberty strikes, and is supposed to be more common in girls. This kid fits the profile.”

Mel ran one hand along the line of his jaw and stared at a nonexistent point somewhere over Belinda’s left shoulder. “A child would be good—very good. Little girls are pliable and agreeable; I could probably obtain her cooperation with a few grand in toys—whereas getting cooperation from an adult male for what I have in mind would require . . . more complicated measures.” His voice faded off into nothing, and he refocused on Belinda. “Why did you kill Stevens and Peterkin?”

She yawned. “They double-crossed me. I don’t take that from anyone, especially not from the hired muscle.”

Mel sat on the long dresser that also acted as the motel room’s writing desk. He crossed his arms and

let the muzzle of the gun dip toward the floor. “The word ‘double-cross’ is open to a wide range of interpretations. Be more -specific.”

She spread her hands wide and gave him her most innocent expression—hard to do with all the bruises. “I should have had him on his way to you in a bag yesterday. They withheld a drug that would have knocked Mac Lynn out, then lied to me about it. I can’t figure out what they hoped to gain by that maneuver, but there is no doubt that they lied to me. I tested the remainder of the drug on the two of them, just to make sure it wasn’t faulty—you found the results, apparently.”

Belinda went into greater detail, stopping only when Mel asked questions. She went over each point until she was sick of talking about it—and finally Mel seemed satisfied.

Mel lay the gun on the dresser top. “You aren’t lying about this. I can always tell.” He pulled one knee up to his chin and rested with his arms wrapped around his leg. He looked genuinely bewildered. “Why the hell would they turn traitor on me? They knew what I would do to them if they tried—God knows, they carried out my sentence on a couple of their colleagues.”

Belinda leaned her head back and tried to relax enough to get it to stop throbbing. “I have no idea. I searched their rooms, their possessions, their car, their pockets—everything I could think of. I couldn’t find anything incriminating.” She sighed. “Whoever bought them kept the whole deal very well hidden—and they must have been offering a fortune. I just can’t figure out why anyone would pay so much for such a ridiculous thing as a TK.” She glanced at Mel through half-lidded eyes. “No offense intended.”

Mel’s face twitched into a slimy smile. “None taken. *I* know why someone would offer a fortune—you haven’t seen the private offers that come across the desk of anyone who might have access to, ah, commodities like Mac Lynn. Believe me, dear, he’s worth more to you on the hoof than in the bag.”

“Pardon me for not giving a flying fuck.” Belinda laughed. “I guarantee you he’s worth more to me spread-eagled on a rock somewhere with a white-hot poker in his ass.”

“Tch-tch,” Mel said, shaking his finger reprovingly at her. “Language like that is not becoming a lady.”

Belinda made a full-forearm gesture at him and ignored her boss’ raised eyebrows. “I’ll get you a TK. But I’ve gone through hell you wouldn’t believe”—*quite literally couldn’t believe*, she thought—“trying to get this one. You’ll get the kid. And I’m going to take that creep out all by myself.”

Mel patted the gun that lay beside him. “We really must talk sometime about this habit you have of killing people who annoy you, Belinda dear.”

Belinda’s laugh was short and harsh. “You should bloody talk.”

He chuckled. “Not at all. I would never think of killing someone just because he—or she—has annoyed me. For example, Belinda, you annoy me, but you are useful. I only kill those people who are dangerous to me or who are of no further use to me alive.” He smiled gently. “I thought you had passed that line, dear. I truly did.”

A cold knot formed in Belinda’s belly, and she repressed the shudder she didn’t want Mel to see. “Friends again?” she asked with false cheerfulness.

His smile was just as false. “Of course—now that I know you’re still playing on my team. I make it a



point to stay friends with the people on my team. Get me my kid tomorrow or the next day, and we'll even be best buddies."

Belinda nodded, and winced as her hair moved with the nod. There were a lot of bruises under that hair. "I'll go out tomorrow. I already know how I'm going to get close. First, though, I've got to get some sleep, and then I'm going to the beauty parlor. I'm not going to be able to get anywhere near her looking like this. I'll have your kid for you in a day or two."

"Fine." Mel's eyebrows furrowed, and he looked down at his shoes for a long, silent moment. "I think I might like to go along to pick her up," he said when he finally looked up. "I want to have a good look at my -merchandise."

Belinda sighed. "Hey, it's your party. Just so long as you still intend to pay me the full price, you are welcome to come along."

Mel chuckled. "You mean you aren't inclined to give me a discount if I come along and help out?"

She gave him a look of disdain. "You came along too late to earn a discount. Hell, I deserve a bonus just for pain and suffering incurred."

"We'll see." Mel stood, and they watched each other warily. Then Mel slipped the gun into the holster hidden beneath his windbreaker, and keeping his eyes fixed on Belinda, he eased out of the room. "I'll be in touch. Or if you need me, call me at the Prince Charles. I'm listed as Mel Tenner," he said just before the door closed.

*Oooh, that's creative,* Belinda thought. *Nobody would ever connect Mel Tanbridge with Mel Tenner. Idiot.* She listened to the click of the latch and held her breath until she heard Mel's measured tread moving away from her door. "Shit," she whispered.

The room would be bugged, of course—Mel would have kept his options open, even if he had fully intended to kill her. "*Do nothing irrevocable until the last possible moment,*" he'd told her more times than she cared to think about. "*And always leave yourself an out—two, if you can.*" So he would have the room bugged, and he would now have someone keeping track of her movements.

What else? Threatening her family? Maybe—and if he tried it, he would find out how little that meant. Her lush of a mother wouldn't even notice a bullet between the eyes, her bastard stepfather deserved one, and if Mel's goons could locate her real father, who had skipped before she was even born, she hoped they'd make his life exciting. Threatening her, then? If she screwed up, she was dead. But she already knew that. She was dangerous to Mel—she just had to make sure she kept herself useful. Well, as long as she was the only one who knew who—and where—the little girl TK-wonder was, she was useful. And after that, she'd get out of his reach. Fast.

In the meantime, she hadn't seen the inside of her eyeballs in far too long. She double-locked the door, then stripped and eased herself between the cold sheets.

Life was giving her real cause to consider another line of work.

Andrew Kendrick sat in the kitchen, staring out the window at the policemen who wandered around his -property accomplishing precious little. He was satisfied that they wouldn't find anything incriminating in

the barn. There *was* nothing—absolutely nothing—left. How that could be, he didn't know, but the fact that it seemed impossible didn't in the least change the fact that it was true. And with the worry of discovery of his questionable activities behind him, he could relax a bit. And since they hadn't found the person responsible for destroying his barn, he wished the police would just get the hell off his property.

He would have to rebuild the barn. Rebuild the little windowless locking room, he thought. For the time being, the other barn would serve—but not as well. It had its private places, and its private times, but they were less frequent, and less convenient. Convenience had become important to him.

He could see Amanda and Sharon playing Barbie dolls in the den, doing something that was not meant for adult eyes and whispering with their heads leaned close together. He watched them without making it obvious that he was doing so—something had just occurred to him as he sat there. Amanda was growing up.

He sniffed with sudden distaste. Amanda had once been an enchanting child. She had been innocent and vulnerable and tractable. Now, as she sat next to the delicate and fragile Sharon, whose hair still tumbled loose in a five-year-old's baby ringlets, whose face was sweet and round and whose eyes were gentle and uncomprehending, Amanda was a gangling and ugly colt. She looked plain and scrawny, Andrew thought—and she looked hard. She had lost the childish innocence of Sharon. She seemed somehow adult, as she sat there making sly little comments while the two girls changed their dolls' clothes.

His attention was suddenly riveted by something his older daughter did. Amanda's face and mood had changed, and her eyes glittered green in the dim light. She tied the Barbie doll's wrists behind her back and placed the Ken doll behind her in a pose suggestive of—

Andrew's fingers tangled around the tablecloth in uncon-scious rage. He knew what Amanda was telling the little girl—he knew what she was showing her. Sharon was watching her older sister, fascinated, hanging intently on every word. Andrew couldn't hear the words hidden in the hushed whispers, but he knew anyway that she was exposing his secret—exposing *him*. And in the same burst of insight, he knew something else.

He knew that he was going to have to get rid of Amanda.

What she told to her little sister was of no real importance. Sharon wasn't old enough that any rational adult would take her seriously if she repeated what her sister said. Assuming she even understood half of what Amanda was telling her, or that she considered it anything other than a scary story. But Amanda could talk to adults as easily as she talked to the little girl. She could walk out the door and tell the police in his side yard what he had been doing—and what would come of that? Where would his law practice, with his high-powered corporate clients, be? Merryl would leave him, and worse, she would take Sharon with her—sweet, beautiful, obedient Sharon.

It would only be a matter of time until Amanda let something slip—he saw it coming with terrible clarity. He could see it in the crafty, loathsome eyes of the homely creature in the other room. He would have to get rid of her as soon as possible, in some way that would leave him completely above suspicion.

With the police department's newfound interest in his home, that was going to be damned difficult.

Dierdre felt the Gate pull in behind her, felt it drain her of some of her energy as she bore the brunt of the snap for both herself and Felouen. Felouen was near death. She hovered there, suspended over the

chasm of nonexis-tence by the finest of gossamer threads.

Dierdre stood in the sacred grove of Elfhome Outremer, and felt the magic flow into her—magic she had cut herself off from voluntarily for a very long time. The great trees seemed to bend over her, welcoming her home, and their acceptance changed her subtly. She dropped her lighthearted human persona, her years of human acclimatization. She seemed to stretch, becoming something both more beautiful and more terrible than the human-seeming creature she had hidden herself in for all those many years. Her human colleagues, who had never seen the ancient elven noblewoman she truly was, would not have recognized her—and would have felt the strong compulsion to kneel and beg mercy in her presence for ever treating her with anything less than deepest respect.

She knelt next to her wounded comrade and gently rested her hands on the torn and broken body. A soft, golden glow gathered around her; a faint sheen that grew in glittering bands until she became the pale, lovely center of a brilliant light warmer than any homecoming. Her lips trembled just a little as she sang, over and over:

*“Gathwaloïr muellëiralra elearai ao;*

*Elearai, pallaiebaroa, ailoaië houe.*

*Tué, atué escobeieada—*

*Tué, atué,*

*Tué, atué—tué.”*

The song was ancient, one of the oldest magics of the elvenkind—so old that its language was far removed from that spoken by the Seleighe Court. To a people whose lives stretched thousands of years, and whose language had not changed in tens of thousands of years, this made it a tongue of unimaginable age and power. Singing it, she gifted her strength and her health to Felouen. And as she sang, pain spread through her body, and Felouen’s wounds healed under her fingers.

She kept singing until the pain blinded her and her voice faltered. She had no more strength to give—she could only take some of the damage to herself. Too much, and she would die in Felouen’s place.

As her voice fell silent, though, another voice picked up the song, and other hands rested on Felouen’s body. The Grove had felt her need and had summoned help. She fell back and lay in the soft velvet grass, and the Grove fed her and comforted her and promised her renewal.

She listened, unable to move, as the voices over Felouen changed; strong voices becoming weak, then being replaced by other strong voices, over and over. She felt like a child in her cradle again, rocked and safe, with others singing the old songs and whispering in the language of her childhood, the sounds familiar but the meaning of the words just out of the reach of her tired comprehension.

Homesickness, long foreign to her, overwhelmed her as she lay in the eternal twilight in the hallowed place -between the worlds. The elven-tongue, so beautiful and long -neglected by her, sang through her veins like hot brandy. Dierdre felt tears welling in her eyes, felt the uprush of repressed longing for a place and a way of life she had voluntarily forgone.

Homecoming—in such a way, with the death of one of her folk and the near-death of another riding her shoulders like a close-fitting cape—was bittersweet. The bitterness was only in the pain she brought with

her from the low and dirty world of the humans, the unbearable sweetness in the touch of friends too long neglected, too long put aside.

Felouen would live. Her people had come to the call of the Grove, and her wounds had been shared by them.

And over Dierdre as well the elves began to sing, dispersing among themselves the agony that she had taken on alone when there was no one else to help her.

At last she was able to sit again, to hold her head upright, to look around her. She saw Felouen moving restlessly in the grass, her head tossing and her arms jolting out at intervals to stop the fall her mind would not release from present memory. Around her moved the beautiful folk in their flowing robes, their pale faces grave.

“Welcome home,” said a rich, deep voice from behind her. “Too many years have you been apart from us, fair lady. Your home weeps in your absence.”

Dierdre looked up and to one side. The elven lord had once been a friend and a comrade, had fought at her side under Dwylleth’s leadership—and had been, with other friends, sadly neglected of late because of her other -interests. “Yes,” she said sadly. “I’ve been away a while.”

She glanced around the Grove, and back up at her old friend, and touched his iridescent green robe. “But I’m home now.”

## Chapter Ten

Amanda-Abbey “woke” to find herself playing Barbie dolls in the den with Sharon. Daddy was in the other room—she could just barely see him in the kitchen corner with his long legs stretched out under the table, while he sat and watched her. She had no memory of where she had been, or of how she came to be playing with Sharon—and the dolls in her hands were doing something that made her stomach twist, although she didn’t know why. It looked naughty and *felt* naughty. She moved the dolls apart and stared at her hands with dismay.

*What happens, she wondered, when I’m not here? Why doesn’t Sharon notice that I just woke up? What, she thought with a shudder, has my body been doing without me?*

She busily started putting clothes on her dolls, so that Sharon wouldn’t interrupt her while she was thinking. She thought about Stranger.

Stranger had always seemed to be just a funny voice in her head, one that talked oddly and used a lot of words she didn’t recognize, but Amanda-Abbey had always -assumed Stranger was part of her imagination—like the elf had been. She had to wonder about the elf, however. Amanda-Abbey looked at the gold bracelet on her wrist and at her real mother’s glass bead, and she wondered—

Maybe the elf was real. And if the elf was real, maybe Stranger was real, too.

Amanda-Abbey put down her dolls and dug her fingers into the cool, deep carpet. She stared at her hands, her odd, unpredictable hands, now pulling little bits of fiber out of the rug and rolling them into pills. *Suppose—just suppose—Stranger is real. Then the place where she took me, the place where that awful girl with the flying knives and whips and stuff was hiding behind her walls, was real, too.*

*Stranger is inside of me. Is the awful girl? Is that what happens to me when I'm not here? The awful girl comes out?*

“Don’t pick at the carpet,” her step-mother said, walking into the room. “That’s destructive.”

Amanda-Abbey stopped and began to put her dolls away. She needed to get away, to think. There were things -going on that she didn’t understand, but she wanted to find Stranger and talk to her if she could. She wanted to be alone when she started looking for her. For some reason, it seemed important to be alone for that.

“You said you’d play with me,” Sharon whined.

“I already did play with you,” Amanda-Abbey said, hoping this was true.

Now the whine was joined by a pout. “Not long enough.”

Amanda-Abbey decided that it was time to be firm. “Yes, long enough. I have stuff to do.” When the pout continued, she tried coaxing instead of ordering. “Why don’t you watch Turtles, now? I bet they’re on.”

The pout turned scornful. “I already watched Turtles—they were on this mornin’, dummy butthead. They’re not on in the afternoon.”

Amanda-Abbey shrugged and finished shoving her dolls and doll clothes back into their storage case. “Watch something else. I gotta go clean my room.” She got up and started for the stairs.

“I want someone to play with me,” Sharon wailed.

From the kitchen, Daddy leaned around the corner and looked past Amanda-Abbey to Sharon. He said, “I’ll play with you, honey. Just give me a minute to finish my -coffee.”

Something about Daddy wanting to play with Sharon all of a sudden worried Amanda-Abbey, but she didn’t know what it was. Her stomach twisted, as it had when she saw what she was doing with the Barbie dolls. Confused, she walked to the stairs and up them, trailing her doll case. The stairs, too, made her feel a little funny. It seemed that today everything in the house made her feel a little funny. Amanda-Abbey decided that she was probably getting the flu like Bobby Smithers in her art class, and next she’d have a fever and be puking on everybody.

She’d worry about that when it happened. Right now, she wanted to find Stranger if she could. She wanted to see if Stranger was real.

In her room, she stretched out on her bed and looked out her windows. The clouds outside were low and dark, and for a moment she expected to see rain—but there was none. She didn’t know why, but this surprised her.

She lay very still. If she were someone else hiding in her body, where would she hide? She watched the clouds scudding by and wiggled her fingers tentatively. *:Stranger?:* she asked.

There was no answer.

*:Stranger?:* She closed her eyes and tried to hear the voice with its funny accent. *:Stranger? Are you there?:*

*:Aye, lass, I'm here. What are ye' huntin', then?:*

*:I was looking for you—:* Her thought faltered. It occurred to Amanda-Abbey that it was probably rude to ask someone to prove that they were real. Still, if she didn't ask, she wouldn't know. *:Are you just my imagination, Stranger?:* she asked.

*:Nay, I'm not that. I'm as real as you are—how real that is, I've no more way of knowin' than you.:*

With her eyes still tightly closed, Amanda-Abbey tried to see where the voice was coming from. She got impressions of a shadow, the outline of a woman—

*:If you're wantin' to see me, I'll give you a light, child. Before this, you nay wanted to look at me.:*

Amanda-Abbey considered that. It was, she realized, quite true. She never had wanted to see the face that went with the odd voice—not even the time she had seen that horrifying other girl, the frightening child behind all those walls. She had not looked into Stranger's eyes even when they had escaped, not even when the woman's arms had been around her, comforting her.

White fire cascaded in waves from the darkness, until she saw Stranger clearly. Amanda-Abbey stared at her, devoured the woman's features with her eyes—and suddenly knew why she had been afraid to see her.

Somewhere, in the back of her mind, she had been afraid that Stranger would look just like her, and that this would prove what she had suspected when she first started hearing the voice—it would prove that she was crazy. Amanda-Abbey knew stories of people who heard voices and were locked up.

*Like my real mama. That's what Father said.*

But there had been another fear, equally deep, equally bad. She had also been afraid that, even though the voice belonged to a stranger, the face would belong to her mother—her real mother, who was dead—and that this would mean she was seeing ghosts. She wanted her real mother back, but did not want her back as a ghost.

Stranger looked like no one she had ever seen. The woman was short and extraordinarily pale, with a long dark braid and a pointed, pixielike face; her clothes were funny, too, like they were made out of kitchen towels or horse blankets pinned together. She smiled, and Amanda-Abbey nervously smiled back.

*:Hi. I'm Abbey.:*

The woman nodded politely. *:I know you. Merry meet.:* she added. *:I am named Cethlenn.:*

*Cethlenn. Not Stranger*, Amanda-Abbey thought. She rolled the name on her tongue a few times. The woman looked real enough standing there in that short cape that was nothing more than a horsehide with round pins holding it on, with her boots looking like something she'd made herself. *Yes, she does look real enough*, Amanda-Abbey thought, *At least while my eyes are closed*. Experimentally, she opened her eyes. The woman vanished. She closed her eyes. Cethlenn still stood there.

*:Prove you're real,:* Amanda-Abbey demanded. Inside, what she was hoping was that Cethlenn would prove she was not crazy.

The woman nodded. *:Fair enough. Get up and walk to your mirror. Look at yourself in't, an' say what ye see.:*

Amanda-Abbey followed these directions—and found herself staring at her reflection. *:I see me, of course.:*

From over her shoulder, it seemed, Cethlenn said, *:Quite right. Now, close your eyes and imagine that ye stand behind my shoulder, and let me look in the mirror.:*

Amanda-Abbey found this difficult to accomplish. Several times, right when she was sure she had it right, she opened her eyes just at the wrong moment and found that nothing had changed. When finally she got it right, she didn't even know it until Cethlenn said, *:There. See?:*

She opened her eyes and discovered, to her surprise, that *the* eyes had opened already. She had the feeling that she was standing behind Cethlenn. When she moved her arms, they felt just fine, but *the* arms, the ones attached to the body which she could see quite plainly in the mirror, did nothing.

*:Oh!:* she cried out, and no sound came out of *the* mouth. The face that was and was not hers said, "See? I'm real."

She looked on in fascination as the arms moved without her will, as the lips smiled, as the eyes—*brown* eyes—blinked in a rhythm different from her own. The face in the mirror looked unaccountably fierce, and though the hair was still blond, and the skin still had a little of last summer's tan to it, she could see that the person inside was Cethlenn.

*:Oh, Cethlenn, you are real!:* she said, with a rush of joyous relief. And, suddenly bewildered, she asked, *:But why are you here?:*

The face in the mirror looked back at her, and the uncertainty reflected there matched her own. "Och, child," Cethlenn whispered, "I have na' the faintest idea to that. I dinna even remember how I got here. I only wish I knew what I was supposed to do now that I'm here."

The trip back to Lianne's apartment was mostly silent. Maclyn stared at the road that unfolded ahead of them—Lianne leaned back on Rhellen's soft gold upholstery with her eyes closed and pretended to sleep. Maclyn didn't expose her pretense for what it was—he didn't particularly want to talk anyway.

Old Gwaryon was dead—weird old Gwaryon, with his fascination for ancient human cultures and his reputedly bizarre personal habits—who had been a part of Maclyn's life since his birth. Dierdre had liked Gwaryon, had seen some value in his tedious memorization of long-dead human languages and his eccentric love of human books and his freakish emulation of long-outdated human fashions. She'd

thought the old elf bright and funny and clever, and so Maclyn had grown up surrounded by his elvish imitations of human worlds that—Mac suspected—bore only a faint resemblance to the long-gone realities. Dierdre had lent these suspicions some truth when, to young Maclyn's unending questions, she would admit nothing but that Gwaryon preferred to see only the good in every human culture and work.

Old Gwaryon had, in his way, been a friend. He had died bravely—but not well. In Maclyn's estimation, there was no way to die well. Dead was dead, and the longer one put that state off, the better.

And that brought him to Felouen. What of Felouen?

The image of his mother dragging Felouen's unmoving body through the temporary Gate he'd made into the Grove of Elfhome Outremer left a queasy hollow in his stomach and made every breath painful. What of Felouen? He felt she was still alive—he thought that surely her death would have left a bigger ache in him than the one he carried right then. She had said that she had been waiting for the one she loved for hundreds of years and had implied that she loved him. He glanced anxiously over at Lianne, whose eyes were still closed—and he allowed himself to acknowledge the deep and painful yearning for Felouen he intentionally ignored, the one that came roaring back to life every time he saw her.

It was a yearning, he had to admit, that invariably and promptly got quenched by Felouen's stiff-necked, hard-headed, do-it-or-die approach to every damn thing. Witness her insistence on dumping him with a Ring.

Unconsciously, his fingers made their own way into his jeans' pocket and pulled out the scrap of silk in which the Ring resided. Felouen was wounded, maybe dying—he didn't know if she would survive. She had wanted him to wear the Ring, had wanted him to be her knight.

He started feeling a little guilty. It hadn't been that much to ask of him—just that he accept the role of one sworn to uphold the Seleighe Court's edicts. It wasn't as if he had to start walking perimeter on guard duty if he wore the damn thing. It would, he thought, have made her happy if he had worn the Ring. Hell, Korindel, over in Misthold—California—wore *his* Knight's Ring openly and constantly, and *he* spent most of his time in the human world.

Against his better judgment, he slipped the carved gold band on.

Nothing happened. *There*, he thought, *that wasn't so bloody difficult, was it? Show a bit of respect for your own folk, show a bit of backbone, stand up against the Unseleighe things—you'll still survive it. Plenty have before you—that's how they earned their high places in the Council.*

*It isn't driving race cars—but then, what is? It's probably less dangerous to be one of the Ring-wearers than it is to drive race cars.*

The dull gleam of the gold ring on his right index finger mocked that last assertion.

Rhellen pulled into the apartment parking lot.

“Wake up, baby,” Mac said, in deference to her act.

She barely stirred. “Mmmph.”

He shook her, gently. “We're home. Time to get -moving.”



One slit eye glowered at him. “I’ll wake up in a minute.”

“Okay.” He paused, on the brink of delicate negotiations. “Lianne, I know you have some classwork you need to finish. And we didn’t find out anything that we can use to get Amanda out of that house a minute sooner—but maybe Felouen did. She was out there at Amanda’s tree before we got there, and somehow all of this feels tied together. While you grade papers or whatever it is you have to do, I’m going home to check on Mother and Felouen. If I find out anything useful, I’ll stop by later and let you know.”

Instead of looking disappointed, Lianne looked relieved. “That sounds fine, Mac. Tell you what—unless you find out something earth-shattering, why don’t you just stop by tomorrow morning. I feel like making an early night of it.”

Perversely, Maclyn’s feelings were hurt. “I’ll be happy to spend the night—” he started.

She waved him off with one slender hand. “Actually, Mac, the idea of having the bed to myself for a night sounds appealing. I want peace and absolute quiet. I want to think for a while—and I also want to scrounge around the house and not have to worry about how I look or how I act or what I do. I’m a bit too tired to be social.”

“Well,” he pouted, ignoring for the moment the fact that the outcome was exactly what he had hoped to accomplish, “if that’s really what you want . . .”

She nodded. “Yeah, I think so. Gimme a kiss and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

When Maclyn drove off, he noticed that she hadn’t even stayed outside long enough to wave good-bye—something she almost always did. *Maybe*, he thought, *she’s mad at me for something*. He pondered that notion while he and Rhellen drove toward the permanent Gate the elves had hidden in the center of the Grove on 15-401, out back of the Beauty Spot Missionary Baptist Church.

*Maybe*, he decided at last, *she’s pissed off at me because I didn’t thank her for saving my ass out there in the woods today—and neither did Mother*. That, he thought, was a good possibility. He would have been pissed if the situations had been reversed and no one had thanked him.

It was just that elves didn’t often have occasion to think of frail human women in the role of rescuer. Ah, well—he supposed in this case, he’d better show up with an apology offering first thing in the morning.

The Grove spread in front of him. Rhellen drove off-road, carefully picking his way. As soon as the car was well into the trees, Rhellen shifted, and the two of them charged through the Gate into Elfhome Outremer.

Even though the on-again-off-again rain might be -annoying if one had to be out there in it, it made ideal sleeping weather, Belinda decided. Too much of a good thing, though, would get her in trouble. She rolled over and stared at her clock.

It was a bit past two in the afternoon, and she had just finished a well-earned nap that had left her feeling better than she had anticipated, by a long shot. Her head still ached, but less than it had when she went to sleep. Still, she was going to have to get all her hair chopped off, which was damned depressing.

And Mel wasn't happy with her, which depressed her more. An unhappy Mel was a dangerous Mel. She couldn't spend a great deal of time worrying about him, however. She had her afternoon plans mapped out. Worry wasn't on her list.

*Screw Mel*, she finally decided. Then she laughed. *It would probably solve a few of my problems if I did. I'll bet the little bastard is kinky as hell, though; that's one of those personal details about my employer I'd rather not discover firsthand.* Belinda's personal sexual preference was abstention—a fact that would have surprised any number of people. Including, no doubt, her employer.

*Ah, well.* She stretched, then lay under the covers a few minutes longer, lazing. She had to spend some time with her modem and laptop computer. She needed to access files on the Kendricks and see what bounced. Then she needed to get herself looking good again. There was a salon out by the mall that was open nearly all the time. She could go there without an appointment and get her hair clipped and styled in some fashion that hid her new bald spot. Then she could get the kind of clothes that would make her look like a well-heeled member of the horse set, and she could visit the Kendrick stables—get a close-up look at her target and the obstacles she would be facing.

*Let's see: to do this right, you gotta walk the walk and talk the talk.* Belinda had spent some time on a job pretending to be a rich woman who wanted to be part of California's moneyed crew, and that meant an interest in horses. And not just any horses, either. She rehearsed vocabulary. *Breeding terms: broodmare, stallion. Buying terms: colt, filly, yearling. Good on those. How about words for things to look for when buying. Ah, good legs . . . hmm. Yeah, that includes fetlocks and hocks, pasterns, withers—no, the withers is that hump on the back up near the neck. Riding things: good gaits—briskwalk, comfortable trot, springy gallop, and . . . easy canter. Performing things—uh—dressage training, jumper, cross-country—*

She carried on mentally in that mode for several more minutes, then called up an online encyclopedia from her laptop computer. She searched by keywords—horse, Arabian, Andalusian, stud, all things she'd need with an Arabian breeder—and scrutinized the entries until she was sure she could pass herself off in that unused persona again.

Then she stretched and crawled out of bed.

Out of habit, she scanned the room, and her attention fixed on the door. It bothered her that Mel had broken in with so little difficulty, had caught her off guard so easily. While she showered, she wondered if she was losing her skills. God knew, she hadn't managed to pull in the racecar driver, whose IQ had to be on a par with that of a Boston fern or cold mashed potatoes. She didn't give herself any breaks because of the extenuating circumstances. There were *always* extenuating circumstances.

While she dried herself off, she entertained herself with the television. A news teaser caught her attention with the "bizarre drug-related death" of "two gay men" whose bodies had been found in a roadside motel—details at six. She cheered up again. After all, she decided, for every one wrong thing she did, she also accomplished a multitude of right ones.

Once she was dry and dressed, she hacked around the Fayetteville school system's computer setup, running one up and one down from the long list of phone numbers, until she got in. Security was weak, and very forgiving of errors—for that, she grinned. It was so much easier to break into schools than into, oh, police departments, say, or restricted installations.

Once she was into the system, she ran a search for any Kendrick files, cross-reffing with the Bal-A-Shar Stables address. In a moment, she had a match.

Kendrick, Amanda, was the name of the kid she'd seen. She was on the verge of adolescence; her records indicated plenty of personality disturbances, some of them pretty odd, her grades and teachers' comments marked her with all the stigmata of the erratic genius. And she was part of a "blended family"—a term Belinda considered a euphemistic hype.

Blended family. *Right. Mom has one, Dad has one, and now we are four. Sure we are.* More stress, which, according to Mel, made for psi-powers popping out.

*Plus you made my little black box happy, kid.*

The information she had turned up was good enough for Belinda. She disconnected her modem and reconnected the hotel room's phone, then picked up the Fayetteville phone directory and located "Kendrick's Bal-A-Shar Stables" in the Yellow Pages. "By Appointment Only," the ad -announced clearly. Belinda called.

A clipped, feminine voice answered on the other end after the third ring. "Bal-A-Shar Arabians, Merryl Kendrick speaking."

Belinda affected her persona from the old California job. "Mrs. Kendrick, this is Alessandra Whitchurch-Snowdon," she said in the upper-class Brit accent that could only be obtained by speaking without moving the lips. "I've recently moved to the States, and I'm looking for a yearling filly, probably green-broken, with good conformation and potential as a dressage contender. Your stables were highly recommended to me, but I'd like to come have a look, informally, before I go any further. Even if you don't have fillies suitable now, if your establishment impresses me, I'm willing to wait to look at the new crop in the fall." Belinda grinned at the phone. *Come on, snob appeal*, she thought. The Brit accent had never failed to get her access among the wealthy yet—something, she suspected, to do with making the local -upper-class feel like provincials who needed to prove themselves.

It didn't let her down this time, either. "Yes, certainly, Ms.—ah?"

"Alessandra Whitchurch-Snowdon. But it's *Lady Rivers*."

"*I see.*"

Belinda saw, too. She could see the dollar signs clicking merrily in the other woman's eyes, but more, she could see the other woman sampling the prestige factor possibly offered by her name. "Oh, yes, *Lady Rivers rides Bal-A-Shar Arabians*," she pictured Mrs. Kendrick imagining telling her other clients.

The woman came very close to concealing her eagerness—but not close enough for Belinda. "When would you like to see the horses?"

A little more pressure. "Have you an indoor theatre?" Implying that anyone who didn't wasn't worth visiting.

Eagerness became avarice at the hot prospect. "An indoor arena? Certainly."

"Splendid," Belinda replied. "Then would tonight be too much of a bother—say, nine?"

Avarice became anticipation. "That would be fine."

Belinda allowed her voice to warm. “Lovely, then. I’ll be off.”

Anticipation swelled. “Ah, yes. I’ll look for you at nine.”

Belinda hung up the phone and laughed merrily. One every minute—and, boy, did she know how to jump ’em through the hoops. P.T. Barnum would have *loved* her.

She slipped into some dressy clothes—for shopping later in the “right” stores—and trotted off for the hair-dresser’s, happy as a blacksnake in a nest of baby rabbits. *We’re back in business, now, babe*, she thought. *Oh, yeah.*

As soon as Mac was out of sight, Lianne darted out of the apartment and took off for the discount bookstore that was hidden away in one of the town’s indoor malls. When she got there, she hunted down Jimmy, her favorite bookseller. She found him crouched down inside the cash wrap, sorting special orders.

“Lianne McCormick!” His eyes lit up when he saw her, and he gave her a warm smile. “Nice to see you again. Dare I hope that you have given up dating car jockeys?”

She flushed. “I’m still dating, uh, Mac Lynn.”

He sighed. “So the answer to my question is ‘no.’ What a waste of a woman with brains.” He stood and leaned against the counter, his expression mock-wistful. “You ought to give some of us bright guys a chance.”

Lianne glared up at him. “I’ve seen those creatures you date. All big bleached hair and legs up to their ears—so don’t you feed me that line about looking for ‘women with brains.’ Now, I want everything you have on child abuse.”

“Change the subject, why don’t you?” Jimmy stroked his goatee and stared off into space. “Well . . . child abuse? Ugh! That’s a nasty subject.” He propped his elbows on the cash wrap. “Not thinking of taking up another new hobby, are you?”

Her glare became truly vicious, and he backed down.

“Just a joke,” he said, and tried a placating waggle of the eyebrows. “Really. I don’t normally make jokes about that subject, but you looked so—ah—threatening.”

“The books.”

“Foot-in-mouth, huh? Sorry. I won’t joke anymore.” He headed back toward the psychology section. “I think we actually might have a few. They’ll either be in Psychology, or True-Crime, or—um, Biography. I just remembered one that’s pretty highly recommended.”

He pulled a thick paperback off a shelf and handed it to Lianne.

“*When Rabbit Howls*,” she read aloud. “By the Troops for Truddi Chase?”

He made a “you’ve got me,” gesture. “Abuse, a woman with multiple personalities—all kinds of stuff. I

haven't read it, but several of my customers have. They told me I ought to, but I wasn't into getting depressed right then. It's apparently all true. And pretty awful."

Lianne nodded. "I'll take it. Anything else?"

He pursed his lips and thought. "We have a couple on adult children of abusive parents, one on alcohol and abuse—and a few novels have started dealing with the subject, even fantasy stuff from Baen." He pulled the books that the store stocked and handed them to her with a sigh. "There isn't a great deal on that subject available yet outside of special order or hardbound." He jammed his hands into his pants pockets and rocked back on his heels. "Why the sudden interest?"

She decided it was better not to let the cat out of the bag yet. Kendrick was a lawyer—and there was such a thing as "defamation of character." "There's a kid in one of my classes—I'm just suspicious, you know?"

He nodded. "I hope you find what you need."

"Thanks." She paid for her small stack of books and got ready to leave.

Books in hand, Lianne felt a sense of relief related to the feeling that she was beginning to accomplish something. She looked at the bookseller with her sense of humor renewed. "By the way, that pinstriped suit makes you look like a gangster," she remarked.

Jimmy grinned and bowed with mock-gallantry. "Wanna see my violin case?"

Lianne returned his grin and headed out the door.

Maclyn found Dierdre just behind the Gate of a Thousand Voices, sitting next to the singing water-flames and staring into their depths.

"How are you, Mother?" he asked, resting a hand on her shoulder.

She kept her eyes turned to the blazes that darted through the fountain in their ever-changing dance. "I'm better than I was, but feeling my age."

"You aren't looking it."

Maclyn was rewarded by the soft half-curve of her smile, seen in profile. "Ask what you're wantin' to ask, laddie, and spare me your silver-tongued flatteries."

He came straight to the point. "How's Felouen?"

Dierdre—he couldn't think of her as D.D., not when she looked like this—sighed. "In pain—more of the spirit than of the body now, I suspect—but pain hurts no less when it stabs the soul."

Maclyn recalled seeing Gwaryon with Felouen a time or two and remembered the infatuated expression the older elf had worn on those occasions. "She and Gwaryon were—?" Maclyn couldn't bring himself to finish the question.

His mother understood him anyway. “No. Gwaryon loved her; she was his friend. But his death hurts her more than her own remaining wounds.”

He rubbed his temple, wondering which would do the most good—leaving her alone, or going to her. “Where could I find her?”

Dierdre nodded to her left. “She was still resting in the Grove when I left.”

Maclyn swung onto Rhellen’s back with a fluid motion. “I’ll find you later, Mother. We need to talk—but I want to see Felouen before then.”

He found her where Dierdre had said she would be. She was alone. She knelt with her forehead pressed against the base of the Grove’s heart-tree, still dressed in the tattered remains of the clothes she’d worn earlier. He saw her shoulders heave and realized she was crying soundlessly. His chest tightened and he felt a lump in his throat. He wanted, at that moment, to put his arms around her and hold her.

The cynical voice at the back of his brain commented that this was most likely because this was the first time in his life that he had seen her looking like anything but the seamless and indomitable warrior-maiden.

He quelled his doubts and knelt beside her. Hesitantly, he rested a hand on the small of her back. Felouen froze. Maclyn had seen the same response in deer caught in Rhellen’s headlights. “It’s only me,” he said.

She looked over at him quickly, not relaxing even slightly, and he saw that her eyes were red and swollen. “I—I—” she started, and her voice faltered. “G-g-gwaryon—” she choked out, and fresh tears streamed down her cheeks.

*Aw, hell,* Maclyn thought, and pulled her against his chest. “I know,” he whispered, holding her and rocking her against him.

She cried against him like that for a long time. When finally the tears were all wrung out of her, she started to talk, still keeping herself pressed firmly against him.

“We felt the summons together,” she said. “He was watching at the Pool with me.” She gave him the details, what she and Gwaryon were talking about, the things Gwaryon had said. Maclyn let her ramble.

“This child called us,” she said, and abruptly he found himself listening with complete interest again. “She looked like a child, but she wasn’t really—she said she was Cethlenn, a witch who had lived back when the elves were still only on the other side of the sea, back when someone named MacLurrie was a leader of the Celts.”

“I don’t know that I’ve heard of him,” Maclyn waffled. History had never been one of his strengths.

A single faint flicker of a smile crossed Felouen’s lips. “Don’t feel too bad. I didn’t remember hearing of him, either. He was, according to Gwaryon, a pompous, overblown human warlord who died long before we were born—in the days when you could call yourself a king if you commanded more than a dozen men.”

“Ah,” Maclyn said. “That explains it.” But her choice of words in describing Amanda puzzled him. “What about the child, though? You said she was . . . a witch?”

Felouen looked just as puzzled and confused. “Her body was a child’s body, that was what was so strange. She was very young, even by human standards. Very thin and frail-looking, with pale hair and brown eyes. But she knew the old magics, and her speech was from the Old Country. She talked about people that Gwaryon recognized. I did not feel that she intended us any harm. Truly.”

If Felouen hadn’t sensed any intended harm, there hadn’t *been* any. “Then what happened?”

“That was the strangest thing of all.” Felouen pulled away and leaned against the heart-tree, gathering strength. “She started to tell us why she had called us—but something stopped her. There were two voices warring in her, and a sort of awful battle that I saw going on in her face. It was frightening. Her face seemed to change as I watched, so that one instant she was one person, the next, someone else entirely. The closest I can describe, is that it was as if we were watching a possession, a war for control between the witch and something else. And in the end, the witch lost the battle. When the child looked at us again, she looked like someone completely different—completely mad—and her eyes had become a green so pale they were almost white. *That* mad creature summoned the golems from a bead she wore around her wrist—from the -Unformed.”

“*That was* Amanda,” Maclyn whispered, his uneasy feeling confirmed.

Felouen turned to stare at him. “You know her—or them?”

Maclyn pulled at a tuft of grass near his knee. “Them . . . yes. *That* explains the day at the racetrack. *That* -explains everything—” He hugged Felouen again, this time in relief. “There really is more than one person in that child’s body. I’ve met several of them, but I don’t know if they’ve met each other.”

Felouen put a hand on his cheek, then hugged him back. “I’m glad you came here,” she whispered.

“I was worried about you,” Maclyn admitted, serious again. “I was afraid you were going to die.”

She shuddered convulsively. “I almost did, Mac. I was standing with the Abyss in front of me, and I started to step onto the glowing bridge—but the singing called me back.” She started crying again. “I wasn’t going to come—but somehow, standing there, I remembered you. I suppose it wasn’t time for me yet.”

Mac found his voice suddenly hoarse. “Don’t leave again. If you face the edge of the Abyss, walk away.” He held her tighter.

She pressed her face into his chest, trembling. “I will, Maclyn. I promise.”

Amanda-Abbey lay on her bed with her eyes closed and talked silently to Cethlenn.: *The other one, the crazy one—is she one of us, really?:*

:*Aye,* came the grim reply.: *She’s real enough.:*

Amanda-Abbey shuddered.: *She’s so—bad.:*

:*She is that, too. But she has been through things you canna’ imagine, child—she has taken all the pain in your life so that you wouldna’ have any. Fear and pain are all she knows, and if she*

*has learned to fight, she's paid, and plenty, for the knowledge.:*

Amanda-Abbey remembered the sick feelings she'd had earlier. *I don't know what you mean,*: she said.

Cethlenn's expression darkened. *There are times when you have bruises—when you hurt and don't know why—when things that you don't understand scare you—*: the witch began slowly.

Amanda knew what the witch meant now. *Like the Father.:*

Cethlenn nodded agreement. *Exactly like the Father. You don't know how you got those bruises, or why you hurt, or why the Father scares you—but she knows. Her name is Anne, and she is very frightened, and very brave. And in her own confused way, she loves you.:*

Amanda-Abbey wrinkled her nose. *I didn't like her. She scares me.:*

*:You ought to be scared. She's very dangerous, and sometimes she doesn't know who is trying to hurt her and who is trying to help her. The only person she trusts is herself, because that is the only person she knows won't hurt her.:* Cethlenn sat closer to Amanda-Abbey and whispered, *:She scares me, too.:*

Amanda-Abbey sighed. That was an uncomfortable revelation. *Is she the only other one?:*

Cethlenn shook her head. *No. There are others.:*

That was even more uncomfortable. *Are they all like her?:*

*:They are as different as you and I,:* Cethlenn assured her.

Amanda-Abbey thought about that for a while. At last she said, *:Are there any I could meet?:*

Cethlenn considered the question. *:Those of you who I know are Anne, Alice, you—and Amanda. There may be others who are hiding. Anne hid from me for a long time, until she realized that she was stronger than I am.:* Cethlenn seemed to think of something, and she frowned abruptly. *:You can't meet Amanda, I'm afraid.:*

There was something ominous in Cethlenn's expression. She was afraid to ask, but she did anyway. *:Why not?:*

Cethlenn answered, after a reluctant pause. *:Amanda stays in a very cold place, and she never moves, and she never speaks—I'm not sure that she's really still alive. She is—or was—very young. Something terrible happened to her when she was three, and that was when she went away, and you and Anne were born.:*

Amanda-Abbey's body tensed. *:What about—um, Alice?:*

Cethlenn seemed relieved that she didn't ask anything else. *:Alice goes to church with Them on Sundays, and keeps your room all cleaned up, and makes sure you don't get your clothes very dirty. There are many things that she, too, has done to protect you. But I don't know that you will like her. Still, I think that you must meet her. If you can work together, I think we can beat Them.:*



A thought niggled at the back of Amanda-Abbey's mind, which grew larger and uglier and began to worry her deeply.: *Cethlenn*,: she whispered, *if they have these things they do to protect me, what do I do for them?:*

Cethlenn smiled sadly.: *You're the one, child, who learns her school lessons, plays with her friends, and makes every-one outside of your family believe everything is all right. Anne decided that you couldna' tell what you didna' know, and protected you, so that you could protect them.:* A tear formed at the corner of the witch's eye, and she wiped it away with a preoccupied swipe.: *Alice protects you by -believing things you might ask questions about, so that you don't get into trouble there—and by keeping your room and your things exactly the way the Step-Mother wants them so that there are fewer reasons to punish you. They have no life except for keeping you from the ugliness and the brutality and the pain that they know. You keep up the disguise tha' keeps them alive. Even so, they want to live.:*

Cethlenn's voice grew hoarse, and her expression grew far away.: *It's the only thing any of us wants, at the end.:*

The red-haired woman who stepped out of the late-model Thunderbird and strode across the gravel to the Bal-A-Shar barn bore little resemblance to the somewhat battered woman who had left a cheap hotel room for the beauty salon only a few hours earlier. "Alessandra Whitchurch-Snowdon, Lady Rivers," complete with expensive-looking business cards, wore her shoulder-length hair in a neat french braid, and affected riding boots, jodhpurs, a lean tweedy jacket with leather patches on the elbows, and a high-necked silk blouse. She carried herself with the effortless confidence that access to unlimited funds and a high social standing seem to confer. She managed to convey, in her cool, clipped accent, wry amusement at American cars which had their steering wheels on the wrong side, American roads which were positively rampant with insane drivers and impossible rules, and American restaurants, which didn't know how the hell to serve tea ("they serve it overice, my dear, and sweet!"), or what went with it ("everythingover here tastes like it's been bathed in sugar"). She saved her compliments for the horses.

Within ten minutes, Meryll and "Alessandra" were on a first nickname basis, ("Dear, I'm only Lady Rivers to the poor—my closest friends call me Bits,") and were comparing points on the three two-year-old fillies Meryll was offering. "Alessandra" narrowed the choices down to two, and then it became a matter of pedigree.

They returned the horses to their stalls, "Alessandra" making sure she watched gait and conformation even as they were led away, and then headed back to the house to flip through the pedigrees that Meryll kept up with on her computer.

After a thorough study of the pedigrees, for both of which the delighted "Lady Rivers" received laser-printed hard copies—"Want to see what both of the girls could offer to my breeding program before I settle on one, don't I?"—Meryll gave her a guided tour of the house.

"Cozier than the ancestral pile back home, don't you know?" the ersatz noblewoman offered about halfway through the tour. "You wouldn't believe the chilling effect suits of armor have on one if one happens to be wandering about the place in the wee hours. But nobody will let me change the bloody decorating scheme. National Trust, don't you know."

Prices for each of the two horses were discussed and agreed upon in between rooms—there was no dickering. This appeared to hearten the seller greatly.

The two women parted with “Bits” promising to make up her mind in the next day or so, and ring back with her decision. Both women were smiling as they went their separate ways.

Lianne skimmed the abuse texts first, and was surprised to find that they were more help than she’d anticipated. They outlined signs and symptoms of abuse that went farther than just noting bruises with regular outlines, or a high incidence of broken bones, E.R. visits, or days absent from school. They also outlined personality traits—from constant timidity, clinging behavior, or a desperate search for anyone’s approval, to erratic school performances.

One book focused almost exclusively on child sexual abuse, and Lianne was surprised to find that sexual abuse of children did not have to include intercourse. Inappropriate touching or kissing, verbal abuse with sexual overtones, and some forms of humiliation were all forms of sexual abuse. She was appalled to find that a shocking number of children were sexually abused—statistics varied slightly, but according to her books, by the time they reached adulthood, roughly one out of every five girls and one out of every nine boys would have encountered sexual abuse. Most sexual abusers were also alcoholics, and almost all of them were men.

Abuse of all kinds ran in families, with a high percentage of abused children growing up to be abusers. It was agreed in all of her sources that the biggest hope for eliminating child abuse of any kind was to treat the children who had been abused, *soon*, so that they in turn would not continue the cycle.

Lianne curled on the couch, lost in the horror of the raw numbers. The odds were that Amanda was being sexually abused—she fit many of the characteristics of abused kids, though not all at the same time. Even worse, the odds were incredibly high that Amanda not only wasn’t the first abused child Lianne had in her class, but that she wasn’t the only abused kid in her class right then.

*I didn’t know*, Lianne thought. She felt sick. *Dammit, I just didn’t know.*

There had to be something she could do. *Maybe I could lobby to have some sort of abuse-detection program added to our curriculum. Let the kids who are being abused know that abuse is not their fault—never their fault—and find some way to tell them that they aren’t alone.* The books had said that children felt—or were told until they believed it—that they had somehow caused the abuse. It also said kids thought such things had never happened to anyone but them. And sometimes—this made her gorge rise—they thought it was normal. That things like this *did* happen to everyone else, and that there would be no reason why anyone would help them. They were often told no one would believe what the children said. Those were apparently the biggest reasons why kids didn’t go to someone for help.

Another was that they were afraid that something bad would happen to their parents. They didn’t realize that the abuse was as bad for their parents as it was for them—that their parents needed help, too.

*They could come to me*, Lianne thought. *And there are always a few teachers in any school that the kids know they can trust. Those are the people they should tell.*

Lianne stretched out on the couch, staring out the glass doors of her apartment at the quad and the faintly greening trees, and the few bits of dull gray sky that showed around the other apartment buildings. *Someone would listen—someone would believe them. And then they would get help.*

She felt emotionally depleted, but she picked up the Truddi Chase biography anyway, and was drawn

into it almost immediately.

When she finally put it down, hours later, it was dark outside, and the wind had picked up again. She shuddered and drew the curtains across the glass doors.

That Truddi Chase had managed to survive her ordeal in any form whatsoever spoke for the strength of the human spirit. That she had gone on to make a life for herself left Lianne feeling very weak and insignificant in comparison. *I feel almost guilty that I had such an easy life.*

Lianne had a bad moment when she realized she could see similarities in things she read about Truddi Chase and things she saw in Amanda. Changes in personality, in abilities, in attitudes toward her and other teachers and the girl's classmates—she'd seen all of them.

Could Amanda be a multiple personality case? It seemed more than a little farfetched. But if she was, what sort of life could have fractured her into those multiples?

The door rang, and Lianne sighed with relief. *He's found something, then. Good.* After reading *When Rabbit Howls*, she wasn't as eager to spend the night by herself as she had been.

She opened the door with a grateful smile on her face.

"Hi!" a masked stranger said, and wedged her riding boot into the door. "I saw your boyfriend wasn't here, so I thought I'd pay you a visit."

She shoved her way inside with her gun aimed at Lianne's midsection the whole time, and closed the door before Lianne had any time to react.

"Just us girls together," the intruder said cheerfully, and pulled back the hammer with an ominous *click*.

## Chapter Eleven

*Feeling guilty is not the best way to start the day,* Mac told himself, driving slowly toward Lianne's. He worried about telling her how out of hand his comforting of Felouen had gotten, then rationalized that hang-ups about mono-gamy were a mostly human obsession. But then he reminded himself that he had known about that human quirk before he started dating a human—

Finally he made up his mind that he would just pretend nothing had happened unless Lianne accidentally found out otherwise.

*Besides,* he told himself in an attempt to soothe his aching conscience, *Felouen really needed me there last night. It made her so happy to see that I'd accepted the Ring's geas. She looked at me the way human women do when I've just won a race. And after Gwaryon's death, she needed comforting.*

*And since when does "comforting" include jumping the bereaved's bones?* his conscience snapped back.

So much for that approach. He dragged his feet as he walked away from Rhellen, heading as slowly as he could up the walk to the apartment. And he knew immediately that there was something very odd.

*She's left the door standing open*, he thought when he stepped into the apartment entryway. The heavy gray door stood about an inch ajar. He could see that the chain lock wasn't on, either. *Considering the day she had yesterday, I'm surprised she doesn't have the whole apartment locked and barred. What did she do, just go collapse on the couch? Or maybe—maybe she left it open for me this morning. So I'd just come straight in.* He shook his head, puzzled, and knocked.

“Hey, Lianne!” There was no answer. He pushed the door all the way open, and looked inside.

Fear overwhelmed puzzlement.

He stared at the living room. It had been thoroughly and expertly trashed.

*Oh, gods*, he thought, *oh, shit!* With inhuman strength, he clamped down hard on the doorknob; it broke off in his hand. Before him, two living-room chairs lay on their sides with books scattered across them. The shattered television lay on the floor, one of the shoes he had last seen Lianne wearing resting in the debris. In the connecting kitchen, shards from broken glasses and dishes sparkled in the light of one errant sunbeam. A Rorschach blot of blood traced obscene patterns down one wall.

“Lianne! Lianne! Where are you?” he shouted. He ran from room to room. Beyond the living room and the kitchen, nothing had been disturbed. Lianne's jewelry was intact, her stereo and her computer were where they belonged, her clothes still hung neatly in the closet.

Only Lianne was gone.

In the sinister hush of the empty apartment, his sharp, irregular breaths and the tick of the kitchen clock were the only sounds. He stretched his psychic feelers—and came up empty. No magic had touched this room except his own. No demon creatures from the Unformed Plane had stolen Lianne away.

Scenes from a hundred TV cop shows played in his memory. Robbery wasn't the motive—and it wasn't magic, either Unseleighe or human. Rape? Kidnapping? Worse? Mac started looking for a message, a note, anything—going room to room and searching inch by inch.

When the phone rang right next to his ear, Mac jumped. “Gods, let it be her,” he whispered. “Let this be some -stupid mistake.”

He picked up the handset and held it to his ear. “Lianne?” he asked.

“Not a chance, babe. It's Jewelene. I've got her.” The voice on the other end of the line was muffled, the laughter in his ear was coarse and vicious. “You owe me. You owe me big time, baby—and you're going to pay. You know what?”

A dull ache gripped Mac's chest. “What?”

“You stole my car and slashed the tires. So I stole your girl. You don't want to know what I've slashed.” The voice was laughing again.

*Belinda Ciucci.*

“What do you want?” Mac whispered.

The voice was full of obscene gloating. “I’m going to kill her. And I’m going to enjoy every long second of it.”

*Think, fool! What can you bargain for her?* “You don’t want her.”

Belinda made *atsk* ing sound. “Sure I do, babe. You know what they say about a bird in the hand and all that.”

*Convince her. Somehow convince her.* “You want me. Not her.”

Deep breathing for a moment, as his heart raced and fear clogged his throat. “Yeah, but I’ve got her. Right now, pal, I just want to hurt somebody. She put up a fight—I’ve already hurt her a little. She’s not as pretty as she used to be.”

*Gods, Lianne. What in hell have I done to you?* Mac thought. *What did I get you into? How can I get you out again?* “You tell me what you want me to do, and I’ll do it. Just let her go. Don’t hurt her anymore.”

“Damn shame you didn’t have that attitude a day or two ago. Everybody would have been a lot happier.” Maclyn twisted a butter knife lying on the counter into a knot. *Damn Belinda Ciucci.*, he thought. *I should have wiped her memories instead of playing games with her.*

The woman cleared her throat. “First, don’t call the police. I’ll kill her at the first sign that you’ve involved them. For now, you get to wait. You’re going to meet me somewhere, but I haven’t decided where yet. Stay by the phone. I’ll call you back when I make up my mind.”

Mac clenched his hand on the handset. This woman was not sane. “When?”

Belinda laughed, and the note in her voice confirmed that she was not sane. “Who knows?”

“Let me talk to her,” he pleaded.

“Nope.” There was a click. The woman had hung up.

Mac refrained from smashing the handset to shreds. Instead, he set it gently back in the receiver. Then he put his fist through the wall. “Dammit! Dammit, I should have *been* here, dammit! I should have been *here*. Not with Felouen. Here. If I’d been here, none of this would have happened.”

He stared at the phone, his only link with Lianne. He hadn’t thought through the possible consequences of -anger-ing Belinda, then leaving her to her own devices. He could have taken care of her by himself earlier—that would have been the end of it. No one would have suffered. Now he needed help, and needed it badly.

And Dierdre and Felouen and all of his other potential sources of help were currently Underhill gearing up to wipe out golems. In fact, he should have been going straight from Lianne’s place back to Elfhame Outremer. Instead, he was locked in place in the apartment.

He would have to construct a Gate in the apartment, he decided—one that he could leave up and use to shuttle back and forth between Underhill and Lianne’s telephone. The energy drain would be bad, worse since his resources were already low. He was tired, he was needed by both his own people and a seriously disturbed child, he’d just lost a friend and had another seriously hurt—and now Lianne was a

hostage somewhere. He was pulled in too many directions.

*Which is exactly when people get careless and get themselves killed,* he told himself. *Not that my state of readiness matters. There's no looking back.* He started pulling in the energy that would form the Gate.

Amanda-Anne sat like a spider in her web, centered in the Unformed Plane, singing loudly and off-key, making monsters.

She had started to vary them—somewhere along the line, she had gotten tired of the stick-men. She made a few two-headed stick-men, but even that was too boring. She made some things with four legs and long, spiky tails and huge teeth, and she rather liked those. She made a few more, similar but with wings. When the first of her winged monsters flew through the air, she laughed and clapped her hands—and began adding wings to everything she made from then on. Her monsters started getting bigger. One had dozens of legs and three heads on long, snake-like necks; it flew with less grace than a winged tank might have, but it did fly.

No one bothered her in the Unformed's nothingness. The Father couldn't find her. The nasty things that lived there were more afraid of her than she was of them. Nothing could touch her, nothing could hurt her. She had never had so much fun in her life. She had never had so many friends, either.

She rubbed the green bead strung on her wrist. "My m-m-magic door," she whispered. "J-j-j-just like the g-g-genie's lamp." She crowed with delight. To have been so weak, to be so strong—it was wonderful.

And the best thing was that her magic door could take her back into the elf's world. She thought about this as she worked on her current creation, an eight-legged nightmare with hundreds of eyes and a fanged mouth that ran the length of its belly. If it weren't for the goody-two-shoes elves, that place would have been perfect. The Father and the Step-Mother couldn't get there. In among all those trees, with all that magic, she would be safe. She could hide there forever—if it weren't for the stupid elves, who would make her go home.

She thought yearningly of how nice this place would be without bossy elves, about how much she would like to hide here forever.

She sang to herself and made another monster.

Lianne woke to a blaze of pain, with the tang of blood and a filthy rag in her mouth, bathed in the stench of car exhaust and gasoline. She felt as if she was lying on a bed of nails, with another one slowly descending on her. Her head throbbed, her eyes would not open, her face burned horribly and screamed with pain. Her ribs crunched ominously against hard cold metal and stinking carpet when she rolled off to the left. She felt the bones of her face shift relative to each other when she moved, and white-hot searing agony shot through her skull. She sobbed, and the movement of her rib cage stabbed fire along her nerves.

*What have I done?* she wondered. *Where am I?*

She fought to retrieve foggy memory.

She remembered elves fighting the monsters—or was that a true memory? She remembered magic, too—and Maclyn doing magic. And that was crazy. Absolutely crazy. Impossible. Everyone knew that magic couldn't exist.

*Mac Lynn. Not Maclyn. He's a racecar driver. Not an elf. Something has happened to my mind—amnesia or something—to make me think of magic. However I got hurt like this—it's confused me.*

But that wasn't so, was it? Maclyn, not Mac Lynn, wasn't human. She'd figured that out all by herself, using logic, using reason—and she'd caught him out. So the elves were real. That meant the monsters were real, too. The elves had won their fight with the monsters. Because of her. *I'm a hero—whoopee. Look where it got me.*

*What happened next?*

She remembered books. Child abuse books—she'd been reading, and she'd just figured out something about Amanda. Yes. It was coming back. She remembered the knock at her door, but it wasn't Mac waiting on the other side.

It had been a strange woman with a gun.

The woman had barged in—but Lianne hadn't reacted the way she'd expected. Lianne had grabbed a heavy ashtray and bashed the intruder in the face—*God knows where the courage for that trick came from, or how I managed it*—and blood had spurted down the inside of the pantyhose mask the bitch wore. A second bash, this time to the gun-hand, and the gun had flown across the room.

*I got first licks in—but she had obviously had training. Lots of it.*

Lianne was starting to remember the other things, as well. Very unpleasant things. The woman was good at hand-to-hand combat—she'd probably used it on other people, given the way she acted. When she dove at Lianne, she took her down and flipped her on her stomach, slapped handcuffs on her—*what the hell was she doing with handcuffs?*—and then started kicking.

Lianne knew she had broken ribs. She remembered hearing them crack when the woman's riding boots struck, and she could feel them now, hurting more than she'd ever thought she could hurt, screaming with pain with every breath. Her nose was broken, too, and probably her jaw and her left cheekbone—those injuries had occurred -after the woman retrieved her gun, when she started beating Lianne in the face with it.

Her eyes wouldn't open because they were swollen so badly. *I could go blind from this*, she realized with horror, then wondered if she was going to live through this to be blind. She couldn't move her arms—the handcuffs were still on. Her ankles were tied together.

The rag in her mouth tasted of blood, old and new.

*Why I'm here doesn't matter. What matters is—how do I get out?*

From her almost-fetal position—which she could not change without bumping solid obstacles or causing even more pain than she already endured—from the smells, and from faintly heard road noises, she

figured she was in the trunk of a car. She did not remember how she got there. *She must have knocked me out, dragged me to the car—she was a hell of a lot stronger than I would have guessed.*

The car door slammed so hard right then that the shock wave jarred her head and rattled through her teeth. The driver's weight as she (or was it a he now?) bounced the vehicle around, confirming the fact that her cage was, -indeed, the trunk of her captor's car. The engine started up, and Lianne was thrown from one side to the other as the driver accelerated and turned corners at high speed. The teacher debated making some noise to let the driver know she was awake—then decided against it. There was nothing in the woman's attitude last night that made Lianne think she would let her get a drink of water, or go to the bathroom—if the same woman was still the one who had her. Lianne figured if she made any noise, she was more likely to be beaten with a pistol again. A drink of water wasn't worth the pain.

*Mac will know I'm gone today. No one else will miss me until tomorrow, but Mac will know. I hope he finds me soon—I think she's going to kill me if he doesn't.*

Elves with mage-blades and gleaming gold armor sat on the grass next to elves in Kevlar who carried Steyr AUGs, shotguns, or high-tech graphite compound bows—and these sat next to elves whose only weapons were their expressions of scorn or amused disbelief. Felouen tried to contain her dismay at the meager attendance. Less than half of Elfhame Outremer's fighting force had seen fit to show up for her briefing. The few warriors present had listened in polite silence while Felouen described her ordeal. She began with the spell that had drawn her and Gwaryon in and ended with Dierdre's entrance. Dierdre took up the tale then, describing what they found, Gwaryon's death and the rescue by the human woman.

Felouen thought that she had done well—and Dierdre certainly sounded convincing enough—but it was obvious that the warriors were unimpressed.

One of the younger elves, who wore no weapons, sprawled in the grass, nonchalant. He'd listened with a bored expression on his face. When she finished speaking, he indicated that he had a question with an indolently raised finger.

“Yes?” Felouen asked him.

“I felt the spell you're talking about yesterday. I warded against it as soon as I noticed it, and it didn't bother me. If you hadn't been hanging around old weird Gwaryon, you would have done the same thing, and then we wouldn't have been out here earlier using a lot of valuable energy saving your life.” He shrugged and turned his palms up. “Not that I resent helping you out—but if you had taken a few reasonable precautions, it wouldn't have been necessary.”

One of the older elves nodded. “You should never have answered a summons unarmed.”

“How in all the hells would I know that?” Felouen snapped. “Humans stopped summoning elves long before I was born. And Gwaryon didn't mention it.”

One of the others grunted. “He should have.”

“Granted,” Felouen snarled. “However, you are all missing the point. The witch-child who summoned us wasn't the threat. The other child and the Unseleighe things *she* called were the threat.”

A mail-clad woman who sat near the front sighed. “I find it hard to believe that they are even a fraction



of the threat you make them out to be, Felouen. The sort of weirdlings a child is strong enough to conjure would have to be pretty feeble. I know they killed Gwaryon, and I'm not discounting the injuries they did you—but neither of you were *armed*. Neither Dierdre nor Maclyn were harmed.”

Felouen felt her frustration building. She hit her fists together, wishing each of them held one slow-brained elvish skull in it. “The only reason they were unhurt is that the human woman broke the containment spell and sent them back wherever they came from.”

A shrug of indifference. “Yes. Precisely. We’re talking about monsters that one *human* can banish.”

“We’re talkin’ about five beasties that four elves couldna’ kill—couldna’ even scratch, Ymelthre.” Dierdre, cross-legged to one side of the standing Felouen, leaned forward, her eyes glowing with contained rage. “With our enchanted blades, we couldna’ even make them cry out. *And neither Gwaryon nor Felouen could break the binding spell that held them helpless.* A spell a ‘mere human child’ set. Felouen has seen these things in the Oracular Pool, and she says they are a threat to us. And I’ve fought them, and I say they are a threat to us. We need to stand a watch. We need to be ready.”

Felouen watched them as the group broke into a -debate over standing watch versus not standing watch. *I know what the problem is. Nothing really scares them anymore*, she thought. *They have been the fastest and the strongest and the best for so long, they believe they can’t be hurt. -Except by our Unseleighe kin, and this time they aren’t -involved.*

When the group announced its decision to post a bare-bones watch so thin that she knew it was merely a token thrown in her direction because she was the warriors’ chieftain, she smiled bitterly. *Well, I hope they’re right.*

After the main group had drifted off, several of the Ring-sworn, who had waited in silence, came up to stand in front of her. She recognized all of them from long-ago campaigns together, or from more recent social meetings. Of the group, considered by most of the elvenkind in Elfhome Outremer to be dreadfully conservative, Amallen was nominal leader. Amallen bent one knee slightly—Old World manners—and briefly bowed his head.

“Lady,” he said in grave tones, “do not think too badly of them. They have not fought beside you—and they cannot imagine a human child who could bring forth anything that could endanger them. We,” and with a nod of his head he indicated his companions, “have decided among ourselves to stand a separate watch. We will begin at once; we have already set our shifts. The others will realize that they were wrong later—and some may die learning their folly. We don’t need to see the monsters to smell their taint. There is something sorely wrong here—and though we cannot fathom it, we cannot doubt it.”

Felouen smiled gratefully, as relief so profound it made her knees weak washed over her. “Those who will later owe you their lives will thank you. I know that thanks is due now.” She hugged each of the nine who had supported her for so long. “I wish this were idle worrying. As it is, I know you won’t be standing your watches alone for long.”

Belinda grinned at herself in the rearview mirror. *The worm turns—that’s the phrase, I think. The worm turns.* She readjusted the mirror and stretched the stiff muscles in her shoulders.

*The worm has certainly turned in my favor now.* The light changed from red to green, and Belinda headed through the intersection and pointed the car out of town. She’d spent the night in the

Thunderbird, unwilling to move her captive out of the security of the trunk, and equally unwilling to leave her in the trunk while she slept inside her motel room. No sense taking a chance on the teacher waking up and making enough noise to get herself rescued. And she couldn't think of anyplace to keep the woman—until she remembered the abandoned building out in the middle of nowhere that she'd hiked past the night Mac Lynn stole her car.

It would work well enough, Belinda thought. Tie the teacher up, steal her clothes so that she didn't get the urge to do any wandering even if she got loose, and leave her.

Of course, killing her immediately would be a lot less complicated. There was nothing to connect her with the woman; nothing left behind to incriminate Belinda. It would be just one more senseless abduction-murder—probably wind up on “Unsolved Mysteries.” If she killed the teacher, there wouldn't be any witnesses who might cause trouble later, and Mac Lynn didn't need to know his little slut was dead—hell, the whole purpose of this business had been to get him by the balls. Belinda smiled. The tone of his voice over the phone told him she'd accomplished that. So Miss Teacher had served her purpose. He'd go where Belinda told him to go, hoping that his girlfriend would still be alive.

The abandoned house would *still* make a good destination. It could be weeks or even months before someone found the body—Belinda and the child and Mel Tanbridge would be well away from North Carolina by then.

She retraced her trip from that night carefully, stopping and backtracking on a couple of occasions as she missed a turn. It was a long drive, made longer by the fact that she felt obligated to drive the speed limit right then. It would be a stone bitch to get pulled with a well-beaten kidnap victim in her possession.

The sun rode higher and the day started getting hot—a nice enough change, Belinda thought, after the cold, wet crap of the day before. She drove past hundreds of little rural houses, all of them ordinary, all of them quiet—which suited her just fine. But none of them was the one she wanted.

Finally she spotted the place. Weeds had overgrown the drive, and kudzu, greening as the weather warmed, covered everything else. In another month, the house would be completely invisible under its kudzu blanket.

*Perfect. I'll have to thank Mac Lynn for helping me find this dump.*

*Now, what to do with little miss schoolmarm?*

Belinda considered only an instant, then decided. Hostages were risky, and too much trouble to take care of. Dead bodies, on the other hand, were very little trouble at all. She'd rather deal with corpses than captives any day.

So, she'd get the woman out of the trunk, march her into the place. Shoot her in the head, shove the body through some loose floorboards—there were bound to be some loose floorboards in there somewhere. Then she'd find a phone, call Mac Lynn, have him meet her—where?

*Why not out here? Torture the bastard, dump him next to his girlfriend while he's still alive and can appreciate it—then kill him. That would be fair after what he's done to me.*

First the girlfriend.

She pulled into the weed-choked drive, and the Thunder-bird bumped along, weeds and sticks hissing

and thumping against the glossy brown finish. She stopped the car when she was right behind the house. It was going to be hell to get back out again, she thought with displeasure.

The place was dilapidated, the wrap-around porch sagged to the ground in several places, and the only part of the structure that looked slightly solid were the boards nailed over the windows. There had been something nailed over the door, too, but that had been ripped away. The actual door hung on one rusted hinge, partway open. The place was a perfect haven for snakes and rats and God only knew what else. *At least that probably keeps the riff-raff out*, she mused. *More than that ludicrous little sign, anyway.*

The building was posted, “no trespass—g by order of t—.” Rain and sun and wind had bleached the yellow sign to bone white on one side and obliterated much of its message. *Dump looks like the place where the universe goes to die.* It gave her the creeps worse in the daylight than it had at night. She realized that was because she could see it better in daylight.

Belinda pulled out her gun. It was a good, reliable weapon. She didn’t use it often—guns weren’t subtle enough for her taste most of the time—but it had never let her down.

Still, she didn’t much like the idea of killing the teacher—it would hurt the bastard race driver, but it was extra. She wasn’t getting paid for it—and that made it dirtier, somehow, than killing for pay. Or for revenge.

Belinda looked out at the bleak ruin. *I’ll be doing her a favor*, she decided. *It would be worse for her if I left her here alive.*

She slipped the gun into its holster and pulled the keys out of the ignition. It would be a long time before she made the mistake of leaving them in it again—no matter how little time she intended to be gone. She popped the latch on the trunk, got out, and walked around to the back, fighting her way through burrs and thorns and tenacious stickers.

She pulled her shoulders back and took a deep breath. The gap between the trunk and the hood looked odd for a moment. Peculiar. It gave her the shivers for just a moment, like someone had stepped on her grave.

She shook off the feeling.

*Ah, well. Showtime*, she thought.

She reached down to release the latch.

Cethlenn flew Abbey across the slick ice-barrier that Alice had created to protect her domain, then floated both of them down to stand in the long, white-on-white -corridor.

Amanda-Abbey studied the high-arched ceiling and the unadorned walls that ran, unbroken, to the vanishing point. “She’s in there?” she asked.

“Somewhere,” Cethlenn agreed.

Abbey stared at the nothingness, puzzled. “How will we find her?”

Cethlenn didn't seem concerned. "We won't. She'll find us."

"We're just going to wait here?" Abbey asked, hoping that Cethlenn had some plan.

Cethlenn gave the girl a weary smile. "I wish it were so easy. No—we'll walk. Make lots of noise."

That made no sense at all. "Why?"

"You'll see," Cethlenn promised.

The two of them started down the corridor, stomping on the floor as hard as they could, sending the clamor of their footsteps ringing on ahead of them. Amanda-Abbey started hopping, and her heavy thumps increased the racket—until she noticed the noise becoming muffled, and the floor on which she jumped becoming springier.

She looked down at her feet. "Cethlenn," she whispered, "look! The floor is growing carpet!"

"Aye." Cethlenn did not seem surprised. "She always does that after a bit. Now we must sing. Know you a bothersome song that we can sing together?"

"'One Hundred Bottles of Beer on the Wall,' " Abbey offered after a moment's thought.

Cethlenn shook her head. "Sing a bit of it for me."

Amanda-Abbey did, while the witch listened.

"Oh, for sure—" Cethlenn laughed. "That will drive her to distraction."

They resumed marching while they bellowed through nearly forty verses of the song. Again, Abbey noticed a change, as their singing echoed less and less, and seemed closer and smaller—though she knew she was making just as much noise as she had at the first.

Cethlenn looked up and pointed at the ceiling.

Amanda-Abbey's gaze followed the gesture. "She's lowered it."

"Now we bring her to us," Cethlenn whispered. "Here. Take this." The witch made a gesture, and a pail of bright yellow paint appeared in her hand. She offered it to -Abbey, who took it and stared at it in confusion.

Cethlenn created blue and pink paints for herself, in the brightest tints imaginable. She took the pink pail, and slung it against one wall. Fluorescent streaks spread in gaudy profusion, and dripped messily down the surface of the corridor. The witch followed the same procedure with the blue.

Amanda-Abbey watched, appalled. "That's not very nice, Cethlenn," she said.

"It had to be done." The witch shrugged. "Now you do yours."

Abbey bit her lip, then tipped her can and dribbled just a bit of the yellow onto the floor.

“*Not on the carpet!*” a shrill soprano voice screeched, and a child raced out of hiding and yanked the can away from Abbey.

Abbey and Alice stared at each other. Abbey thought that the girl appeared to be about her own age—but that similarity was the only one Abbey could find. The other girl was as white as the walls around her—white hair, white face, white lips, white clothes—no hint of color touched any part of her except for her eyes. The girl’s eyes were gray, but they were neither the bright and lively gray of kittens nor the safe gray of the bark of old maple trees, nor the firm and dependable gray of the stones in good fireplaces. They were the dismal gray of drizzly late afternoons when the sun hadn’t been out all day. They were the flat gray of institutional paint, the kind Abbey saw used on garage floors and storage rooms, and the kind she suspected prisons would be painted in.

“I’m Abbey,” she said, lost in the hopelessness of those gray, gray eyes. “I’m—I’m your sister.”

The gray eyes narrowed. “*You made a mess!*” Alice fumed. “You tracked on my carpet, you were noisy, you were *singing* in my hall!” She glared at the two of them, then pointed her finger at Cethlenn. “*You have come here before. I don’t want you here.*”

“*Alice!*” Cethlenn took the authoritarian posture and voice of a demanding adult. “You are being rude to your guest. You have not properly introduced yourself to your sister.”

Alice wasn’t fooled for a second. “I’m not the one who went into peoples’ houses and stomped and screamed and sang wicked songs and threw paint on the walls and tracked it into the carpet. That’s evil. Evil! I don’t have to be polite to evil people—the Bible says not to countenance -wickedness.”

Abbey raised an eyebrow and looked at the witch.: *This is my sister? She’s awful. Why would anyone ever let her come out?:*

:*She’s very good at cleaning up messes. That’s something neither you nor Anne have managed yet. Adults think she is a very good child, she knows manners—and she is very organized and very patient. And she doesn’t mind being alone.*: Cethlenn rested a hand on Abbey’s shoulder.: *She also knows things you don’t know. You need her.:*

:*Then we shouldn’t have dumped paint on her carpet.:*

Cethlenn waved her hand at the paint that still marked walls and floor. It vanished, along with the paint cans that had contained it.: *Now she doesn’t have as much to be upset about.:*

Cethlenn jammed her thumbs into the braided belt that wrapped around her narrow waist and leaned down -until her eyes were on a level with Amanda-Alice’s. “If you want to stop real wickedness, come with us,” she told the pale girl. “You have yet another sister, who protects both of you. She thinks the way to protect you is by making monsters—and that is what she is doing now. She has to be stopped.”

“Making—monsters?” Alice looked at Abbey. “You are going to stop her?”

Abbey shrugged helplessly. “Cethlenn says the two of us can’t. We need more help.”

Alice’s eyes lit with a zealot’s glee. “I’ll help. When we’ve stopped her, I’ll tell her about the Bible.”

Amanda-Abbey, who had met Anne once before, had doubts about the wisdom of that, but she kept them to herself. She figured Alice would reconsider, too, once she’d met the other “sister.” So she said

nothing, just nodded.

Cethlenn said, “Excellent. I’m glad you’re joining us, Alice. We can put your talents to good use.”

Abbey tried not to be bothered by the fact that, where she had only had herself and the faceless voice of “Stranger” to rely on a few days ago, now she had the bossy presence of Cethlenn and the bizarre Alice. And Anne, who scared her badly, and whom she did not like at all, was yet to come.

Maclyn finished the Gate and sagged against the living-room wall, gray with exhaustion. *Rhellen—stay put, and if the phone rings, come through and get me.*: he Mindspoke to his elvensteed—hoofprints in the living room were the least of the damage that had been done here. *The Gate is in the kitchen—get me as fast as you can, and get me back here before it stops. I’ll leave the side door open.*:

The elvensteed sent back affirmation, and Maclyn stepped toward the kitchen and through the Gate.

He stepped out at the periphery of the Grove and immediately looked toward its center. He had expected to see the fighting forces of Elfhame Outremer assembled, or at least to have been met by armed guards.

But there was no one. The Grove was devoid of warriors, devoid of elves of any walk of life. He listened and heard the gentle laughter and the music of normal days coming from Elfhame Outremer itself, and he frowned. Surely Felouen and Dierdre had brought their message to the city. Yet the sounds he heard were not the sounds of a people preparing for war.

“Ha, Thaerry, you almost had me,” a light female voice called from the other side of the Grove.

Maclyn saw a red-clad beauty dart out from under the sheltering boughs of the trees, followed closely by her lean swain, elegantly robed in gold-shot blue.

“Droewyn, you minx—I’ll have you yet,” the would-be lover answered. He caught the girl and tripped her into the grass, and the two of them rolled together, laughing and fondling each other, oblivious to Maclyn’s presence.

“Pardon,” Mac said, stepping into the open arena of the Grove with them, “but have Felouen and Dierdre not been here?”

Droewyn straightened her bodice with some annoyance, and said, “Aye, they’ve been, Maclyn—gone, too, I hope. Old buzzards, prophesying their dismal tales of doom.”

Thaerronal chuckled and nibbled on his companion’s neck. He gave Maclyn a pointed stare and said, dryly, “They headed back toward the Oracular Pool, no doubt to bathe themselves in more of their gloomy worries. Why don’t you follow them?”

Maclyn bit his lip and withheld the criticism he wanted so badly to give. Thaerry was about his own age—and one of the few Elves of the High Court even less inclined to involvement in Court affairs than he had been. Droewyn was Low Court, tied to the Grove—Maclyn wouldn’t have expected any better of her.

So he nodded stiffly and ran in the direction they'd indicated.

The rich woodland scents, the soft whisper of his boots on the forest loam, the warm, moist breeze that brushed his skin, the twilight gleam of the eyes of the beasts that watched his progress along the path—all those things said “home” to him, reassured him—

*:Halt, Maclyn, Ring-sworn Friend of the High Court of Elfhome Outremer.:The crisp Mindspoken command cut through the exhausted reverie into which he'd drifted. Maclyn skidded to a stop and watched the forest around him.*

From behind a massive tree, an armed and armored elf stepped into view. The Uzi hung casually at her side; the Kevlar body armor fit her like a seamed skin. Her soft gold hair streamed like a river from the silver coronet that held it out of her eyes. She grinned at him.*:Nice to see you've finally joined us.:*

Maclyn smiled with relief.*:Hallara. Good to see someone standing watch.:*

The woman, one of his mother's contemporaries, laughed.*:Some of us know Felouen—and Dierdre. They have better things to do than chase imaginary bogans; if they say the Unseleighe—or anything else—are about to bite us, we won't wait until we feel the teeth. So. There are enough of us to cover the permanent Gates, with a few left over to raise the alarm throughout Elfhome Outremer. We may be caught short, but we won't be caught sleeping.:*

He nodded.*:Mother around?:*

*:Checking the Oracle, I think. The omens were very bad, last time I got any news. Crisis impending, any second—of course, that's the Oracle. Damned imprecise. Makes you wish something would happen, just so you could get past the waiting.:*

Maclyn's laugh was bitter.*:Don't you believe it. The waiting is a hell of a lot better. Things have broken loose on my side—someone kidnapped my girlfriend.:*

*:The human? Is it related to all of this?:*

*:I don't think so. This crazy woman has been following me for about a week. I don't know what she wants, but she's not Unseleighe, just mad, and evil. A bad combination, but there's none of the feel of magic to her.:*

Hallara nodded, then whistled—a low run of rapid notes with a liquid trill at the end. The whistle was answered and repeated.

*I really ought to keep up on the codes,* Maclyn thought as he listened to the brief message making its way through Elfhome Outremer.*It would save a hell of a lot of footwork.*

In almost no time, Dierdre, astride her elvensteed, galloped into view.

“That red-headed bitch kidnapped Lianne,” Maclyn told her without preamble. “I need help finding her—and some backup for her rescue.”

“The timing on this couldn't have been worse. The Oracle is showing imminent disaster, Mac. None of us dare leave—it appears that an attack is going to be launched against us through one of the Gates within mere minutes. I'm afraid I'm going to have to leave you on your own where Lianne is concerned.”

This was not only unexpected, it was disastrous. “Dammit!”

Dierdre shook her head, implacable. “I’m sorry. We’re thin here as it is.”

“I know—” he pleaded, “but I’m afraid for Lianne’s life.”

“And I’m afraid for all of ours.” Never had he seen his mother look so drawn, so torn by conflicting duties. “I’m sorry, Maclyn. Go back, do what you can—I’ll come and help you search if I survive this.”

Mac stared at his feet, then looked into his mother’s eyes, anguished. Conflicting loyalties and loves tore at him as well. “She’s in trouble because of me. I can’t stay and help you fight. I can’t abandon her, Mother.”

She nodded slowly. “Go. I understand. A single fighter more or less isn’t going to make a difference. An army, now—but an army isn’t going to have time to come to us. We’ve called on Fairgrove, but they’re depleted and down after their last to-do. Nobody else is near enough.”

Maclyn’s shoulders sagged, and he turned and began the walk back toward his own Gate.

Amanda-Anne shivered. The cold mists of the Unformed Plane seeped through to her very bones, and the things she had made had grown restive. They looked at her with edgy calculation in their glowing eyes—circled around her along an ever-shrinking perimeter, snapped their toothy jaws and hissed at each other, slashed and growled. But always, they watched her.

And the closer they moved, the more she ached for a safe haven, and the more she yearned for safety, the more restless and dangerous her monsters became. Suddenly, making them didn’t seem like such a good idea after all.

They grinned at her, the awful things, and they suddenly looked hungry. She didn’t know what to feed them, but she suspected they would be only too happy to eat little girls. And now Amanda-Anne felt very much like a frightened little girl again. The Unformed Plane wasn’t fun anymore. Making monsters wasn’t fun. She wanted to be warm, she wanted to be protected, she wanted to be—

—in a safe place. Where the elves lived!

She “stretched”—reached out to take control of the body she shared with the others. It wasn’t occupied—all the others were elsewhere, and the body itself was in Amanda’s bedroom, curled on the bed. Amanda-Anne took control, opened her eyes, wrapped stubby fingers around Mommy’s green bead. The first of the monsters appeared in her bedroom, following her.

Amanda-Anne shrieked and carved a road that drove straight into the heart of the elves’ stronghold, and safety.

## Chapter Twelve



The trunk was so hot that riverlets of sweat ran down Lianne's face, back, and chest, stinging in her cuts. The metal handcuffs around her wrists slid up and down her forearms, and every time they did, it felt as if they added another set of bruises. Everything hurt. And what didn't hurt, she greatly feared might not be working anymore.

She squirmed a little, trying to find a more comfortable position. If only her hands were in front of her—wait a moment. Maybe this bitch wasn't used to kidnapping people Lianne's size. *Well, she thought, there are a few advantages to being both skinny and flexible.*

This might be something the bitch that caught her hadn't reckoned on.

She ignored the pain that movement caused her, and scooted her hands down over her hips, curling her back as she did. That hurt so bad she almost quit—but the promise of not being thrown forward on her face every time the car jolted was more than she could resist. She waited for the worst of the wave of agony to pass, then pulled her knees up to her chest and tucked her feet through the handcuffs as if she were jumping a very short rope.

*A very short rope. The cuffs caught on her instep. Better, Lianne thought. I always figured my twenty minutes of yoga at bedtime would come in useful for something. But I never thought it would be for dealing with a kidnapper.*

The pressure of her feet on the links of the handcuffs had pressed them halfway down Lianne's sweat-soaked hands. They hurt, but when Lianne experimentally shoved her thumb joint hard into the palm of her left hand, the cuff slipped down further.

The possibility that she might actually get the things off hadn't occurred to her until that moment. *I'll be damned! I think I can get out of these things!*

She pressed the bones of her left hand together as tightly as she could and pushed with all of her strength. The combination of her sweat, the looseness of the cuff, and her flexible joints worked a minor miracle. The cuff slipped off, scraping skin as it went.

She pulled the foul-tasting rag out of her mouth and reached down to fumble with the knots that tied her ankles. When they came loose, she got to work on the other side of the handcuffs. The right one proved to be more intractable than the left—her captor had shoved it tighter when she put it on.

*It doesn't matter, the teacher thought. I can move now. I'll bet that will surprise the hell out of her.*

*In fact, Lianne realized, it might surprise her enough to save me. That is, if I can get the rest of me to function. . . .* She tried to open her eyes again. Although they were badly puffed and swollen, she felt the lids of the left one move apart.

There was nothing but blackness.

*Oh, God—I'm blind!*

For a moment she felt panic clawing at her.

Then, hard on its heels, dry humor. *No, idiot. You're in the trunk of a car.*

Lianne considered her situation. She probably wasn't blind. She was within the confines of the trunk, but

completely free. She hadn't made any noise that would carry over the road and engine sounds, so the driver wouldn't know this—wouldn't even know whether she was awake or not. She had a length of rope, the handcuffs, one of which was still attached—was there anything else in here she could use as a weapon? She felt around in the trunk and stopped when her fingers wrapped around the smooth metal length of a tire iron. In the darkness, Lianne grinned. Hot damn.

Those were her advantages.

She enumerated her disadvantages. She wasn't likely to have very long to make use of her element of surprise. Her captor, if she ever decided to open the trunk, could do so at any time. The only warning Lianne was likely to get was the click of the key in the lock. Also, she was hurt—the broken ribs were going to be the worst of it. She wouldn't be able to run away. Wouldn't be able to put up much of a fight—though, she thought with wry amusement, the tire iron had the potential to be a great equalizer. And finally, she didn't know where she would end up, while her captor would be on her own chosen ground—possibly with allies.

*I've got a damned good chance of getting myself killed if I put up a fight.* Lianne considered playing dead, or going along with whatever the woman wanted her to do, and hoping for a chance of escape later on, when she was alone. But her dad had spent a very short time as a P.O.W. in 'Nam—before he'd escaped. He had, in the course of years of later conversations, mentioned a fact about the art of escaping from a P.O.W. camp that Lianne considered -applicable now.

“Baby,” he'd said, with the air of one imparting the wisdom of the sages, “the sooner you attempt to escape after they've captured you, the less they'll be expecting it, and the better chance you'll have to succeed. When you're first caught, you're usually hurt, and damned confused—and you keep thinking someone is going to come from outside to rescue you. It isn't until later that you realize no one is coming, and you'll have to get out by yourself. So you take care of it while they're thinking you're still too messed up to take off.” Then he'd winked at her and grinned his broad, easy grin. “Works in most any situation. You remember that, okay, baby?”

A kid in on her daddy's joke, she'd grinned back and had said, “Sure, Daddy. I'll remember.”

*Well—I remembered. Okay, Dad, she thought, I'll go for it, first chance I get. Let's hope for baby's sake you knew what the hell you were talking about.*

The car bumped wildly, throwing her against the front with a vicious thump that sent every bruise and broken bone into fresh, screaming agonies. Lianne shoved her fist into her mouth to keep from howling. She heard grass and branches dragging on the sides and undercarriage. *Shit—we're out in the middle of nowhere, then, I'll bet. Not likely to be anybody friendly around. And no witnesses to see what happens next.*

She planned her tactics with that in mind. Readied her weapons. Stilled her racing heart. Positioned herself as best she could in the cramped space.

Waited.

The Gate appeared with an unnatural shriek as time and space themselves were shredded. Winds raged out of the raw wound that opened in the middle of Elfhame Outremer, whipping the delicate silk hangings and bright pennants into a frenzy. Out of the pocket maelstrom raced a child, tiny, blond, green-eyed,

with a fragile beauty obscured by the fear on her face, who ran like one pursued by all the devils of hell.

The elf who reached out and caught her, a patroness of the arts on her way to the premiere of Valyre's production of "Nine Lives of Woldas Toklas," could not imagine how the little human child had arrived nor what could have frightened her so. Her confusion cleared up an instant later, as the first of Amanda-Anne's monsters followed her through the Gate, to be followed by another, and another, and another.

The child wriggled free of the elf's suddenly nerveless grip and darted off among the trees.

The last thing the elven matron heard as the monsters leapt on her was the seldom-sounded attack-alarm, a clarion call that echoed from the top of first one tree, then many.

When the trunk lock released, Lianne tensed. *Wait for it, wait for it*, she chanted in a silent mantra. She gripped the tire iron like a sword.

She heard the door open, heard footsteps swishing through the grass.

*Wait for it, wait for it.*

Her eyes adjusted to the meager light that came through the tiny space between trunk-lid and body, and she discovered she really *could* see. She watched fingers sliding along the inside of the trunk, feeling for the catch.

*Wait for it, wait for it.*

"There it is,"—a faint mutter, followed by the click of the latch, and light so bright it hurt.

*Now!*

Lianne stabbed with the tire iron and hit the woman in the throat, pumped full of adrenalin and with her attention focused someplace where the pain wasn't. The woman gagged, one hand flying to her throat as she staggered back a step, her expression one of shock.

If Lianne had a little more strength, it might have ended then and there. Instead, she only stunned the woman long enough to get the upper hand.

Lianne loosed a banshee scream, the accumulation of her rage and pain and fear tied into that savage howl, and tumbled out of the trunk. Her grip shifted slightly, and she backhanded the tire iron across the woman's face, then with both hands brought it down on the top of her head. The handcuff that dangled from her right wrist swung staccato accompaniment against the metal of the tire iron.

The woman threw her hands over her face and head to protect them, and Lianne staggered toward her, the tire iron held like a quarterstaff in front of her. Then she swung again, overbalanced, and fell forward, catching the woman across the chest with the tire iron. They tumbled to the ground together.

Lianne screamed with the pain of her broken ribs, but she forced herself to sit up, forced herself to hit the other woman until the bitch stopped struggling and her arms dropped to her sides and she lay still.

It was a pity, she reflected, as she sat on the ground and panted with pain, that she was so weak that it had been the weight of the tire iron that had done most of the damage. The woman lay like a lump in the weeds, a red welt rising on her cheek—but she was breathing, Lianne noted, with mingled disappointment and relief. She was still breathing just fine. Lianne poked her in the side once with the pointed end of the tire iron. She didn't move.

"I wish I was the kind of person who could do to you what you did to me. I'd beat *your* face in with your gun and kick *you* in the ribs." Lianne was so angry she shook, as conflicting emotions warred within her. *Damn, I wish I could do that!*

She looked down at the woman, lying unconscious and helpless. *Well, I can't.* She sighed, her adrenaline fading away. *Time to get out of here—wherever here is.*

Lianne went through the woman's pockets. She came up with the keys to the car, but none for the handcuffs. She toyed with the idea of taking the gun, then decided against it. At least she could take the clip out of the gun—leave her without bullets. That would work. When the police found the woman, Lianne wanted them to find plenty of evidence that would make it easy for them to throw her into a cell forever.

With the keys in hand, she pushed herself shakily to her feet and surveyed her escape route. She would have to retrace the other woman's path, which would mean backing the car down the long, overgrown drive to the road. She would have to twist around in the seat to back the car, which ought to hurt like hell, considering her broken ribs. She looked at the redhead, lying in the track broken down by the T-Bird, and sighed.

"I ought to just back over you, dammit. I really ought to."

But she didn't. She pulled the woman out of the middle of the drive, swearing with every step. An instant of weakness and the opportunity for revenge overcame her, though, and she dragged the woman over to the edge of a huge blackberry thicket, rolling her as far into it as she could, without getting caught in the vines herself. Limping over to the car, still suffering, Lianne wore the smile of the vindicated on her face.

She shoved the trunk down with difficulty, and leaned against the car itself to keep herself from falling as she stumbled over creepers and vines and fallen branches toward the driver's side door. She opened the door, leaned forward, wheezing; doubled over at the sudden stab of pain in her side, and fell onto the seat. Falling saved her life.

She heard the crack of the other woman's gun, a surprisingly unimpressive noise, at the same time that the driver's side window, in the precise spot where her head had been, flowered into an array of tiny concentric cracks.

*Damn! Another clip? That's what I get for not killing you, isn't it! I should have taken the gun,* she thought, pulling her legs in quickly, and closing the door as fast as she could.

*Better yet, I should have left you where I could run over you.* She shoved the keys in the ignition and curled low on the seat. The car started easily, and she slipped it into reverse and pushed lightly on the gas. She sprawled across the bench, as low as she could get and still reach the pedals, facing the rear of the car, her left hand clutching beneath the headrest of the passenger seat for balance, her right steering the car. *Thank God the thing's not a stick, -anyway.*

She curved the car around the side of the house and aimed toward the road, praying like a gift-wrapped

nun at the devil's birthday party. The car wallowed over a bump at the same instant that a bullet hole appeared in the front passenger window, and Lianne's foot slid farther down onto the gas pedal. The T-Bird accelerated wildly.

"Shit, shit, shit—oh, shit!" Lianne wailed, as various small trees and other obstacles loomed in the rear window, vanished at high speed and were replaced by others. She swerved and kept right on going. *I wish I could close my eyes*, she thought. *I doubt it would make much difference in my—oh, shit!*—she dodged another tree—*driving!*

She heard two sharpings in the windshield behind her head. *Two more of the bitch's bullets. When is she gonna run out?* Lianne didn't dare look back. As long as she was still alive, anything else could wait.

The car bounced again, and a small tree splintered across the rear bumper. *Oh hell*, Lianne thought for some reason, *it's only a rental*. She didn't even remember the joke that punchline was from.

There was a crunch of metal and one massive heave—and Lianne felt the smoothness of pavement under the tires, heard the scrape of what must be the entire exhaust system under the car. A quick spin of the wheel, and she backed the rest of the way into the road. To her right were the dilapidated ruins of the house, and the red-haired woman, taking aim yet again. Lianne threw the car into drive and hit the gas. *What a persistent snake you are. I hope you enjoy your walk home*. She flipped the woman the bird and burned rubber in her acceleration. The rear window blossomed with its own bullet hole.

*Well, Dad*, she thought. *I owe you my life on this one, I think. And if I live long enough to get to a hospital, I'll have a story to tell that rivals even yours.*

When Maclyn heard the alarm through the trees, there was no question of going back to the apartment and waiting for the phone call. Rhellen would have to find him, Lianne would have to fend for herself—he armed himself as he ran toward the center of Elfhame Outremer, from whence the alarm came. Even as he ran, he kept thinking *What kind of fool would open a Gate in the heart of an Elfhame?*

Beside him, Dierdre on her elvensteed and Hallara on hers launched themselves toward the battle.: *This is it!*: Dierdre bellowed directly into his brain.: *Get Rhellen.*:

:*I can't! Didn't bring him!*:

Dierdre paused long enough to give him a withering look.: *Idiot.*: She pivoted her mount and leaned down to offer Maclyn an arm up. He took it and swung onto the steed behind Dierdre's saddle.

:*I had to leave Rhellen to listen for the phone.*:

:*Brilliant, oh my son. Riding pillion is not the safest way to go to battle,*: his mother said acidly, *but you'd be dead in no time on foot. There's nothing to contain those monsters or slow them down here.*:

Dierdre wielded her sword left-handed, Maclyn held his in his right. They charged along the ground paths beneath the singing boughs of the gold-leaved home-trees, past the shimmering curtains of light in the flame-fountains, under the branch-braided arch of the Lover's Trees—and into the melee behind Hallara, who sprayed a broad blanket of machine-gun fire to try to clear them a path. From other sites on

the perimeter, reinforcements arrived.

The vortex of a rogue Gate glistened hypnotically from beside the delicate blue-green filigreed sculptures in the Masters' Garden. Three elven mages engaged themselves in battling the Gate itself, trying to close it off. They threw containment spells and reversal spells over the maw that spewed the monsters into their midst—to no avail. Amanda-Anne's hastily-constructed Gate had ripped away part of the spell-formed reality of Elfhome Outremer itself. It fed on the energy of the destruction it caused, creating a direct road from the Unformed Planes to the center of the elves' safe haven. Amanda-Anne's nightmares advanced unchecked.

A horde of giggling, tittering stick-men and multi-legged screamers burst through and launched themselves against the scattered elven forces with bared fangs and razored claws. Initially, there was no strategy to the skirmishing. The elves hacked and slashed and shot, and the monsters failed to die. The grim things pressed forward into the elven ranks, pushed from behind by the larger monsters that moved through the Gate at their backs.

Hallara, Dierdre, and Maclyn joined forces with Felouen and a small phalanx of veteran warriors who were covering an elven spellcaster and one of Outremer's adopted human mages. The mages were mildly successful at individually spelling the nightmare things with the same containment spells that had proven useless on the Gate. But the effort required of them was enormous, while the number of horrors shoving through the Gate far exceeded those being contained.

Then Amanda-Anne's winged creatures arrived in force, lurching through the air like medieval stained glass demons and cathedral gargoyles. They dove on the defenders, howling like the damned, belching fire and dripping acid, diving down to pluck hapless elves from their elvensteeds and ascending far above the trees to fling them back to the ground below.

The defenders of Outremer were forced to retreat beneath the sheltering overhangs of the trees.

Then the trees began to burn.

The entire population of Elfhome Outremer—that part of it, at least, that had managed to survive the initial onslaught—fought back desperately. The few elven children lent their magical energy to parents who cast shielding around Outremer's untouched trees. A contingent of mages battled their way toward the Grove and dug in around the heart-tree. Weapons of every variety, human and magical, were leveled against the invaders. The Oracular Pool, the many fountains, and the Vale River that circled the whole of Elfhome Outremer were drained to feed a storm spell. Rain poured from the smoke-filled sky, and the conflagrations in the tree-homes and shelters of the elven haven began to die. And wet wood did not rekindle as easily.

Maclyn and Dierdre were part of the contingent who fought to protect the Grove. Their losses had been huge—more than half of the Grove's trees were charred stumps, with the bodies of their defenders scattered at their bases like fallen branches. Now, the largest of the monsters seemed to be concentrating on destroying the heart-tree itself. The death of the heart-tree would release the spells of thousands of years that had used it as the focus for maintaining Elfhome Outremer. Without the heart-tree, Elfhome Outremer would disappear back into the nothingness of the Unformed Planes. Mac had seen the movies—the battle to guard the heart-tree was a kind of Masada, an Alamo—there was no question of retreat. If the heart-tree went, there would be nothing to retreat to.

Maclyn had discovered that almost nothing slowed the monsters down, but if he cut off a golem's head, it stopped fighting until it could either locate the missing extremity or grow a new one. He'd passed this

information on to the other elves, and the ground around them began to look like a croquet lawn designed by head-hunters.

The monsters became warier, and ground-fighting -demons began to time their attacks with those of the airborne gargoyles.

Mac took a two-handed swipe at a winged demon that dove at him. He missed, and the demon sank its claws into a seam in his armor. Maclyn was ripped off of Dierdre's elvensteed, thigh muscles screaming in pain as he struggled vainly to stay horsed. The monster's screech rang in his ears, its breath blasted into his face, burning at his skin and making his eyes water. Then it dropped him. He lay, stunned, while the tides of the fray shifted.

When he was able to stand and wield his sword again, Dierdre was out of sight, and a new horror lurched at him with a grin on its foul face. He had no time to look for allies. His arms felt like lead, but he forced himself to slash again and again as the beast lunged at him. Three times the elven blade bit deep at the monster, yet it continued to giggle maniacally.

Around him, the elves were being herded into a few remaining pockets of resistance, and the toll of the dead mounted.

Amanda-Anne huddled in the hollow of a great silver elven-elm, shivering and miserable. *This* was the only safe place she had known of—this retreat far from the evil Father and the uncaring Step-Mother. This was the place she had thought to come and hide, where no one would hurt her, where nothing could frighten her. She had never thought that her own monsters would follow her—

And when they did, she had been *sure* that the elves would be able to get rid of them.

She had brought hell from her own world and from the Unformed Planes, and visited it here, in the only completely beautiful place she had ever seen. And she had destroyed it, all by herself; ruined it, made it worse than any place she had ever known, worse, even, than the pony barn. She stared out at the devastation that spread before her. Charred and smoking stumps were all that remained of most of the trees; the bodies of elves—so many beautiful, gentle elves—lay bloody and sprawled in the churned mud. The pretty green grass was gone, the sweet music was drowned in the screams of the dying, the bright pennants that had fluttered so briskly in the warm breeze hung in sodden tatters in the pouring rain.

Amanda-Anne, looking at the havoc she had wrought, felt something she had never felt before. She felt pain and guilt for those she had hurt. She felt regret for her -actions. She felt responsibility.

She was as bad as the Father.

Maclyn shouldered aside a flailing arm as he cleaved another creature's fleshy skull. They came, still they came. One of the human mages had just been overcome by the monsters, his body clamped in the eight-armed thing's jaws as it laid into a second mage's defenses.

One of the Sidhe who had lived in the humans' world was doubled over near him, as if injured. Her lips moved as she concentrated on a Summoning-spell, and the air before her turned dark. Then a stack of wooden boxes materialized, and another, and finally a wooden rack of firearms with handwritten price

tags on them. She stood straight again, pulling thick gauntlets on.

Maclyn hacked at his creature a few more times until he dismembered it, kicked its pieces far from each other, then turned to the female.

“Need help?”

“Could use it.” She expertly undid the latch on a case and began loading a grenade launcher. “We need to buy some distance.”

Maclyn winced at the amount of Cold Iron in the weapon, but decided that the time for desperate measures had come. “They’ll be picking steel chips out of the Grove for years, but at least there *will* be a Grove.”

Amanda-Anne huddled in her hidey-hole, and the first tears she had ever cried came to her eyes, scorching her cheeks, etching hot trails down her face.

“I am sorry,” she whispered. “Oh, I am . . . so . . . s-s-sorry.”

One of her monsters shuffled toward her hiding place, snuffling and casting its head from side to side, following the scent of the living. It looked down into the hollow where she hid, saw her, and chittered in soprano glee. Its bloodstained talons reached in after her.

“G-g-goaway,” Amanda-Anne whispered through her tears. “I d-d-don’t want you here anymore!”

The monster vanished with a soft “pop.”

*:Make them all go away, Anne,* a quiet voice whispered in her head. Amanda-Anne closed her eyes and found her sisters, her other selves, facing her with angry or unhappy faces. Cethlenn stood before her, and Alice, and Abbey. Only the first-born, the real Amanda, was absent.

*:Make them go away,* Cethlenn repeated. *:You are the only one who can. Only you have the power. Only you can work the magic—or unwork it.:*

*:Please,* Abbey said, piteously, her own tears coursing down her cheeks. *:Oh, please. They’re hurting, they’re hurting so much!:*

*:You must,* Alice added. *:You can’t leave the people in this place to die. You did it, now you have to undo it. It’s all your fault.:*

Amanda-Anne felt the hot tears streaking down her cheeks and choking away her breath. *:I know.:* She hugged her arms tighter around herself, and told the three who watched her. *:I’m sorry.:*

But “sorry” didn’t fix things. She’d have to do that now, before they got worse. Amanda-Anne crawled out of her shelter and stood exposed to the sharp eyes of the monsters, the startled eyes of the elves. “Go away,” she screamed, above the roars of explosions and gunfire, above the skin-crawling chattering laughter, above the howls and the prayers and the oaths and the crying. “Goaway!” She concentrated on how much she didn’t want her monsters, on how much she wished them to disappear. For a -moment, there was nothing but silence.



Then the creatures of her imagination vanished, leaving behind only the dead, and the ruin they—*she*—had caused.

And then, miserable and afraid, fearing what the elves would do to her when they realized what she had done to them, and feeling that she would never deserve safety or beauty again, Amanda-Anne raced for the Gate she'd made. She threw herself through it, pulling it shut behind her.

In mid-flight, still spouting flames at the remaining treetops, the three-headed flier popped out of existence. The gothic demons flickered slightly and were gone. Maclyn, fighting a losing battle with a many-legged snake, found himself swinging a rifle-butt at an opponent that had suddenly ceased to exist.

All over Elfhome Outremer, cries of surprise became shouts of elation. The survivors fell together, hugging each other in disbelief and hysterical joy at the sheer miracle of it.

Those who were relatively unscathed soon enough -began the grim task of sorting dead from dying, of dying from salvageable. They walked from charred body to mangled body, from one still form to the next, struggling to recognize in death some semblance of those they had known in life. Maclyn rid himself of his gloves and heavy armor with a thought and began that dark walk, too, looking into the faces of survivors, hoping to find his own loved ones, and seeing his own disappointment reflected over and over in each face that was not Dierdre, was not Felouen. He knew that for all of those who stared into his eyes and turned away in despair, his own grimed features represented one less chance that the ones they loved still lived.

He worked his way back to the point where he and Dierdre had become separated. All around him, the Mindshouted calls, the agonized cries for help, the screams of those who recognized the ones they had loved in the features of the dead, blotted out any hope of finding Dierdre or Felouen by Mindcall, or by simple shouting. He kept at his steady examination of each passing face, of each sad corpse, praying to all the gods he'd never -believed in that he would recognize his loved ones in those who still stood, and not those who would never stand again.

Suddenly, across a muddied clearing, he recognized a familiar toss of the head, a quick brush of hand through hair.

*"FELOUEN!"* he roared, and was rewarded by a startled jerk of the head in his direction, by a shriek of *"Maclyn!"* and by the woman's ungraceful two-legged gallop across the field of the dead.

Felouen threw herself into his arms, careless of her wounds or his, and wept. *"By the gods, you're alive. When you fell, I knew I'd lost you, oh, gods I knew—"*

She pressed a suddenly tear-streaked face to his, and Maclyn found to his surprise that his own eyes were not dry. He held her tightly, breathing in the scent of her hair and savoring the warmth of her, the hard-muscled strength of her lean body pressed tightly against his. *"Thank all the gods you're alive,"* he whispered. Then he loosened his grip and looked in her eyes. *"Dierdre?"* he asked.

Felouen's face lost its animation. *"She sent me to find you."*

Maclyn, ignoring her bleak expression, smiled with relief. *"Ha! Then she still lives! I knew she was too tough—"*

“Barely,” Felouen interrupted grimly. “She waits by the last of the beasts, the ones held in the containment spells. They didn’t vanish with the rest of the monsters. She is summoning their thoughts to see where they came from—and why.”

He sucked in a breath of dismay. “But if she’s injured, using magic will only weaken her further.”

She bit her lip, shrugged her helplessness. “Perhaps you can convince her to spare herself—I could not.”

Felouen’s elvensteed reached them, and Maclyn noted its burden for the first time. A body was slung across the saddle face-down. “Who—?”

Felouen’s face tightened. “Hallara. She died trying to put out a fire in the heart-tree. She’d run out of ammunition. The pike line around the mages broke, and one of the things took her when she tranced.”

He closed his eyes and fought back despair. “Oh, gods.”

“There will be time to count the dead later, Mac. Let’s tend the living while we can.” Felouen turned away from him and broke into a flat-out run, heading back toward the spot where the Gate had opened.

Maclyn followed.

They found Dierdre propped against one of the contained monsters, her body blood-drenched, her face white with impending shock. But her hands pressed against the thing’s skull, and her expression was one of tight concentration.

“Mother!” Maclyn exclaimed as he saw what she was doing. “Lie down! Save your strength.”

Dierdre opened pale eyes and quelled him with a single glance. “There is a man who must not be allowed to die,” she said. Her voice was a hoarse croak, but her speech never faltered. And her expression was one of implacable hate. “These things were made by an aspect of the child, Amanda.”

“What—” Mac was puzzled by her choice of words.

“The child was tormented until she shattered,” Dierdre explained tersely, “like a fragile crystal, dropped by a careless hand. She is no longer one, but many. One of her number learned how to weave magic from you, all unwitting. To protect herself and her other selves, she wove these, monsters—fragments of her pain. They are constructs of her fear—her fear, Maclyn, fear so great they nearly leveled Elfhame Outremer and the magic of three thousand Sidhe with it. We did not win the battle, son of mine. Amanda released her fear, and when she did, our foes vanished.”

He blinked, uncomprehending. “Mother—”

“Quiet.” She pierced him with her eyes. “Do you know what she feared, Maclyn?”

How could he? “No,” he replied carefully. Dierdre in this mood was not to be contradicted.

“She feared her father—and with reason. He has tortured her,” Dierdre said, at last. “He has raped her—yes, you heard aright. For years, he has done unspeakable things to her—he has shattered her into a handful of strange, fragmented children that do not even communicate with each other. The aspect that created these monsters never knew love, or caring, or kindness. It knew only brutality and pain and

hatred and fear—until it came here. This was where that aspect of the child thought it could hide and be safe from the horrors it had created—but because no one had ever been good to it, it feared us as well.”

Felouen answered for all of them. “Not the child’s fault. She had not the experience, could not have known what she did. Fragment or no, she was a child, and to a child, all adults are gods. She must have thought we could banish these creatures as easily as she. It is her father that has brought this upon us, not her—*he* is the cause that made her create them in the first place. For fear of her father, we have suffered and died.”

“I’ll kill her father,” Maclyn said softly. “For what he has caused here, for what he has done to you—”

Dierdre shook her head. “No, Mac. For my revenge—for her revenge—I want something more.” She let herself slip down to the frozen monster’s feet. Her skin was the color of snow, waxy and translucent, her lips bloodless. Only her eyes looked alive. Mac stared at her rent armor, at the damage that could not be repaired by the greatest healer of the elves, and covered his face with his hands in grief.

“Listen,” she told him.

He knelt and put his ear to her mouth, to hear his mother’s dying wish.

*Damn them, Belinda thought. Damn all of them.*

She had never suffered so much or been hurt so badly in pursuit of a target. It seemed as if everything—her target, his feeble girlfriend, even his damned car, for crissakes—had conspired to destroy her. She had been foiled at every turn. She had been made to look like a fool.

Belinda had been through enough.

She leaned wearily against the phone booth’s wall, searching the out-of-date phone book’s battered pages.

*There it is—the Prince Charles!* She maneuvered a quarter into the slot and dialed.

A mechanical, but not electronic voice, answered. “Prince Charles, this is Sharon speaking. May I help you?”

“Connect me to Mel Tenner’s room,” she ordered thickly.

“May I ask who’s calling, please?” the polite voice inquired.

*Officious bitch.* “This is Belinda, and it’s an emergency.”

The voice did not seem impressed. “Hold please, ma’am.”

It was just like that miserable S.O.B. to have his calls screened, Belinda thought. *He’d better decide to take mine—I’ll kill him if he doesn’t. I don’t need this s—*

Sharon returned. “I have Mr. Tenner on the line, ma’am.”

“Fine,” she said shortly, reining in her temper.

A few clicks, and a moment later Mel drawled, “What is it, Belinda?” He sounded supremely bored.

“Get a pen and some paper,” she snarled. “I’m going to give you directions—I want you to come get me. Then we’re going to pick up your girl. Bring your gun.”

Mel laughed, as if she had made a joke. “I wouldn’t leave home without one.”

Belinda gave him the directions, tersely, keeping her eyes fixed on the phone.

He made an odd little grunt of surprise. “Belinda, darling, what are you doing at a convenience store out in the middle of nowhere? Slumming?”

“Working. For you,” she replied, hoping *hemight* feel a little responsibility. After all, she was still working for him, as he had so pointedly reminded her. “My car got stolen.”

“Again?” The laughter in his voice was only too obvious, and he wanted her to hear it. Mel was not going to take on any belated responsibility. Not that she really expected him to. Mel believed that everything that happened to anyone was their own fault—including being caught in earthquakes, high-rise fires, and tornadoes.

She restrained the impulse to scream, and contented herself with shredding the pages of the phone book, one by one. “Sound a little less happy, Mel. I’m having a bad day.”

“Why don’t you just tell me where to go pick up my little TK,” he suggested, with deceptive mildness, “and then you can get a taxi and go home to rest?”

*And you can take off with the kid and skip paying me, scumball? I don’t think so.* “Just come get me, Mel,” she growled. “And bring your bankbook.”

He sighed, as if with infinite patience. “Fine, sweetheart. If that’s what you want. I’ll be there in forty-five minutes.”

*Click.*

Belinda slammed the receiver home and glared at a slip of paper. It was the schoolteacher’s phone number. Belinda debated calling. Maybe the woman had gone straight back to her apartment, or maybe she had called first, on the chance that her boyfriend had shown up and found the place trashed. If she had, Belinda wouldn’t be able to fool the race-driver—but if she hadn’t . . .

*Nothing ventured, nothing gained, as they say.* She dialed, and the phone rang. Once.

Twice.

Three times.

“Come on, shithead,” she muttered. “Pick up.”

Four times.

Five times.

Maclyn was alone at the foot of Dierdre's grave beneath the remains of a giant white willow. The tree had protected his mother's Underhill home since she had come over from the Old Country—it was the part of Elfhome Outremer she had missed most when she was in the world of -humans. It was now scarred and burned, and its loving inhabitant had come home forever.

*I'm going to miss you, Mother, even more than you would have believed.* Maclyn stood alone as the last smatterings of warm rain soaked into his clothes and ran down his face. Her death had destroyed a part of him. He felt suddenly old, watching the loose earth over the grave falling in on itself as the raindrops struck. He had never really given her cause to be proud of him. Unlike the rest of his colleagues on the racing team, he had not been motivated by any higher goals. The others, the elves and human mages of SERRA, had been raising money to finance shelters for teenage runaways, kid-rescue operations, any number of altruistic causes. He had been a member of SERRA only because he liked to drive fast cars, and because he liked to win. If the money he won went to "worthy causes," well, frankly, he hadn't wanted to have to hear about it.

In his own way, he was as much an escapist as any of the elves who lived Underhill permanently, as any of the dilettantes who idled away their days with music, dancing, gaming, loveplay.

Maclyn stiffened as he felt Rhellen's sudden presence in the Elfhome. The elvensteed called out in his blunt mind-images as he galloped, searching on the other side of the Gate for his cohort. He answered the elvensteed with a quick whistle, and the golden beast charged to his side. Rhellen saw the fresh dirt beneath the tree and gave a questioning whicker.

Maclyn shook his head. "Later," he said. "I'll tell you everything later." He sensed the elvensteed's horror at the devastation of Outremer, but there was no time to comfort him, and no time to explain.

Mac leapt to the elvensteed's back, and Rhellen charged back through the Gate. He skidded to a stop in the kitchen next to the phone, bumping against the sink top. Mac leapt off of Rhellen's back and answered the phone.

"Hello?" he said, thinking, *Please, no more bad news. Please.*

"I just about hung up, fella. You took a long time getting to the phone." The voice was the same one he'd talked to earlier—and, in spite of the muffling, he was certain it was Belinda Ciucci he was talking to.

"I was busy," he said. "In the bathroom. I got here as fast as I could."

She snorted. "I don't think calls of nature are as important as my call. Especially since I'm going to let you save your girlfriend's life now."

He spoke carefully, not losing any of his anger. "What do you want me to do?"

"Meet me out in the woods on the right side of the Bal-A-Shar Stables," she said. "I know you know where. I followed you out there yesterday."

Well, now he had a rendezvous point. "Fine, Belinda. Let me talk to Lianne now."

“Not a chance, buddy—” Then, suddenly, silence.

There was a pause—Maclyn realized from the faint wash of emotions he caught over the phone that he had just tipped the woman to the fact that he knew her real name. Dammit, that was going to make things harder. “You’re going to meet me in the woods at five p.m., and then I’ll let—ah, Lianne—go,” Belinda continued.

“What do you want me to bring?” he asked. “Money?”

There was a bitter, harsh laugh at the other end of the line. “Sure, why not? Write this down.”

She paused, and Mac pulled out the pen Lianne kept on the clipboard with the notepad and got ready to write.

Belinda continued. “Bring me a hundred thousand dollars in small, used, non-sequentially marked bills. Pack it all in a little suitcase, drag that with you, and—oh, by the way, don’t drive your car. I don’t like it. You come in your girlfriend’s car—the little yellow Volkswagen convertible. Big racecar stud like you oughta look cute in it. Park in the turn-around next to the dirt road that goes back to the cotton field. Get out of your car, walk along the road until you cross the culvert, and walk across the street and into the woods. I’ll have a red ribbon tied around the tree you are to go to. Put the money down beside the tree—when you turn around, you’ll see your girlfriend. As long as you follow directions and you’re all by yourself, everything will work out fine.”

*For you or for me?* Mac wondered, but he said, “Okay.”

The line clicked, and Belinda was gone.

*Felouen may come through this Gate*, he thought, staring at the dark swirl of energy. *She knows about Lianne, and she knows we have to find Amanda—maybe she’ll come through in time to help me. She needs to know what I need, and where to meet me.*

He took paper and pencil, and in flowing elvish script, wrote a note and drew a map to Bal-A-Shar Stables. Then he created a large, elegant leather case out of thin air and filled it full of very real-looking counterfeit bills. He would hand Belinda one-hundred thousand dollars in used-looking twenties, with only eight serial numbers between them. And as soon as she took the case, he decided, the faces on all the bills would abruptly sport matching maniacal, toothy grins. Maybe the motto would read, “Gotcha.”

Cethlenn woke in Amanda’s room, on Amanda’s bed. The child’s clothes were soaked and filthy. Bits of the elven domain’s dirt and greenery still clung to her. In one hand, she found a silver leaf—crumpled and tattered, it was both beautiful and saddening. Inside her, the children huddled in fear and stared out over her shoulders. Poor children—they had been through so much, and a sixth sense told her the worst was yet to come. Downstairs, she could hear Them arguing.

“Don’t you talk to me in that tone of voice! I’ve been out working with the horses,” the Step-Mother yelled. “I haven’t had time to watch where your weird kid got to—she was in here with you the last I knew!”

“She isn’t in here now! I’ve been all over the house looking for her.” The Father sounded truly furious.

“The little liar said she was going up to her room. She isn’t up there now, let me tell you.”

Fury filled the Step-Mother’s voice. “I know where *my* daughter is—and I want to know why the hell she came running out to the barn in tears! What did you do to her, you bastard?”

A pause, and then the Father countered, a hint of something Cethlenn couldn’t read in his voice. “I didn’t do anything to her—don’t change the subject on me!”

The Step-Mother snarled at him, “We agreed when we got married that your kid would be your responsibility, and my kid would be mine. You remember that? Huh? Well, that means if you want *your* daughter, you find her! *My* daughter and I are going shopping. And from now on, you keep your hands off her!”

Cethlenn heard the Step-Mother’s angry footsteps and Sharon’s short, light ones clipping across the floor. She heard the door slam so hard the walls shook. She was alone in the house with the Father.

She heard him storm from the front room back to the den. There was a long, silent pause. *Mixin’ himself a drink*, Cethlenn thought. *Goin’ to feed his anger with a wee drop of the uisge-beatha, no doubt. And then he’ll go ragin’ through the house until he finds us—and we’re in trouble when he does, and sure.*

As if he’d heard her thoughts, the Father bellowed, “I know you’re in here somewhere, Amanda! You can come down here right now and spare yourself a lot of trouble. Or I can come find you. I *will* find you. And when I do, I’ll break your skinny, ugly little neck.”

*:You need to go, Cethlenn, : Alice urged. :You have to do what he says. He’s our father and we have to obey him.:*

Cethlenn shook her head. *:And if I do what he says, he’ll break our neck without having to work to find us first.:*

Abbey said fearfully, *:Daddy wouldn’t hurt us, not -really. Would he?:*

Cethlenn cocked an eyebrow at Abbey. *:Why don’t you ask Anne about that?:*

*:I can’t, : Abbey replied uncertainly. :Anne’s gone. :*

*:Not back into the Unformed Planes, please all the gods! : Cethlenn felt her pulse race and her breath quicken in dismay at that thought.*

Abbey answered slowly. *:I don’t think so, Cethlenn. We could feel that she was there, before, even though we didn’t let ourselves know about each other. But now there is nothing where she was but an empty place. I think after Alice yelled at her, she went away.:*

In the pit of Cethlenn’s stomach, something twisted. *:Alice. What—did you say to her?:* the witch asked Alice. Now that she knew to feel for the emptiness, the place where Anne should have been nagged like a newly missing tooth.

Alice donned her most self-righteous expression and said, *:I told her the truth—that she was awful and evil and that we didn’t need her or want her here.:*

And by all the gods, the child had the gall to look smug—as if she'd done something grand.: *Oh, no! Alice, Anne is a part of you! You can't just get rid of her! You can't!*:

Alice crossed her arms and glowered at Cethlenn.: *She did those—things—with our father. Nasty, wicked, sinful things. She was a bad, bad girl. Our father said so, and he is our father so he must be right.*:

Cethlenn reacted without thinking.: *Your father is a vicious brute who ought to be flayed and drawn and quartered and hung, then burned for good measure.*: she snapped.

Alice looked shocked. Her mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. Her white cheeks flushed momentarily red, and angry tears filled her eyes.: *I'll—I'll—I'll tell you!*: Alice finally sputtered. She flickered out of sight.

: *Oh, dear.*: Cethlenn told Abbey, with a twinge of guilt.: *I shouldn't have said that to her.*:

Abbey glared at her.: *You shouldn't have said it to me, either. I don't believe he's as bad as you and Anne say. Anne was crazy, and I'm glad she's gone.*:

Abbey followed her sister.

Cethlenn heard the Father coming up the stairs. No time left to find the children and retract her ill-thought statements. Apologies would have to take second place to survival. She hurriedly jumped off the bed, and noticed as she did that it was wet and dirty where she had lain on it. A beating would be the least she got if the Father caught her. She frowned and slipped out by her secret window escape. As soon as she pulled the window shut, she dropped to the roof below. Instead of running to the tree and climbing down to the ground this time, though, she stayed put, hugging the side of the house and listening to the Father as he rampaged through her room and then started searching for her through the rest of the house.

There was a drain spout that went right alongside one of the attic windows. Cethlenn was sure she could climb it. It had fastenings about every two feet that would serve as hand and footholds. It connected along the edge of the roof where she stood and soared to the attic window on the third story without going near any other windows.

The attic wasn't the safest place—the Father would certainly check there for her—but he probably wouldn't check more than once. If she climbed up after she heard him moving around in there, she should be able to buy some time. Perhaps the Step-Mother and Sharon would be home by then. He wouldn't do anything really brutal with them home, surely.

Cethlenn wasn't certain, but the attic plan seemed reasonable in theory. So she scooted down next to the spout and sat with her head pressed against the wood siding, listening for the sounds of the Father's footsteps ascending the stairs above her. Finally, she heard him crashing upward.

She stilled, waiting, and at last she was rewarded with his racket as he clattered back down the uncarpeted stairs. Cethlenn wiped her suddenly-damp palms on her shirt, eased her slender frame onto the gutter, and found the first tiny handhold. Almost afraid to breathe, she began the long ascent.

When Mel picked her up, Belinda flung herself into his car and said, without preamble, "Straight by my



hotel—I have something special I need to pick up to finish this job. Then we'll go out and get your kid.”

Mel gaped at his employee. Apparently he hadn't thought she'd have sustained any real damage. “You look awful. How did you get all those bruises on your face?”

“I walked into a door.” She pulled down the passenger-side visor and looked in the mirror long enough to assess the most recent damage to her appearance, and bit her lip in dismay.

“Not really,” he replied, as if he half believed her.

“No,” she agreed. “Not really. But I don't want to talk about it.” She glanced out at the passing scenery, then over at the speedometer. “Can't you drive any faster? God, you drive like the old coot who used to be my partner.”

Mel frowned, disapprovingly. “I'm already going seventy, Belinda. I would just as soon not get pulled over right now. A cop might ask questions, once he gets a look at you, especially if he sees our guns. What are you in such a hurry for?”

She grimaced. “I have an appointment. Move it, okay? If I don't get to my appointment, you won't get your kid.”

Neither of them said anything until they arrived at Belinda's hotel. As they pulled into the parking lot, Belinda swore. “Dammit, she took my keys and my fake I.D. I don't think I can get the clerk to give me another key without some identification.”

Mel shrugged as if it didn't matter. “Have you done anything to the door or the lock since last night?”

Belinda rolled her eyes. “Oh, yeah, Mel. I installed a bomb so that the first person who opened the door would be blown away. The room is probably coated with Maid-Kibbles by now.”

He sighed elaborately. “Hey, I was just asking. If you haven't done anything fancy to the locks, I can still get in.”

She decided not to employ any more sarcasm on him; it was obviously wasted effort. “I haven't. Lead on, Macduff.”

Mel did as promised. Once in the room, Belinda went to the dresser, crouched with her back to it, and lifted a corner of the heavy furniture a few inches off the floor. “Grab the case,” she panted.

Mel, eyebrows well into his hairline, pulled the thinline briefcase out of the tiny space. “Nice hiding place. I haven't seen that one.”

Belinda twitched her shoulders in dismissal, then nodded at the case. “That's an expensive toy. I didn't want it to walk off without me.” She dropped the dresser, grabbed a bright red excuse for a skirt from a hanger, and with that in one hand and her little case in the other, headed for the door.

“May I ask—”

Belinda cut the question off. “It's a gun.”

Mel looked puzzled. “To fit in that case, it couldn't be much of a gun.”

Belinda climbed back into the passenger seat of the car. Mel slipped in. As they backed out of the parking space, she said, “You want specifics? Fine by me.” She briefly opened the case to reveal a long, streamlined handgun and a loose scope packed in padded velvet. “It’s an XP-100; a single-shot bolt-action handgun that comes tapped and drilled for scope mounting. I use a 12-power quick-mount scope on mine. It shoots a fifty-grain .221 Remington Fireball with a muzzle velocity of about 2650 feet per second. The velocity is still about 1150 feet per second at 300 yards. It delivers an impact over 400 foot/pounds at a hundred yards, and 130 foot/pounds at three hundred yards. It’s machine polished, with a hand-carved conforming rosewood handgrip to make it pretty and easy to hold and not look so obvious on x-rays, and a bull-barrel to limit recoil. Best of all, at three-hundred yards, its point-of-aim is only thirteen inches above its target.” She gave him a nasty little smile. “Feel better now?”

He only looked bored. “All of that babble means something to you?”

She snarled. “Yeah. It means this is a real nice gun if you want to kill somebody with one bullet from a long way off, but you don’t want to drag a rifle around for everybody to see.”

“Oh,” Mel said, dismissively. “It’s an assassination gun.”

“It’s an assassination gun,” Belinda agreed. “An expensive one. I’m about to get my money’s worth out of it.”

## Chapter Thirteen

*By the gods, I had no idea the ground was so far away. A mere strip of wooden ledge was all that separated Cethlenn from the plant beds and pine bark far below. Och, I’d forgotten how I hated the heights. So, I end up here, in this wee bit of trouble, like a stranded chick and the snake comin’.*

*And speaking o’ which, I wonder what the bloody bastard’s doin’ now.*

She heard the Father thundering around the lower floors, a bear deprived of his meal—a beast deprived of its prey.

She got eight inches of clearance before the attic window refused to budge further. Amanda was a thin child—Cethlenn could be grateful for that. She squeezed herself through the narrow space and into the cramped confines of the attic.

Boxes and other menacing shapes hulked in the gloom. Cethlenn felt among them, fingers probing for shelter. Her eyes refused to adjust—the darkness wrapped around her like a living cloak. Every breath sounded loud to her; every creak in the floor seemed to scream betrayal to the -Father below. And always, it seemed that eyes watched from just over her shoulder.

She found a trunk, half empty, with old dresses and blankets in it. With a muttered prayer of thanks to the gods of her past, Cethlenn clambered in, pulled scratchy, dusty cloth over her head, and went to sleep.

Belinda snapped the sight onto the silver handgun and loaded the single cartridge into the chamber. There was a smooth click as the bolt slid home. She thumbed the safety, then laid the gun on her lap, pointed towards the passenger door.

“I want you to drive down to the other side of the horse stables you’ll see on the left,” she said to Mel as neutrally as possible. She didn’t look at him. She began cutting narrow strips of cloth from her red skirt and tying them together. “Wait for me just down from the intersection. As soon as I’m done with this, I’ll hike through the woods and take you to pick up your kid.”

“Is she around here somewhere?” Mel asked, unable to conceal his avarice.

“General vicinity,” Belinda told him. She knew what he wanted, and she tried to summon up the appropriate wariness—then the wariness melted into her overall exhaustion. *I’m getting paranoid. Mel’s been waiting for this TK kid for a long time. It’s only natural he should want to know where she is. He won’t double-cross me—not after I’ve done so much for him. And not with all the dirt I have on him.* She smiled at her employer and said slowly, “Sorry I snapped at you. I’m edgy, Mel. I’ll feel better when we get the girl and get the hell out of North Carolina. This place is driving me up the wall. I feel like every Billy-Bob G.I. jerk in this state is trying to get in the way of my job.”

He nodded, his own smile, thin-lipped and unpleasant. “Don’t worry about it, Belinda. I understand.”

Belinda got out of the car and watched Mel drive off in the direction she’d indicated. Then she walked well into the woods, tied the red strips around a tree, and paced off two hundred and fifty yards to one side of that point, keeping a clear line of fire in mind. Belinda checked her watch—only fifteen minutes more until Mac Lynn would walk into her sights.

\* \* \*

Lianne got out of the police car and breathed a sigh of relief. It was over. The cops had found the information in her kidnapper’s purse very helpful—they’d traced the aliases back to Berkeley, California, and a woman named Belinda Ciucci, an ex-cop whose record ran to such interesting charges as grand-theft auto, kidnapping, and murder. They’d located her hotel room and staked it out; the woman was going to return to find company waiting. The policemen would be by the apartment later for more information; until they arrived, Lianne had been instructed to take it easy.

Those were pretty much the same instructions the nurse in the E.R. had sent her home with. Her three broken ribs weren’t misaligned—and how she’d lucked out there, she had no idea, what with all the twisting and turning and bumping around. The swelling in her face would have to go down before a doctor could tell how much work her nose and cheekbone fractures were going to require—if any. She didn’t have any dangerous injuries, only ones that hurt. The folks in the E.R. had been sympathetic and encouraging. They’d given her scrips for an antibiotic and a painkiller, told her to put ice on all the swollen places, and to avoid any further excitement. She’d called her principal—and verified that, yes, she was in the emergency room and she wasn’t faking all this and that, yes, the policewere involved, and that she was the victim of something they could not specify. She could only imagine what stories would spread around the teachers’ lounge in her absence—everything from rape by her racecar boyfriend to kidnapping by terrorists.

*Certainly nice to know I have both medical and legal backing for taking a day or two off. I don’t think I could face a class anytime soon. Soon as I let Mac know I’m all right, I’m going to lie down, take my pills, and sleep for the rest of the day.*

Lianne felt around inside her mailbox for the spare key taped there, and walked across the quad.

When she put the key into the lock, she realized the door hadn't been locked in the first place. She walked in, ready to take off if anything seemed out of the ordinary. The place was a disaster—Lianne vaguely remembered how it got that way. It was dark inside. She moved quietly through the living room down to the hall and opened all three doors soundlessly. The rooms were undisturbed and nothing was missing. No one was hiding in any of the corners or under the bed. In spite of the mess in the living room, the apartment felt safe and peaceful again. Lianne breathed a sigh of relief. *Thank God for small blessings*, she thought, and headed to the kitchen to fix herself a cup of hot tea to go with her pills.

She noticed a piece of paper taped to the kitchen entryway. She pulled it down and stared at it. It was writing that looked vaguely Arabic or Hebraic or—Her brows knit in puzzlement. Not that—and not anything else she'd ever seen, either. There were lines that were clearly a map to somewhere, but the directions on it weren't anything she could decipher.

With the map in hand, she walked into the kitchen—

Or at least, she intended to. As she stepped across the threshold, her skin tingled and smoke and mist swirled around her. For an instant, she felt nothing under her feet at all. She screamed—and finished the step she had started into the kitchen.

*Mac, you scum-sucking worm, what did you do?*

She wasn't in the kitchen anymore. The smoke was even thicker here, blown by an intermittent breeze. She landed on her hands and knees in wet, tenacious mud, and caught her breath as her ribs reminded her of their injuries. She looked up at the soaring, sad remains of what had been an ancient forest. The massive ruins of burned trees towered over her, and a few unbelievably beautiful survivors in front of her made her heart ache for the lost glory. *I wish I could have seen this place before the fire*, she thought, surprising herself with the strength of that wish. *It must have been heavenly.*

She pulled the note she'd carried out of the mud, and looked at it gloomily. It was muddied and torn. She considered tossing it out, then decided against it. *Probably Mac's shopping list, written in elvish*, she thought. *But about the time I throw it out, it will be important.*

Lianne heard the quick, faint pounding of horse's hooves, steadily growing louder as she listened. After a moment, she saw a fair-haired man galloping toward her astride a huge chestnut horse. It was an elf—which meant this arrival of burned forest to the middle of her kitchen *was* Mac's doing.

*I knew it.* Lianne felt a bit smug at how calmly she was taking all this. *I'm getting very rational about facing all these little episodes. Becoming quite the survivor.* She licked her dry lips and told her queasy stomach that this was just business as usual. At least, she thought it was business as usual. *Or else I've gone round the bend entirely, and I'll wake up in a charming little padded room wearing an I-love-me jacket.* She maintained her relaxed facade as the elf reined in his horse in front of her and rested one hand on the butt of a small machine gun, the kind she saw terrorists in news-shots toting.

*Machine gun? Oh well, Mac races cars, so what's the difference?*

"Hi," she said, wriggling her fingers feebly, in what was supposed to be a friendly, harmless wave. "I've got a note that I'm sure someone here could read." She waved the muddy paper up at him, and the elf took it suspiciously. He scanned it, muttered "Ah, bloody hell!" and reached down to pull Lianne onto the saddle behind him.

He was stronger than he looked. She sailed through the air, shrieking at the pain caused by the rough handling. “Hold on,” the elf commanded, ignoring her cries, and launched the horse into a gallop that was closer to flight than any four-legged beast should have been able to manage. The horse’s gait wasn’t as rough as that of horses Lianne had ridden before, but with her renewed pain, she wasn’t inclined towards favorable comparisons.

“I’d rather walk!” she yelled. “My ribs are killing me!”

The elf ignored her. Horse and rider danced through the trees, leaping dark, charred, human-looking forms that Lianne realized with sudden horror were bodies. The destruction wasn’t limited to trees.

There had been a fight here—no, not a fight, a war. These were the survivors. No wonder this elf wasn’t -impressed by a couple of cracked ribs and a broken face.

She decided she didn’t want to walk after all.

In quick glimpses through the wreathing smoke and mist, she caught sight of an open glade where rows of the dead were laid side by side, dreadful wounds visible on most; groups of the fair-haired elves digging beneath the roots of trees, burying their dead; shock and sorrow in pale faces, the grim set to mouths and eyes of people determined to survive and go on.

The destruction was recent; so recent that one or two fires still smoldered. *What’s happened here?* she wondered. *What have I walked into—is Mac in this mess somewhere?*

“Felouen,” the elf in front of her called. “A note for you from Maclyn. This human brought it.”

Felouen, grime-streaked and weary-looking, put down her shovel and took the muddy paper. Lianne saw the paper glow blue, and suddenly it was clean and untormented. Felouen read, and with a puzzled expression, looked directly at Lianne.

She was incredibly beautiful—and vaguely familiar. “You are Lianne, the woman who saved my life yesterday, aren’t you?” she asked.

The elf in front of her turned around and stared at his passenger with amazement. Lianne blushed. “Yes. I am.”

“Then this letter doesn’t make any sense. Maclyn says he’s gone to a place near the Bal-A-Shar Stables to pay your ransom and rescue you from the woman who kidnapped you, and that once you’re safe, he’s going to pick up the little girl who caused all this damage and bring her back here. He wanted my help in rescuing you.” She shook her head. “Unless he’s already rescued you?”

Now Lianne was just as puzzled. “No. I got away by myself. She was going to kill me, but I clobbered her with a tire iron and stole her car. That was hours ago, uh, hours ago, back there, that is.” She waved in the direction she thought her kitchen was. *God, this is like The Lion, The Witch, and The Wardrobe. I’ve got a tunnel to Narnia in my kitchen, she thought crazily. Why my kitchen? Was it more convenient than the closet, or is it just because I don’t have a wardrobe?*

Felouen rubbed an incongruously dirty finger along the side of her nose. “I don’t understand, then. When this abductor spoke to Mac, you must already have escaped her, for he couldn’t have spoken to her before this. What can she hope to accomplish if you got away?”

Lianne frowned. “Maybe she thinks she can trick him into giving her money—no!” The real answer hit her, and she groaned. “I was just bait to lure him to her. She hates him. The whole time she was beating up on me last night, she kept saying, ‘This is for you, Mac Lynn. Next time it’ll be you.’ She’s crazy. She’ll kill him, I swear she will.”

Felouen snarled, her face transformed into a mask of anger, no less beautiful but so frightening that Lianne shrank back from her. “No, she won’t. I won’t lose another of my folk today.”

The elven woman whistled, and a black steed materialized out of the smoke-laden mist. “You’ll ride with me,” she told Lianne, as she leapt into the saddle.

“Oh, God,” Lianne whispered, but only to herself. “I don’t know if I can take any more of this.” But they had plainly endured so much more, she was ashamed of her few piddly broken bones. She slid off the back of one elvensteed and cried out as her feet hit the ground.

“You’re hurt,” Felouen said in surprise, as Lianne’s exclamation of pain penetrated her anger.

Lianne was a little blunter than she would have liked. “No lie. Three broken ribs, a broken nose, a bunch of abrasions, and pain that just won’t quit.”

Felouen reached for Lianne and muttered under her breath. In an instant, warmth spread through her broken bones, and the pain thinned and paled and sank without a trace. “I have dealt with the pain and strengthened the broken bones—everything else will have to heal naturally. I don’t have enough power yet to do much more.” The elvish woman sighed. “But I owe you my life—and you’d slow us both down hurt like that.”

“Thanks,” Lianne said, not quite certain how to react to the elven woman’s words, but grateful for the relief. “This is the best I’ve felt in quite a while.”

“Good. Let’s get to Mac before that madwoman does.” Felouen gave Lianne a hand up and clicked her tongue once. The magnificent black steed raced back to where the devastated splendor of the elven world met Lianne’s kitchen.

Amanda-Alice woke with a start. She felt around -herself—she was in a box, with cloth over her. It was pitch-dark, and the place where she was smelled musty. She was stiff and sore. She tried to stretch, but the box was too small. She pushed the cloth off of her, and things smelled better immediately. There was some light, too, but not much. Amanda-Alice sat up.

*I’m in the attic. Yuck. It’s always dusty in the attic. I’ll bet I got dust on my clothes.*

She climbed out of the box. Father was downstairs, thumping around. From time to time, he’d yell “Amanda! Amanda! Get down here right now!”

*That Cethlenn is a bad person, for a grownup, Amanda-Alice thought. She doesn’t mind what she’s told. I’m -going to tell Father on her. If I don’t, he might think I don’t mind any better than she does.*

Amanda-Alice walked to the attic stairs and opened the door quietly. She walked out to the steps, and

closed the door just as quietly behind her—*I never slam doors like some people do*. She walked down the stairs primly, like a lady, the way Father said to. It sounded like he was going through the bedrooms. Amanda-Alice followed the sound and spotted him in the guest bedroom, digging through the closets.

“Here I am, Father,” Amanda-Alice said. “Cethlenn wouldn’t let me come when you called.”

She saw her father’s back stiffen, and he turned. The fury on his face was something Amanda-Alice had never seen before; she backed up, frightened. “I’m sorry,” she said. “Cethlenn made me. I couldn’t help it. I’m sorry, I really am.”

He growled, while his face got redder and redder. “You’re sorry?” he breathed. “You’re sorry? Not as sorry as you’re going to be, you little bitch. Where the hell have you been hiding?”

Amanda-Alice gasped, confusion spreading through her at his tone as much as what he had just said. He had never, ever, spoken to her like that. She responded automatically, in shock, in the only way a good girl could when a grownup said anything so outrageous to her. “Those are bad words! You said never to say bad words.”

He grabbed her thin shoulders with his big, thick hands and shook her. In a slow, deliberate voice, he said, “Never correct me.” He slapped her across the face once, hard, and Amanda-Alice felt tears spring to her eyes. Why was he acting like this? Hadn’t she come as soon as she heard him?

“I asked you where you were,” he said slowly, his eyes full of fury.

She pointed timidly toward the attic. “Up there.”

“I looked up there,” he muttered, as if he didn’t believe her.

Hoping to appease him, Amanda-Alice said, “Cethlenn made me climb up the drain spout after you went out. She was being very bad.”

In the back of her mind, Amanda-Alice felt Cethlenn wake up and look through her eyes in horror. *Ah, child, what have ye’ done? We’re in his hands, are we? We’re doomed*. She felt Cethlenn moving around in her mind, looking for Abbey and Anne. Suddenly she hoped that the witch would find Anne, the magic-maker, the only one of them with any power. This was not the father she knew. This was a stranger, an angry, unpredictable, frightening stranger. Could he—could Father have people inside him, too. . . . ?

And Cethlenn was afraid of him. That made her even more frightened. What did Cethlenn know that she didn’t, that made her so afraid?

Father stared at her. “You’re filthy,” he whispered. “But it doesn’t matter now, does it? You’re too big and too ugly and too dirty and too bad—and you’re calling attention to yourself. Sharon will have to do in your place. She’s younger than you, anyway—and she’s not a little slut.”

Sharon? What did Sharon have to do with this? Amanda-Alice was even more frightened. She knew she was bad—she had to be, Father said so—but why did he call her *abad word* ?

He grabbed the back of Amanda-Alice’s neck and propelled her out of the guest bedroom and down the hall toward the stairs. “I’m going to have to get rid of you,” he told her coldly, all of his anger turned inside, but still there for all that it was hidden. “Before that frigid whore Meryll gets home.”

Get rid of her? How? Why? What was he going to do?

She resisted a moment, and he shoved her forward, making her stumble. “Come on, you. Don’t drag your feet.” She looked back over her shoulder and shivered to see his smile. He wasn’t talking to her—he was talking to himself. “Whatever it was that happened at the pony barn, it turned out to be good for me. Now the cops are going to look all over hell and gone for my mysterious enemy when they find you.”

“F-f-find me?” she faltered. “F-f-father? Where are we going?”

He laughed, and something deep inside her went very small and very still. “We’re going down to your step-mother’s barn,” he said, softly, “with all her precious horses. You’re going to make me happy. And then there’s going to be an awful accident.”

Maclyn stroked Rhellen’s dashboard. The elvensteed had been disgruntled to have to impersonate a battered yellow VW Bug. Then his mood had turned playful. He’d let Mac know in every possible way that such vehicles were far beneath his dignity, and he’d better not be asked to humble himself again in such a demeaning way. Mac hadn’t had the heart to tell him about D.D.’s death, or about the massacre of the elves of Elfhome Outremer. Not yet. Instead, he took the teasing in silence because he knew the elvensteed was only trying to amuse him. Gradually, though, his mood communicated itself to the great beast, who withdrew into a state of watchful silence.

Mac and Rhellen raced in mounting uneasiness along the back roads to the spot Belinda had indicated. Maclyn thought it odd that she would pick a spot so near the place where he had intended to go next—but he told himself it was about time something worked to his advantage. Certainly the god of Luck had not been with him until now.

There was no sign of a car at the pull-off she’d indicated, nor of a place to hide one. He parked where Belinda had said, watching warily for a sign of long red hair. Then he got out of Rhellen with his case in one hand. He patted the VW on the fender with the other.:*Stay put.*: he said.:*See if you can spot where she’s hidden her get-away car.*:

Rhellen communicated anxiety.

He shared it.:*I know, old friend. This is a bad situation. I’ll be careful. But remember, this is your old buddy Belinda we’re dealing with, okay? She won’t get away with anything, especially not sneaking up on me. She moves through the woods like an ox on skis.*:

Rhellen’s soft mumbles subsided. Mac turned, counter-feit payoff in hand, and strode confidently across the road. He slipped silently into the woods, eyes open for anything that might be a clue to Lianne’s prison, ears alert for the faintest crunch of Belinda’s footsteps. He spotted the red marker easily and moved up to it, watching for traps.

Strangely, the woods appeared to be completely devoid of Belinda or Lianne.

He wondered if he could be early. He glanced at his watch, then turned slowly to scan the woods.



She didn't see him until he was in front of the tree. *How the hell does he do that?* she wondered. But how he did it didn't matter. Not really. He wouldn't be doing it anymore.

Belinda lined up the cross-hairs on her scope—a nice, dependable chest shot. The gun had enough punch to kill him from the distance she was at, without being close enough for him to hear or see her, no matter how good his eyes and ears were. Her finger tightened on the trigger. She waited while he dropped the case. Then he turned, slowly, scanning the woods, moving beautifully into a full-face shot.

It was perfect.

At the instant that she pulled the trigger, he spotted her, and through the scope, she could see that his face wore an expression of terrible shock and dismay. And fear. It was beautiful, it was wonderful, it was the sweet taste of -revenge.

In the next instant, a red blossom appeared on the white of his shirt, high and to his left. The heart—she couldn't have hit it more perfectly if she had been a surgeon working on an operating table.

Belinda stood and smiled, and ran through the fringe of woods at the edge of the child's home, on her way to pick up Mel.

God, but revenge was sweet.

Rhellen heard a “crack” from the woods that Mac had walked into, and felt his partner suddenly overcome by pain and fear. He charged toward the sensations that were coming from Maclyn, shape-shifting out of his assumed form on the run. He crashed through the underbrush. To his right, running away, he saw the red-headed woman.

He felt fury, but he didn't dare follow her. He had to find Maclyn.

A clump of white showed up in the dimming light, along with red. Rhellen trotted toward it, smelling blood as he got closer. He tossed his head and snorted. Mac didn't answer, not by voice or in Mindspeech.

The white clump was Mac, all right. The elvensteed put his nose down and nudged the elf, whickering softly and radiating concern.

Mac's eyes didn't open. He didn't respond in any way.

Rhellen grew afraid. He knew he could take Maclyn back to help, though. Lianne's house had a Gate in it—he could go there.

He flattened himself in the middle and slipped under Maclyn like a knife shaving butter, then formed around Mac to prevent moving or jostling him in any way. Then he left the woods, rushing towards Lianne's house, ignoring the roads.

Amanda-Alice felt a jostling in her head, as she was suddenly joined by Amanda-Abbey and Cethlenn.

They were tied at wrists and ankles, their mouths gagged, in the unused stall at the end of the stables. The Father stood bent over a little, a few feet away from them, spreading gasoline around the inside of the barn. He ranted under his breath, “This will show Merryll. Let’s see how she feels about all of her damned horses going up in smoke.”

“Happy, you little whore?” he asked from time to time, looking into the stall where Cethlenn and the Amandas lay. “You won’t ever disobey me again. Filthy slut.”

Cethlenn struggled with the bonds, trying to work free. It was no use. The Father had too much practice with this—he knew how to tie up a child so that she couldn’t slither free. Both girls were crying and shrieking. Alice was incoherent—she’d been the most sheltered from the Father’s abuse—but Abbey was clear enough.: *We’re -going to die! Help us, Cethlenn! Help us!:*

Cethlenn wanted to weep; she was as helpless as they were. All of her magics required free hands and supplies, neither of which they had.: *If we had Anne, she could get us out of here. We have the bracelet on—she knows how to use the Gate. Can’t you find her? Bring her back, tell her we need her.:*

The children cried, and Alice answered for both of them.: *She’s gone. She isn’t real anymore. I made her go away.:*

Cethlenn steeled herself. She’d passed through this once, already. Surely death could be no harder a second time?: *Och, my darlings, we’re all going to cease to be real in a few minutes.:* She held her mental arms out for them, and they huddled inside.: *I cannot protect you, my little ones. Only Anne could do that. But I will be with you. I will not leave you alone.:*

The Father finished spreading the gasoline, and came in and squatted in the straw next to Amanda. He stroked her back in a manner that made Cethlenn’s skin crawl and grinned down at them.

“We need to have one last party, little Amanda.”

He stared down at her and frowned. “Shit. You look just like your mother, you know that? I killed her, too. Did you know that? I’ll bet you didn’t.” He sat by the child. The smell of gasoline was sharp and overwhelming in the back of their throat. “She found out what I was doing with you—she didn’t like it.”

He laughed and stood up, and began pulling down his pants. “So I had her committed to a nuthouse, and I hired a woman to go in, pretend she was crazy, and get close to her. That woman slit her wrists for her. Suicide—isn’t that great? Everybody felt so sorry for me. And that left me with you.”

Pants down, he knelt beside Amanda and smiled. “We’ve had lots of fun, too, haven’t we? You’ve liked it, huh? Daddy’s little girl. Filthy bitch. Oh, you liked it. You wanted it. You asked for it.”

Cethlenn tried to call the bastard something crude, but the gag in her mouth changed her curses to a few weak grunts.

“Yeah,” he said, “I’m going to have to take the gag out until we’re done, Amanda. My little whore. Just like your mother now—” His eyes got a glazed look to them, and his face reddened. “I want to hear you tell me that you like it. Tell me that you want it.”

He pulled Amanda’s blue jeans down around her ankles, worked her panties down past her knees. Behind Cethlenn, Alice and Abbey screamed, frightened.

He was breathing hard and obviously very excited. *In my time, you pervert, we'd have cut your balls off and fed them to you raw*, Cethlenn thought.

The Father took the gag out of their mouth. "Tell me you want it," he said thickly. "One last time."

Mel and Belinda had seen the girl and her father go into the barn from their hiding place behind one of the horse troughs in the paddocks. Mel had grinned at her after checking the readings on his own black box. "Good job, Belinda. The kid's as hot as you said she was. I was starting to have some doubts about you."

Belinda felt cheerful and relaxed, now that it was -almost over. Within a few hours she'd have her pay. Within twenty-four, she'd be on a beach somewhere. Bermuda, maybe. "I'm sorry about that, Mel. I just couldn't get the racecar driver. From now on, I'll know never to try collecting adults. The real TK's are too dangerous. We'll just have to get 'em while they're kids."

Mel nodded, as if she had just told him something profound. "I'll remember that. It's an important point." He faced Belinda. "You think there will be any danger from this one?"

*From a kid? How could there be?* She rolled her eyes. "Christ, Mel—she's only ten years old. What the hell could a ten-year-old do?"

He shook his head, as if he hadn't intended to say that. "Yes. You're right, of course. Still, I have my gun with me."

Belinda watched the barn, and with a puzzled glance at Mel, started inching toward it, keeping behind available cover. "They're taking a long time in there," she whispered. "I'm not sure I like this. I think there's something wrong."

Mel followed, nodding, a look of concern on his face.

The lovely old post-and-beam wood barn had been moved from another part of the country and restored by real craftsmen, using the original wood wherever possible. The finished building had all the charm of the original, with a few modern amenities required by a modern horse--breeding operation. But the knotholes in the siding had -remained. Belinda found one and looked in it.

"Horse's rear end," she whispered. "What a view."

She moved down the side, looking through whatever cracks or gaps came her way. At the far end of the old barn, she stopped and stared.

*Jesus Christ. Jesus H. Christ.* Her mind babbled obscenities, as her stomach churned. She turned away, the blood draining from her face, struggling to control her sickness.

Mel noticed her expression and pressed his eye to the hole. After a moment, he shrugged and turned to Lianne. "I'm surprised you're squeamish about *that*," he whispered. "Research seems to indicate that that's the sort of thing that brings out TK talents in some of these kids." He watched her, his expression suddenly fascinated. "My God, that really bothers you. I didn't think anything bothered you."

She swallowed. She tried to tell herself it didn't matter; in a few hours Mel would have the kid out of this stinking barn and into a sheltered, cozy environment. She knew that; she knew he'd treat his little prize like the pearl she was, like a precious gem. She'd never even have to think of this again. "I didn't realize we'd be doing her a favor taking her away from here," Belinda whispered. "All of a sudden I feel like a goddamned hero."

Mel chuckled. "Don't let it go to your head," he told her as he climbed over the fence and headed around to the back door of the barn. He tried it and found it locked. He headed toward the front door. "If we have to rape the kid from time to time to keep her talents sharp, we will."

Suddenly, she didn't feel like such a hero. Suddenly, Mel's back was a very attractive target.

Mel disappeared into the barn.

Belinda's head swam, and the sharp burn of vomit hung in the back of her throat. There had been a fat old geezer in the upstairs apartment who'd groped her up when she was a kid. It sure as hell hadn't been her dad. She didn't remember much, and she hadn't ever been able to like men after the little bit she'd been through; now she wondered how this kid felt.

And Mel had nonchalantly said he'd see that the girl was tortured after they got her away from here if that kept her TK magic operating well.

Belinda gritted her teeth and stroked the holster that held her pistol under her jacket. There were financial considerations to be kept in mind, of course, but once she and Mel got the girl out to California, Mel might find that he wasn't going to do that, after all. He might find out it would be a good idea to treat the little girl like a god-damned princess.

Lianne gave directions to Felouen, who passed them on to her elvensteed, who had transformed into a jet-black Lamborghini. The three of them moved along the roads so fast the only scenery that wasn't blurred was that which was directly in front of them.

The topic of what had happened in Elfhome Outremer had been exhausted, and so had the subject of what had happened to Lianne.

The one thing they hadn't discussed was Mac. That subject hung heavily in the air.

Lianne broke the uncomfortable silence. She cleared her throat and said, "He'll be fine, I think." She was trying to offer reassurance to the elven woman, who was wired tighter than a banjo from tension, as best Lianne could tell. She also found that talking was better than silence. It helped keep her mind off of how fast they were going. She couldn't help but be bothered by the fact that Felouen's hands weren't on the steering wheel. "He knows so many tricks—how could a human hurt him?"

Felouen never took her eyes off the road. "My -opinion of the damage a human can cause has gone way up," she said. "And Maclyn is an idiot. I love him," she muttered, "but all that proves is that I'm an idiot, too."

Lianne stared at Felouen. "You love him?"

The elven woman stared stonily out the window. "I have for several hundred years. It's been a most

unrewarding occupation.”

Lianne folded her hands on her lap and fixed her eyes on the road ahead of them. Her exhaustion must have just caught up with her, because she started speaking before her brain had a chance to clear the words. “I see. But you’re beautiful, and you’re intelligent, and you’re an elf, too. Why—?”

“Why doesn’t he love me?” Felouen’s lips quirked into a lopsided smile, finishing the question for her. “Why can’t you hold the stars in your hands, and why can’t you fly if you want to badly enough? The answer is—‘Because that is not the way the universe works.’ Maclyn is destined to break his heart loving humans, I suppose, and I am destined to break my heart loving him. Just because we are near-immortal in your eyes, it does not follow that we cannot be killed—and just because we have the wisdom of the ages at our disposal, it does not follow that we are wise.”

Lianne nodded, but remained silent.

The elven woman suddenly looked over at her. “I never thought I could envy a human,” she said, “but I do envy you. I’ve had his sympathy, but you’ve had his love.”

A familiar-looking golden Chevy roared past them, going in the opposite direction. Felouen’s elvensteed bellowed like a foghorn and did a sudden controlled-spin turn that threw Felouen and Lianne around inside.

*God, I’m glad this particular elvensteed belted us in, she thought. A stunt like that in Rhellen would have turned us into tomato paste on the windshield.*

And indeed, Rhellen had slowed cautiously and made a careful turn that Lianne could have imagined her grandmother making. *That isn’t how Mac usually drives,* she thought at the same moment that Felouen said, “Moortha just told me Rhellen says Maclyn is hurt.”

Lianne shook her head. “No. He’ll be fine. I know he will.”

Felouen smiled at her, a slow, gentle smile that didn’t even begin to hide the pain in her eyes. “You also love him,” she said. “I’m glad for that, at least. The woman who broke his heart so long ago never really did.” She patted Lianne’s hand as the two cars pulled even with each other and came to a stop. “We’re allies for now,” she said.

The two women got out of the car and ran to the door Rhellen had opened for them. He’d rearranged his interior so that there was nothing inside but a firm, supporting mattress that contoured around the wounded passenger, holding him firmly in place.

“Gunshot,” Felouen said, looking critically at the unconscious elf. She pressed her hands against his chest and his shirt faded out of being.

*Oh God. Oh my God—*Lianne had seen enough cop shows to know where the heart was. And she had seen enough bodies in the past few hours to know what death looked like. Waxy, pale—with a bullet hole in his upper chest that no longer bled. . . . Lianne bit her lip, and felt her eyes fill with tears. “Right through his heart,” she whispered. “He must have died instantly.”

Felouen turned around with a quizzical expression on her face. “Heart? Not at all. That’s down here,” she said, pressing her hand low on the center of his chest. “Lucky he wasn’t human. That shot was very carefully placed.” She suddenly grinned. “Lucky the woman was such a good shot. She hit a lung . . .

some big blood vessels . . . we can fix this.”

*No, I can't believe it. It can't be true, she's just humoring me . . .*

“Really.” Lianne tried to smile, but her lip quivered. Felouen gave her a long look—and took both her shoulders in her hard hands, shaking her like a stubborn child.

“Yes, you little fool! He'll be fine! I can fix him, I can do it *right now*.” She punctuated each word with another shake, until Lianne finally had belief shaken into her.

Felouen let go of her shoulders, with a mutter of “damn fool mortals,” and sighed. “Well, I can do a little for him, and there are others Underhill who can do more. Shit, I wish I had my strength back. And you don't even have much you can loan me.”

Rhellen rumbled, and Felouen eyed him speculatively. “Well, there is always drawing from you, isn't there?” The car flashed his lights emphatically, and she smiled slightly, and nodded. “We'll do it. Thank you, Rhellen.”

Felouen pressed one hand on Rhellen's doorframe, and one on Mac, and sang a soft, minor-key song in a beautiful language Lianne had never heard before. It was hard to believe mere words could be so beautiful, but the teacher felt a poignant sense of loss with each syllable—that this was a world that she could only know briefly from its periphery. The only other time she felt this way was when she watched a Space Shuttle fly. . . .

Lianne rested her hands on Mac's leg and willed him to get better. Felouen's head snapped around, startled, and then she gave the teacher a smile full of gratitude while she sang.

Under their hands, Maclyn groaned and shifted. Felouen kept singing, Lianne kept willing her strength into him—

And he sat up and spoke—dazed, but with only one thing on his mind, and that driving him past all sense or personal injury.

“We have to get to Amanda.”

Amanda-Abbey and Amanda-Alice clung to each other and cried.: *I'm sorry, Anne.*: Alice sobbed.: *I didn't know! Please come back. Please help us!*: Gentle Abbey was too much in shock to do anything but weep.

Cethlenn pressed the two of them against her chest and cried helplessly herself, as all three of them shared the pain of the body they lived in. There was no protecting them this time. They were going to die, and before they did, they had to go through this. *Anne could have saved them—Anne would never have been caught by the bastard in the first place, she thought grimly. But if she hadn't protected them quite so well, they would have known not to trust him.* Cethlenn wiped viciously at her own tears. “*If only*”—*the most useless words in any language. Limit the damage as best you can,* she told herself.

Abbey, as frightened as her sister, and even more stunned, kept thinking, *Anne saved us from this. She let him hurt her like this so that we wouldn't be hurt. We never even knew.* She wrapped her arms

tighter around her remaining “sister” and closed her eyes. *You loved us, and we didn’t know enough to love you back. I’m sorry, Anne, Abbey called. Wherever you are, I’m sorry. I love you. Please, please come back. I really love you. We really love you. . . .*

Belinda followed Mel into the cavernous barn, stepping softly. She felt her trigger finger twitching. The idea of seeing the child’s father with his brains spattered all over the barn wall became increasingly attractive to her with every passing moment. *Funny, she thought. I would have figured I had run out of noble motives for doing things a long time ago. It’s interesting what you find out about yourself.*

The barn smelled—Belinda reflected that all barns smelled, but this one didn’t smell right. The usual animal odors were there, but the place also smelled like—gasoline. Ugh! Just what her already-queasy stomach needed. Lucky she hadn’t eaten since—God, sometime yesterday. She decided she was going to take better care of herself as soon as this mess was over.

In front of her, Mel pulled his gun out and shoved the stall door open with his foot.

“Good afternoon,” he told the man, leveling his gun at him. “I regret having to interrupt your recreation, but we are in a bit of a hurry. So if you will just put the child down and step away from her, I won’t have to shoot you.”

The man stared stupidly at them. It took him a moment to see the gun, another few seconds for him to pull away from the child. He stood, pulling up his pants as he did, his face vacant and still.

“Very good. Bend down and pick up the girl while I cover him please, Belinda.”

Belinda knelt and began untying the child and trying to rearrange her clothes, while the girl stared at her, disoriented and disbelieving.

“No, don’t bother with that,” Mel said. “Her father has conveniently packaged her for transport. Just pick her up and let’s be going.”

Belinda turned and snarled, “For godsakes, Mel, let me fix her clothes, at least.”

“Do what I tell you,” Mel said, coolly.

Without thinking, Belinda reached into her jacket -toward her holster. Mel caught the movement, and his gun -wavered for an instant between the man and her.

Lianne followed elves and elvensteeds across the yard toward the barn, running as fast as she could and falling behind again. Mac had paused just long enough to drop Lianne at the edge of the stable-area, then he and Felouen had headed straight for the barn. He’d probably intended for Lianne to stay out of this—but Amanda was her -pupil, and she was, by God, going to be there. She’d expected for them to storm the house, but instead, Mac had shouted something about “bad magic at the barn,” and the elves and their mounts headed that way.

She saw the elvensteeds hit the barn doors with their hooves. At the first blow, the doors flew open, and Mac, Rhellen, Felouen, and Moortha charged in.

Lianne was just inside the barn when the screaming -began.

Andrew knew it was over the second the stranger kicked the door open. His mind raced, even as he feigned shock. He took his time, cultivated his face into a mask of stupidity, and did everything he could to make pulling up his pants seem the harmless actions of a stunned man.

His law career was over. This would get out, and he would find himself in prison. He knew what inmates did to men they found out were child-molesters.

His marriage was over—Merryl and her million-dollar dowry and her pliable, beautiful young daughter were as good as gone already.

He had nothing to lose but his life, and that had ceased to have any value. He decided then that he might as well die—but he wanted the people who had cost him everything to die with him. When the crash at the front of the barn drew everyone's attention away from him, his hand was into his pocket and out again before they could -notice. His lighter was in his hand, and no one had seen. He clutched a wad of straw in the same hand.

The man with the gun swore and looked around frantically. "Grab the kid and c'mon," he told the woman.

Pounding hooves clattered at the front of the barn. Whoever was up there would be here in a moment. His daughter looked around at the three of them, a puzzled expression on her face. Andrew noticed that her eyes suddenly looked pale, pale green in the dim light. He'd seen the change before, but never before had he wondered at the cause. Now, though, he had a little time for puzzlement; now, when there were only a few more moments left of his life, and everything was incredibly sharp-edged and clear.

His daughter frowned—an oddly adult frown—and the ropes fell off of her wrists and ankles although no one had untied her. She stood, pulled up her pants, and brushed away the red-headed woman's hand as if no effort were involved.

"You h-h-hurt them," the child said to him, and Andrew felt the chill of unreasoning, senseless fear. "You hurt me—and—I d-d-didn't like it, but I didn't h-h-hurt you back because you left them alone. But now you hurt—them!"

The red-haired woman and the man with the gun both made a grab for her. Two tall blond—rock stars, Andrew thought, for lack of a better term—appeared in the stall and grabbed the man with the gun without pausing for a second.

They threw him. Picked him up, and *threw* him over the stall door.

Odd. The blond bimbo looked like a rock star and dressed like a rock star, but she had pointed ears.

Andrew tried to use the chance to escape, and found himself unable to move. So, apparently, did the battered red-haired woman. She writhed in place, but her feet seemed to be rooted to the ground.

The blond man, who also had those odd pointed ears, walked over and lifted him easily. Andrew found himself slung across the man's shoulders, completely helpless, unable to move at all against the man's



unnatural strength. He didn't bother resisting after the initial attempt. It wouldn't change the outcome any.

Andrew thumbed the lighter, felt the straw ignite . . . and he opened his hand.

There was an instant when he wasn't certain it would work—but then the gasoline he'd poured around the -inside of the barn caught, and with a satisfying “*whump*,” the inside of the building blossomed into flame.

Horses shrieked, the pale man and the pale woman started in dismay, and Andrew knew he'd won after all.

## Chapter Fourteen

Fire licked within inches of them. The entire barn was in flames, there were strange people and guns and elves all over. None of it mattered—they were all together. Alice, Abbey, Cethlenn—and Anne. Alice and Abbey wiped tears from their eyes, and hugged her with illusory arms.

*:Anne, :Alice said with real joy, :you came back, you really came back! You aren't bad, you're good, you were right, I was wrong, you're good and you're strong, and—:*

Anne's lip quivered as she interrupted her sister. *:H-h-h-he killed . . . Mommy.:*

Abbey nodded solemnly and put her own arms around her sister, ignoring the flames that crept closer. *:He said so. He was glad about it. We hate him. Are you going to feed him to your monsters?:*

Anne shook her head slowly from side to side. *:N-n-no more m-m-m-monsters. That was bad. Th-th-they hurt lots of people, and nobody deserved it. I'm s-s-sorry about the monsters.:*

Alice crossed her snowy arms in front of her chest and pouted. *:But Father is very, very bad. Bad people deserve to be eaten by monsters.:*

Cethlenn rested her hand on Alice's shoulder. *:I don't think Anne wants to be the one to feed people to the monsters anymore. She hurts inside from all the pain the monsters caused.:*

Anne gave the witch a grateful look. *:Yes, : she said simply.*

The flames crackled and reached for the ceiling; horses screamed, including the strange elf-horses. That got their attention, and suddenly Abbey and Alice shrank against Cethlenn in fear. *:Are we all going to die in the fire?:* Abbey asked.

*:No. :Anne looked at her sisters, and smiled. It was the first time any of them had seen her smile. :I'm w-w-with you . . . now. We're g-g-going to g-g-g-get better.:*

Belinda backed away from the flames, but there was nowhere to escape. She was really trapped this

time, with no place to run, no place to hide. She wasn't alone, but that was no comfort. Even with an escort to Valhalla like this one—Mac Lynn, Miss Teach Lianne, the little girl, her disgusting father, Mel-the-bastard, millions of dollars worth of horses—it was no comfort at all.

All of them trapped in a burning barn, and not one of them had a way out.

*So much for noble intentions*, Belinda thought, looking at the little girl; for some obscure reason, tears clouded her eyes. *I would have saved you if I could have, kid. But now we're all going to die—because of that shitcan father of yours.*

All of them—including the racecar driver. Nice to know, after all her hard work, that he was finally going to cross the Great Divide. Where the hell did he get the Spock ears, anyway? He looked like some Hollywood director's idea of an elf. *How is he still alive after I put that bullet in his heart? And how did he pick up Mel and throw him like a baseball?*

She was perversely glad that Mel Tanbridge was going to get what was coming to him. She just wished she didn't have to go with him.

The smoke thickened, wreathing around her and making her cough, and she knelt down, sucking for air. Maybe it would be easier to stand and inhale the thick, acrid smoke into her lungs. Get it over with quicker.

*I just really don't want to die*, she thought, as her eyes streamed tears and her skin started feeling as if she was getting a bad sunburn. Only this sunburn was going to be a real bitch. . . .

Mac stared helplessly at the sudden eruption of flames that penned them in. Lianne grabbed his arm and looked up at him, trusting him to do some wonderful trick to rescue them. But Maclyn had been too badly hurt—he didn't have enough energy left to work the simplest spell, much less create a Gate. When he'd been shot, the -energy he'd been using to maintain the Gate in Lianne's apartment had snapped and drained off. That, as much as the bullet, had pushed him near death. Now he was fresh out of tricks.

Felouen, he knew, was no better off; she had drained herself to absolute exhaustion in order to heal the others, and had to borrow power from Rhellen to heal him. She told him with her eyes that she would be no help.

The old wood of the building burned like kindling.

*Wait a moment—*

There was a chance, Mac thought, looking frantically around, as his eyes lit on the terrified elvensteeds. The elvensteeds weren't immune to fire. But they might be able to transform, to take their riders out, shielded -inside them. They probably wouldn't survive—but maybe -humans and elves would. He grabbed Rhellen's mane and tried to communicate what he wanted to the terrified beast.

Amanda appeared at his side.

She put her hand on his, and he looked down at her, startled at the upwelling of power from the child. Her green eyes looked up into his. No more hate there, and no more fear. No insanity. He sensed that there were several people, still, inside her little head—but they were all together now, working as one.

“I know—the trick,” she said. She pressed the green bead at her wrist between her fingers, her eyes closing in concentration—

In front of them, with a rush of energy, a Gate -appeared.

The panicked elvensteeds dove into it. Lianne followed, with Felouen dragging Amanda’s father, and Amanda -holding back to maintain the Gate so that Maclyn and Belinda could escape as well. He reached for the child to pull her through.

Belinda suddenly shrieked “No!” and whirled to face them.

Mac froze. Belinda held a gun, leveled at him. “Let the kid go through, but you stay! You aren’t getting away again,” she shrieked, eyes glittering with madness. He opened his hands to reach for her; she was close enough—when a shape loomed out of the smoke and flames. It was the balding man they’d thrown, and *he* had a gun, too.

“Nobody move,” he shouted. Mac and Belinda saw him aim the weapon at the child. “She’s mine,” he screamed. “You won’t have her! Nobody gets her but me!”

Flames roared and circled them; Belinda’s eyes flicked from Mac to that son-of-a-bitch Mel. *Why isn’t he dead?* she wondered. He should have been. He was going to kill the rest of them—

Including the kid.

The kid didn’t deserve it. The kid deserved to go live in fairyland after what had happened to her. Not to die in a goddamn fire.

She bit her lip. Sweat streamed down her face, and she squinted against the worsening smoke.

*Dammit. One bullet—why did I leave everything in the car when I got ready to shoot Racer-Boy? One damned bullet—*

She could shoot Mac. Or she could save the kid. She couldn’t do both.

Belinda made her decision.

“Go!” she yelled to Mac, and the gun in her hands spit fire and bucked—and Mel staggered back, as a crimson dot appeared on his forehead.

*:I couldn’t hold the door anymore,: Anne said sadly, drooping with weariness.:I couldn’t get the lady out. I tried, but I was too tired.:*

Cethlenn looked around the charred remains of Elfhame Outremer, and said softly, *:You did the best you could, Anne. We all know that. I think you’ve made up for what happened to the elves.:*

Abbey hugged her, then Alice, trying to reassure her. *:You’re our sister,:* Alice whispered. *:We aren’t*

*mad at you anymore. You did the right things, and you tried to keep us safe. You saved all of us!:*

*:I'm really glad you came back,:Abbey added shyly.:We need you.:*

Anne smiled slowly, as if trying out the feeling for the first time.*:I need you, too.:*

Maclyn shuddered and took in huge gasps of clean, cool air. Behind them, the crashes of falling timbers, the roar of flames, and the anguished screams of horses echoed, even after the Gate snapped shut.

He could hardly believe their narrow escape. And that all of it had been caused by—or for—one small girl . . . that was the least believable of all.

Belinda hadn't made it. Mac straightened and stood in the forest of Elfhome Outremer, his eyes fixed on the place where the Gate had been. On the other side of it, she was dying horribly. She had saved Amanda's life at the last minute, Mac realized after a moment, and spared his. He still had no idea why she'd wanted to kill him in the first place, and he certainly couldn't fathom why she had saved him in the end. Or had it really been Amanda she was saving? He wondered if it was the only selfless thing she'd ever done—or if once she had been someone who had been worth knowing.

He turned away, saddened by the waste of her life.

Andrew Kendrick figured that he was probably insane. He should have died—but a blond bimbo with special-effects ears and eyes had pulled him through a hole in the air. At first, he'd thought it was some kind of new firefighting technique, and then he'd thought it was an hallucination.

He blacked out, and came to surrounded by a crowd of strangers; he thought then that he might be able to get away—the only witnesses to what he'd done to Amanda were dead, except for Amanda herself, and who'd believe a kid? But all the strangers had those weird ears and eyes, and wherever he was, it wasn't North Carolina.

He was wrestled to his feet with no consideration for his injuries before he could say a thing and hustled off into captivity. Since then, he'd been kept in a tiny cell, given sparse food and brackish water at odd intervals, and other-wise ignored. He was in some bizarre tree-world, and his cell had been the inside of a tree. That was when he figured he had gone insane, and there was no point in worrying about things.

The tall blond people—Sidhe, elves, he'd been told, and he'd stared at the speaker with disbelief, then laughed at him—had avoided him entirely until several hours ago, when two of them came and told him he was to be tried. He'd laughed at that, too, at the absurdity of it. But they'd hauled him away, and gradually he had to admit that whether or not he was insane, someone had him in their power, and that same someone had plans for him that he probably wasn't going to like.

Now he sat in a high-arching hall whose ceiling had recently been blasted open to the elements. The walls were scarred and pitted and burned. He'd noted that with a sort of detached interest as he'd been led into the hall. He wondered why the place was such a dump. What could possibly have happened here? It looked like a war zone.

The audience wore pointed ears, the jury and judge wore pointed ears—in fact, everyone except his

daughter and her damned teacher wore them. The sight of Lianne What's-Her-Name sitting there in the audience stunned him for a moment. Whatever in hell was happening here, she must have a hand in it. Was this the high school drama club's shindig, with the costumes and ears?

He began to think, coldly and with guile. The teacher had him stashed away somewhere. Eventually, he'd get away. Then he'd get her. . . .

As the trial ground on, he was told how this place the "elves" called Elfhome Outremer had come to be destroyed. He was told a litany of dead and injured that made him chuckle in disbelief. He also discovered that the elves maintained that sole responsibility for the damage and all the deaths fell to him.

Even given that these people were loonies, put up to this by Lianne Whatsis, Andrew Kendrick was having some difficulty with that. In the first place, he didn't believe that Amanda had done the things they said she had—if she had been able to make monsters out of thin air, and work "magic" like that, why hadn't she gone after him? Why hadn't she done something about their games?

The memory of what had happened to the pony barn intruded at that moment, but he pushed it resolutely away. Whatever had happened there, Amanda couldn't have been responsible. She was only one little girl, one stupid, slutish little girl. It must have some rational cause—and surely, surely some adult enemy had done it. Not the brat. Children were helpless, as they should be; property of those who fathered them.

Still, these "elves" insisted that was the truth. It only proved that they were loonies. He didn't know how Lianne Whatever had found them, but she sure fit right in with them.

Even if Amanda had been the cause for the "elves' " injuries, he didn't see how he could be legally held responsible for her insane outbreak. *He* hadn't conjured monsters or whatever the hell they were saying she'd done. He couldn't have if he tried—they even admitted that. But they were saying *hemade* Amanda do it—and he'd never heard of any charge as crazy as that, not even in the kangaroo courts of Iran and Iraq.

Nuts. They were nutcases, one and all. Maybe Lianne had dragged him off to a nuthouse somehow?

But even nuts responded to some kind of logic, and before he could think about getting away, getting back to Fayetteville, he'd have to convince them that he was inno-cent. Since Amanda was admittedly as crazy as they were, she must be lying, and he was innocent of whatever they thought he had done. All right, they were trying him as some kind of an accomplice, perhaps. Why should he even have to take the rap for that? The "elves" didn't have any hard evidence. The testimony of a kid the "elves" frankly admitted had serious psychological problems wouldn't have held water for a second back in Fayetteville.

He summoned his best judicial manner and stood up to speak his piece. But when he'd tried his rebuttal, he'd been firmly silenced and told that in Elfhome Outremer, he had no rights. No speech of any kind on his part would be permitted.

At that point, he was just about ready to explode. He kept his mouth shut only by reminding himself that there were other loonies on the "jury," and that even if they convicted him, he'd be able to get away at some point. And then he'd bring the authorities down on all of them. -After silencing Amanda first, of course.

The "trial" took place over most of a day. At the end, he sat, chin erect, eyes firm, expression noble and convincingly innocent. He faced his accusers. Most of the people who had been in the burning barn were

there. The blond “elf,” who was also the local hero racecar driver Mac Lynn; his own daughter, Amanda—who looked at him from time to time and cried; Amanda’s teacher, Miss McCormick; and the tall, skinny “elf” bimbo who had dragged him out of the barn. Felouen? What was that, Jamaican or something?

The kangaroo court prepared for the summing-up.

“Your actions were the direct cause of all of this,” the bimbo said. She looked at him as if he were a particularly loathsome form of excrement she’d found on the bottom of her shoe. “Because of your abuse of this child, almost half of the people—innocent people—of Elfhome Outremer are lost to us. The city itself is as you see it now because of you—a ruin that will take hundreds of years to heal. Nothing will heal our many dead, nor the hearts of those who loved them and buried them. There is no punishment that we can give you which will mete out justice fully.”

Andrew grinned at her. It was true. The worst they could do was kill him, and he’d been ready to do that himself. And if they didn’t kill him, he’d get away, and then he’d come back with the law on his side and ready to deal with them all. Lunatics.

“However,” the bimbo “Seleighe Court Lady” continued, “the one of our folk who discovered the true nature of your crimes also declared a fitting sentence for you before she died. In deference to her, and because her demand on the course of your life comes as close as possible to achieving justice, her sentence will be carried out.”

Sentence? So they weren’t going to kill him. Fine. He was smart, he knew things—he’d learned a lot from some of his less respectable clients. He doubted there was any place they could put him that he couldn’t get out of, eventually. He discounted the fact that he hadn’t been able to find a way out of the hollow tree they’d put him in at first. He just hadn’t had time, that was all. He’d show them.

The bimbo kept right on with her pompous speech. God, how he hated women who got any authority at all, even granted by a pack of nutcases! They got so out of hand. . . .

“We know that you were abused as a child. We discovered this from the Oracular Pool—and we regret that we were not there to intervene for you.” A flicker of distant pity passed over her face, and he noted it with resentment. How dared she pity him? “However, your adult life was the result of a long series of choices you made of your own free will—and your decision to abuse your own child was one such choice. You never displayed regret and never sought help. Therefore, there are no mitigating circumstances to soften your punishment.”

The bimbo Felouen waved one hand, and a pocket of blackness appeared to her side. The other “elves” watched it with calm interest. Only now did he feel a chill of fear. What the hell was going on?

She turned back to him, with a face as cold as marble. “You are to be banished to a pocket of the Unformed Plane that has been prepared especially for you. It is unlikely that you will ever die in there—it is also unlikely that you will ever be released. In order to be released, you must truly, deeply, and completely come to regret what you inflicted on your daughter, take responsibility for it, and to feel guilt for it. In this pocket of the Unformed, your punishment will fit your crime. We regret this, Andrew Kendrick. But this is the justice you have earned.”

Andrew found strong hands clasped over each arm, and although he struggled, suddenly frightened of the dark pool that hung in the air in front of him, he was shoved forward with implacable strength and speed.

“It’s not my fault,” he screamed. “*She* did it, the little bitch! She made me do it! Little girls are whores, and she was *my daughter* to do with as I pleased, damn it! It’s not my fault! It’s not my fault!”

He was thrown into that spinning vortex of tenebrous nothingness, and for a brief, disorienting moment, all detail and all sense of existence vanished.

Then he found himself on hands and knees, naked, in a room that glowed disconcertingly red. The room was hot, the light was dim, and a huge creature, as naked as he, stood at the far end. Beside the creature hung ropes, chains, horse tack and other implements that Andrew recognized. Only they were bigger, here, as if he were ten years old again. There was a narrow cot in one corner of the room. In fact, he recognized the room as a much larger version of the special “tack room” he’d kept for his use with Amanda.

The thing moved toward him, smiling. “Come here,” it said in a voice so deep Andrew felt it before he heard it. “Come here. You want it. You know you do.”

He looked at the monstrous thing’s face. It shifted in the dim light, looking first like his father’s face, then like Amanda’s—and then his own.

“Come here, slut,” it crooned. Then it seized him.

In the Oracular Pool, Andrew struggled in the bogan’s grip; Amanda—Anne, Abbey, Alice, and Cethlenn -together—shuddered and turned away, into Felouen’s arms. The elven lady held her. Cethlenn felt Felouen rejoice that the child permitted herself to be held. Felouen banished the vision from the Pool, and led the little girl away, towards the tree-home of the driver Maclyn. He descended from his home to welcome them, with a smile for all of them. All four of them.

The moment that Cethlenn had sensed approaching came, although neither the elven lady nor the children knew it. They were about to become three, not four. It was time for Cethlenn to go.

:*Children*—:she said—and as usual, it was the sensitive Abbey who guessed what was about to happen.

:*No!*:the girl protested; the others understood in an instant and added their protests to hers.

:*You c-c-can’t leave*,:Anne wailed.:*Who’s g-g-gonna teach me the m-m-magic?*:

:*The elves are better teachers than ever I’d be, little Anne*,:she said, stroking Anne’s hair.:*You’re a fast learner, and Felouen will gladly teach you*.:

:*But who will—will tell us what to do?*:proper Alice asked, completely at a loss.:*You have to stay! We have to know what’s right and what’s wrong!*:

:*Look to Maclyn for that, my dear one*,:Cethlenn told her.:*He’s learned in a bitter hard school, and he lives what he’s learned. He is a most honorable man and a noble elven lord*.:

Abbey crept up beside her and nestled into her side.:*Who will love us?*: she asked piteously.:*You made us see each other, but who is going to make us all better if you go?*:

There her heart nearly broke, but the time was upon her, determined by a higher Power than she could fight.:*Every elf Underhill will love you, my darlings,:* she told them.:*And you will heal yourselves and make yourself whole.:*

They thought about that for a moment, and it was -finally Alice who replied.:*You've never lied to us,:* she said.:*How? How are we going to be better?:*

The tugging on her soul became an insistent pull, and she had to fight against it to stay long enough to reply.:*Look for Amanda,:* she said at last, as the answer came to her from the same source as the tugging.:*Look for the littlest of you all, the most frightened, the one in hiding. And when you find her, show her you love her—and show her she is loved. Raise her up. Teach her that there is an end to fear and pain. Then you will find your way home.:*

The two elves with her sensed something going on. Cethlenn looked out of Amanda's eyes and into the eyes of Maclyn. He saw her there, and his lips formed a Word that he did not speak.

She nodded, gravely. "Blessings upon you, Fair One," she said in the most ancient Gaelic. "I give this one into your keeping. See that you deserve her."

Then, with a farewell caress to all three (and was there a hint of a fourth? A tiny, shy, frightened little child?) she spread her wings, and soared into the waiting Light.

\* \* \*

Lianne and Maclyn stood in the kitchen beside the Gate he'd opened one last time. She'd spent a week healing in Elfhome Outremer, and working with the elves to replant trees and reconsecrate the Grove. But Maclyn assured her that she was going back to the same evening she'd left, that no time would have passed in Fayetteville since she ran through the Gate and out of the burning barn.

He was so handsome, she thought, as if she viewed him from far away. She had spent most of her waking hours with him; she had watched him suffering over his mother's death, she'd worked beside him, had seen the first few smiles he'd managed. She'd seen him with Amanda, who was healing under the tender care of the elves. She knew him now, much better than she had ever known anyone before.

It would be so easy to ignore their differences, to -accept the life he offered her straddled between the world of magic and her own mundane existence. Rather, she thought, it would be so easy for a while.

Then it would become impossible. Especially under the carefully uncritical eye of Felouen. Felouen, who loved Mac so desperately. Felouen, who needed him more than she would ever admit.

Then it would become impossible.

"What will I say about Amanda?" she asked, feeling the awkward silence as they looked at each other.

He shrugged. "Nothing. No one knows you were out there. They'll find simulacra in the embers of the barn—burned bodies that look just like hers and her father's. They won't need any more answers. My only regret is that they'll never know what he was doing to her."

Lianne nodded, thinking about the social worker who would never have to make that investigation. Would he be relieved? Or would he spend the rest of his life wondering if he had failed—wondering if he



could have saved Amanda's life, if only—if only—"What about her sister, Sharon?" she asked. "*Her* mother is no prize."

Mac considered the question for a moment. "We'll watch the mother, I think. This might be the shock she needed to start taking care of her daughter better. If not—we'll intervene."

They continued to look at each other, and another awkward silence developed.

"Are you sure you won't stay in Elfhome Outremer with me?" Mac asked, softly; the very question she had been dreading.

Lianne looked at the floor, and rolled her foot back and forth across a pencil that lay there. "I can't, Mac. My family is here, my work is here, my past and my future are *here*. People need me in this world, Mac. And Felouen is waiting for you, and hoping the two of you will have a chance together."

He sighed—but was it with regret or relief? As well as she knew him, she still couldn't tell. "I know. I thought that was going to be your answer, but I still hoped—"

"There are some things that really aren't meant to be." Lianne made a stab at a brave smile, and gave it up as useless.

He licked his lips and stared deeply into her eyes. "I understand, or I think I do. You're sure?"

She nodded, not trusting herself to speech. The lump in her throat cut her breath short, and her nose was stuffy from the tears that were waiting to fall. One more word was all it would take.

He rested both hands on her shoulders. "One last kiss, then," he said.

His eyes looked—odd. She pushed him away, tensing with sudden suspicion. "No, Mac," she whispered.

"Just one," he asked.

"I saw *Superman*," she croaked.

That seemed to stump him. "So did I," he said at last.

She spoke with stiff lips. "*I hated* the ending. I always thought that Lois Lane got cheated at the end of the movie." She clenched her hands into fists, to keep from wiping away the tears that slid down her cheeks. "He kissed her and took away her memory of him, of who he was and what he was—and supposedly after that everything was back to normal. But she *earned* her pain. She would have lived without him—she could have kept on going even if she knew the truth."

Was she speaking about a two-dimensional movie character, or herself? Maybe both. "She would have known how special she was, though, if he'd left her alone. She would have known that she had been special enough to be loved by someone like him—and if it couldn't last forever, well . . . so few things do." Her voice turned fierce. "But he stole that from her, stole a part of her life that she couldn't ever replace—all because he thought she wasn't tough enough to handle it."

Maclyn blinked in surprise at her vehemence. "I sort of thought he'd made things easier on her."

She shook her head, angrily, to keep from crying. “Do you think she’d have chosen that if he’d asked her first?”

He hesitated. “Well . . . no. I guess not.”

She lowered her voice. “Do you think he couldn’t trust her to keep his secret?”

Mac whispered, “No. I think she would have kept his secret.”

Lianne lifted her chin and glared at him. “Do you think you can’t trust me?”

It was his turn to shake his head violently. “It wasn’t that at all. It’s just that you’ve had so much pain—and I thought I could save you some of it. . . .” Mac’s eyes widened as he realized she’d caught him.

“That was what you were planning.” Lianne glared at him with a kind of triumph. “I saw it in your face. You had that same stupid ‘pity that poor girl’ expression on your face that Christopher Reeve had on his.” She kicked the pencil across the kitchen. “Don’t do me any favors, Maclyn. I’m smart, and I’ll get over you in my own time and in my own way. But I fought as hard for this day as you did—so don’t you dare try to take it from me!”

Maclyn nodded and bit his lower lip. He moved toward the Gate, then looked back at her. She saw her own pain reflected in his eyes. “I’ll miss you, Lianne McCormick.”

“And I’ll miss you. Tell Amanda I wish her luck,” she added.

He bowed a little, courtly and solemn, offering her the acknowledgement of her own kind of royalty. “I will. She’ll find safe haven and healing in Elfhome Outremer. And training for the incredible power she commands.”

They gazed at each other from across the distance of the kitchen—from across an abyss than neither could breach—from across the centuries.

“I love you,” Mac said into the silence.

Her heart contracted. “I know. I love you, too. It doesn’t change anything.”

“No. It doesn’t.” He licked his lips again, and asked, plaintively, “I can still come and see you sometimes, can’t I?”

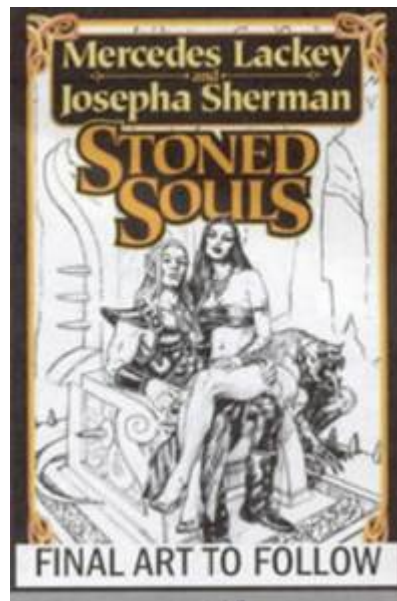
Lianne took a deep breath. “No, Mac. I have to get on with my life—and you have to get on with yours. We can’t do that with each other around.”

He nodded, as if he had expected that answer, too. “You’re right. But maybe . . . sometime . . . you could come out to the track and cheer me on. I could use that . . . all the help I can get. . . .” He leaned over and gave her a gentle kiss on the cheek.

“Good-bye, fair one.”

“Good-bye, Mac,” she said for the last time, and left unsaid a million more things.

## -- Stoned Souls --



Not Yet Published

# Knights of Ghosts and Shadows

## -- Knights of Ghosts and Shadows --



# 1

Tom O Bedlam

"Selfish, inconsiderate, irresponsible—"

Maureen's voice had been rising all through this tirade; by now she was hitting A above high C, and everyone in the Faire could hear her. Eric Banyon winced, and wished she'd get to the point, since it was pretty clear he wasn't going to be able to patch up this fight.

Christ, it would be nice if she'd tell me what it is I'm supposed to have done that was so awful.

She stamped her foot, and got angrier—if that was possible—when she made no impression on the hard-baked adobe. "Shit, Eric, I can't take you anymore! You, you, you, that's all you think about! Where you want to go, what you want to do, when you want to screw—now this—this—"

Now wait just a cotton-pickin minute here— Her accusations bewildered—and angered—him. What is this shit? I've never asked her to do anything she didn't want to. I've never gotten her into anything she didn't okay first! So I'm doing the Faires for a while—I'm a musician, dammit, and so is she! What's the big deal about my taking a couple of gigs?

Maureen's long red hair was coming loose from its knot; strands of it flew around her face as she gestured at the messy area back of the Elizabethan Faire mainstage. Eric presumed, however, that she was including the whole of the Faire in her gesture.

"Dammit, I have had it with you!" she screamed, coming into full operatic voice. "I have had it with your selfishness and I have had it with this grubby little dump and I have had it with you!"

"But—" he said weakly, unable to compete with a voice that could fill the Greek without even using the push of anger she had behind it now.

"You can just take this stupid gig and all the rest of it, and you can ... can ... keep it!" she shrieked at the top of her range, probably shattering glassware in the taverns and booths out front. "I am leaving".

And with that, she threw down the bodice and skirt he'd talked her into wearing and stormed off in the direction of the parking lot, every visible inch of her pink with rage—and in the scraps of shorts and halter she was wearing, there was a lot of her visible.

She nearly collided with one of the Gypsies, who was laden with costumes and couldn't see her. He half expected her to turn on the girl, but she was so angry she didn't even notice the wide-eyed dancer/musician; she just stormed on past, leaving the faint scent of scorched earth—and scorched Eric—in her wake.

He wanted to run after her, but Beth was in the way, and he'd have to bowl her over to get to Maureen in time.

Always assuming Maureen didn't deck him in full view of the "travelers" when he caught up with her.

"What in hell was that all about?" The dark-haired, dusty dancer put her armload of clothing where it belonged in the Costumes storage, and gave him an incredulous look. "Who was that madwoman, Banyon?"

Eric sighed, and picked the skirt and bodice up out of the dust, beating the worst of the dirt off them. "That was a ... personality conflict," he said, choosing his words carefully. "Half of it was my fault, I guess. And the other half of the conflict was Maureen Taylor."

"That was your girl? The man-eating soprano herself?"

Ex-girl, Eric replied bitterly. "At least at the moment. She made that abundantly clear just now. She doesn't like the faire in particular and my itinerant lifestyle in general "

"But—Eric, everybody knows what you're like "

Maybe she thought that when she moved in with me I'd change? She never came out and told me that but—maybe she thought I'd settle down. Get a job. Join the Moose Lodge." He ducked behind the burlap curtain and set the costume down in a stack of others. He turned around just in time to catch Beth's sardonic expression through the open door flap. "Well, go ahead, you might as well say whatever it is you've got trying to beat its way through your teeth."

"Do the words 'fat effin' chance' translate properly?" she replied. "You've been a footloose street busker for as long as I've known you, Banyon. You're a darlin' man," she continued, slipping into her Faire dialect, "But I'd ne'er be after chasin' ye if were ye the last stallion in all of Eire. Jaysus, O'Banyon, but ye've got the wanderin' foot an' the rovin' eye, ye do, an' I'd ne'er trust ye wi' a puir maid's heart. Not t'mention the uither fairer portions of meself..."

"Give me a break," he said, wincing a little. "I just like my freedom."

"Yeah, and I just like to know where my man is once in a while." But she took a closer look at him, and her expression of irony softened to something a little like pity. Not quite—but it was at least more sympathetic. She patted his hand. "Hey, c'mon, Eric, I'm sorry. You just had a rather spectacular breakup. That was a stupid thing to say. I didn't intend to make fun of you."

"It's okay," he said, only now beginning to feel anything besides confusion and pure embarrassment. The full impact of what had just happened started to hit him. Maureen was gone.

Worse than that. Really gone this time. She'd never walked out on an argument before. Not ever. He'd always managed to get her cooled down, they'd always talked it out. Not this time. She hadn't given him a chance to get a single word in. He still didn't know what he'd done—but he'd sure stepped over the line somehow. And it started here, with the Faire.

Like he'd said to Beth, the Faire in particular and busking in general.

What's wrong with being a traveling musician? he asked himself angrily. What's so important about having a mundane job? Shit, I'd rather die. I get by just fine. I did great before I got to LA., I'm doing all right now, and I'll do okay when I move someplace else. If she wanted a CPA, she should have moved in with one.

He pummeled his memory, trying to remember exactly when she'd first put up the storm warnings. Okay, she was getting zoned, and I showed her the camp—that's when she just came out and asked me how long I planned on keeping this gig going. And how long I planned on staying in LA. with her.

So I told her.

Damn. What did she expect me to do, lie to her? It's not like I wouldn't be coming back eventually. Why does she want a leash on me? What would she have that she doesn't have now?

He kicked at a corner of the stage, and checked for "travelers" before venturing out into public pathways. Just what I need right now, a bunch of customers wanting to hear me play "Greensleeves" for the millionth time.

He ducked through the burlap doorway, and into the dusty Faire "street."

I thought she'd figured out I don't like being pinned down, like the way my parents managed to pin me down for so many years. I've had my fill of being tied hand and foot, like a poor little lamb about to get his throat slit. Sacrificed on the altar of Great Art. Bullshit. No more.

I wonder if she's heading straight home to clear out her half of the apartment? Or are we going through this all again as soon as I get home? Goddammit, Maureen, you knew what I was like when you moved in with me! Why did you have to pull this shit on me now?

Beth put her armload of costumes away and changed out to jeans and a T-shirt with "Gentle Ladies of Death and Destruction <sup>TM</sup>" embroidered in pink and lavender on the front.

Poor Eric. He is going to be in real deep kirm chee when word of this gets back to Admin. She pulled the shirt over her head and shook out her hair. The audience didn't know whether to listen to the show or Mademoiselle Mimi. At least he doesn't repeat his mistakes. Tract just went away. Donna married her shrink and left an invite to the wedding on his coffee table. And Kathie—the bitch—drove him out of Texas Faire. Even if that isn't the way the rumor-mill has it.

She hung her mini-ocarina around her neck and mentally slapped her hand. It was itching for her Fender—

We have a gig Wednesday night and rehearsals Monday and Tuesday. Stop thinking heretical thoughts! Guitars alone could get you burned at the stake by the Renaissance Purists at this place, Kentraine. Electric guitars, oh horrors!

She poked her head out into the street, and saw Eric off in the distance, shoulders slouched, head down.

Lawsy. It's hit him. Now we're going to be in for at least twenty-four hours of Gloom, Despair and Agony.

Eric slowly walked down the Tinker's Lane, past the wooden booths, decorated with colorful ribbons and cloth, where the Faire merchants were already closing up shop for the night.

Irish Hill. It's quiet up there this time of night. Nobody to bother, or to bother me. I could play a bit, get my head straight—

A few "travelers" were still wandering the Faire, gently herded towards the exit by the red-tunicked Faire Security. Mostly only the Faire folk were out in the narrow dirt streets, dancers and musicians returning from their last shows, actors carrying their props back to Lockup.

The road continued on in a marginally straight line up to the Hill, his usual post-Faire hangout. But he could see that something was happening up there, a group of Faire folk gathered around a table the burning candles visible even at this distance. Their bright costumes were now replaced by cowed dark robes. A neo-pagan Wiccan Coven was in session, and it was looking pretty serious.

Tonight is May Eve, Beltane, that's right. I'd almost forgotten. High Holy Day. Lord. If you want to raise an occult ruckus, seems to me this would be the place for it. I wanted to sit on the Hill—naw, they're already in Circle, I'd better not disturb them. I'll find another place to play.

He trudged up the slope to the Traveler's Road, that met the Tinker's Lane just below Irish Hill. He could hear the soft words from the Hill: "... Great Goddess, save our Fairesite, keep those who would destroy it at bay. This is all we ask. Great Goddess . . .". The chant faded as Eric walked down Traveler's Road towards the Wood, the dark oaks hiding the last glimpse of red-gold sunlight.

So it's bad enough that they're praying for help. I didn't know it was that grim—sounds like the death knell. Shawna and her bunch are into "the Goddess helps those who help themselves," and if it's gotten to the point that all they can do is pray— He shook his head, stopped, and looked around, the familiar booths and stages of the Faire, the stubby brown grass, ancient oak trees, the shadowed Southern Californian hills rising above it all. Damn shame. Just because some developer thinks this would be a terrific place for shopping mall . . .

I wish somebody really could save it. This is the best Faire I've ever seen; it's so alive, always music and laughing— But when a corporation gets something into its collective head, there ain't much you can do about it. Not when they've got all the money, all the pull they need to make whoever owned the land sell it. Possession being nine-tenths . . . and I know I saw surveyors out here Friday.

General depression piled on personal depression. I don't know if I want to stick around and see this place turn into another shrine to McDonald's and Sears Roebuck. Maybe this is a good time to move on. Maureen sure wouldn't mind seeing me leave LA. Eric sighed and continued walking, dodging three drunken travelers, two guys in shorts and T-shirts, each carrying stacked paper beer cups, at least fifteen each—and keeping their balance despite the added burden of the third member of their party, slung over one guy's shoulder, out cold.

No wonder he's DOA. Their blood must be at least sixty proof. He felt sorry for the Security guy, trying to push the three in the direction of the Faire exit. Not my idea of a fun job.

The Wood loomed before him now, oak branches curving overhead to create thick darkness beneath. Dark and forbidding, to anybody who didn't know it.

But it was as familiar as an old friend to Eric, who'd played there for years: on the Wood Stage, and on the streets filled with travelers and Faire folk.

His pace slowed, and he felt a pang, thinking about how this would all go under a bulldozer's blade. God, but I love this place. It's the only place I've ever really felt at home—even when I want to escape from everything, there's that grove, hidden at the edge of the Fairesite . . .

It occurred to him that since Irish Hill was occupied, he might want to play there for a while tonight, just

get away from everybody and everything and play until he couldn't think or feel anything anymore . . .

Damn it, Maureen, everything was fine! How could you walk out on me like this?

He walked to the edge of the haybale rows that were the seats for the Wood Stage. A group of musicians was seated on the stage, playing. Eric smiled sadly, recognizing the tune even before he saw the players. "Banish Misfortune" . . . yeah, I wish it could.

The reality of the fight—and what it meant—hit him. He began to feel empty inside, and lost; like he'd lost more than just Maureen. Like he'd lost his way and he'd never find it again. Black despair came down on him, so palpable that he was mildly surprised that he wasn't surrounded by a dark fog like a cartoon character.

God. I don't know where I'm going, what I'm doing. Nothing makes sense anymore . . .

All of the Celtic musicians were on the stage, some still wearing their Faire costumes, others in denim jeans and sweaters. All his friends, his favorite people. Linda and Aaron, fiddling like crazy, with Ross and red-bearded Ian pounding out the fast tempo on their Irish war drums. Judy standing over her dulcimer, the hand-held hammers moving so fast they blurred, with Jay sitting next to her, playing tinwhistle.

And four of the visiting Northerners, two fiddler girls looking like a matched set, one with short curly hair, the other a blonde; off in the back, a serious dark-haired woman concentrating on an intricate rhythm on a dumbek, and that blond bearded fellow playing the bouzouki.

Together they sounded better than any professional group Eric had heard in six years of busking, and the music was magnetic, drawing him to them. He half-reached for his flute, then sighed. Not tonight. I can't pretend that nothing's happened, pretend to be cheerful and happy. They'll know I'm pretending, they'll hear it in my music. No, they're having fun. Better not to spoil it.

"Hey, Eric, you crazy whistler, come down here!" Judy called to him.

He forced a laugh and shook his head, calling back to her over the loud music. "Not tonight, sweetheart, I have a previous engagement." He grinned. "Maybe afterwards."

Judy laughed and said something he didn't catch, though from the look on her face it was probably salacious. He just kept his mouth stretched in that phony grin and hurried past them, hoping none of them would decide to follow and haul him back.

"Hey, Eric!" Beth hailed him from behind.

Oh shit. I didn't want to talk to anyone—especially not somebody who saw the fight.

Beth could hear Eric groan, but he stopped, and turned to face her.

"Beth, I'm not in the mood—" he began. She shoved a flask into his long, fine-boned hand before he could finish his statement.

"Have a pull on that," she ordered. "I only heard the tail end of the fight, but I suspect you need it. Besides, we can stay here and talk about it, if you want. I may have to go take care of the rumor-mill after that ruckus."



And I want to know, because you don't usually go around making women screaming mad on purpose, Banyon, she thought wryly. You may not think about things before you do them, but you don't screw up on purpose. And I don't think you would knowingly hurt a fly.

Beth remembered Kathie, and how she'd used this lad to get herself into the Texas Faire, then into a pro band, then dropped him like a hot rock.

In your own peculiar way, you're the gentlest man I know. And, in your own peculiar way, the most forgiving. You forgave Kathie, and I never would have. Hell, I still haven't, and I wasn't the one who got it in the teeth.

"I'd almost rather not talk about it," he said plaintively, shaking his shoulder-length chestnut hair out of his eyes.

God, how can anyone be that pretty? He looks like Sophia Loren at sixteen. With the appropriate male accoutrements. Very . . . nice.

Down, girl. He's also as feckless as they come. He's no good to you or himself as he is.

"You want to live till morning?" she retorted, hands on hips. "Look, maybe I can scotch some of the worst rumors. Tongues are already clacking, and they're not being real flattering to you. Besides, you've never hesitated to talk to me before, right?" He gave her an open, vulnerable look that almost made her want to take him in her arms and give him the best kind of comfort for a broken heart.

Almost.

She continued, trying to keep her thoughts where they belonged—out of the gutter. "And maybe I can help you figure this thing out, keep you from getting into any more screaming break-up fights behind Mainstage . . . during the five o'clock show, no less."

His eyes widened. "You mean . . . could they hear us out there on the haybales?"

"To the tenth row, m'friend."

"Shit. Somebody from Admin is probably going to toast my tail for breakfast." He uncorked the flask, and took a mouthful. His eyebrows rose, and he took a second.

Well, at least he appreciates my whiskey.

"Thanks," Eric said, pausing long enough to come up for air. "This helps a lot. I think Glenfiddich can cure almost anything, even broken hearts." He took another swallow, and Beth waited until he recorked the flask.

"Okay," she said, "You and Signorina Tosca seemed to be doing all right around noon—what happened after that?"

He shuffled his feet in the dust, and looked sheepish.

Too damn cute for his own good, that's Eric Banyan. He attracts too many women who think that sweet face means he's malleable. They don't look past the face to the eyes, the eyes watching for somebody

who might put fetters on him. They look at the generosity, and they think he's theirs for the taking. He'll give you anything, all right; anything but himself. That part of him that he won't let anyone see, or touch . . .

"She was getting hot, I guess, and sweaty, and she wanted to know how much longer I was going to be out here. I told her all weekend. Then she wanted to know where the motel was. I said there wasn't one, and I told her about my campsite."

Oh boy, the operatic soprano hothouse-plant meets reality.

"I can hear the storm brewing already," Beth remarked sagely, since he seemed to be waiting for her to say something.

"Yeah." He took another swig, and his eyes took on their habitual expression of wariness. "Then when I was checking the schedules backstage, she wanted to know how long this was gonna go on. I told her. Then I said I was thinking about hitting Northern Faire in the fall, maybe stay up in SanFran after, if the busking was good. I didn't get a chance to tell her I'd be back by Thanksgiving, 'cause that was when the excrement hit the rotating blades."

Beth shook her head, and recaptured her flask. "Eric, Eric, you lovable idiot . . ." She took a swig. "If I was planning on setting up a fight between the two of you, I couldn't have managed it better. You probably punched every button she has."

This one is obtuse even for you, sweetie. First you let her think you're planning on a long-term relationship, then start wandering off at odd intervals, then casually tell her you may be cruising on out—without her—this fall. Banyon, you definitely take the prize.

"I don't see why," he said, obviously nettled. "She knew I was a street busker, that was how we met! Right at the downtown YMCA. I was playing the street; she was coming back from a rehearsal at the Pavilion. She knew exactly the kind of guy I am, from the minute she met me."

"Allow the Great Madame Zarathustra to read the past," Beth intoned in a cheap gypsy accent. "Tell me, in the past several weeks has she, or has she not, been making hints about how you should go do some serious auditions?"

"Well, yeah . . ." The eyes were warier.

"Has she not, in fact, set up a couple of auditions? Like the one you were telling me about a few weeks back, with that chamber orchestra?"

"Well, yeah . . ." He wouldn't look at her.

"Did you not, in fact, go to those auditions? And get job offers?" Taking the line of least resistance, you lazy sonuvabitch. Avoiding a confrontation, and inadvertently leading her on—

"Well, yeah—but I didn't take any of those jobs!"

"Which looked like what? That you weren't interested? Hell no! Like you were waiting for something better." Beth ran her hand through her hair in exasperation. Banyon actually looked perplexed. "Look, dummy, anybody with half an ear knows how good you are. Madame Butterfly has considerably more than half an ear. She figured you saw how well those piddly auditions were going, and you were gonna

go for something big—and then settle down with her."

"Aw, come on, Beth—I never—I mean—she's the one that moved in, she's the one that started the thing in the first place. It's not my fault, dammit! You know it isn't! Come on, Beth ..."

He finally wound down, and sighed. "Shit. I did let her think I was planning to stick around and take a serious gig, didn't I?"

No shit, Sherlock. "I think that's a pretty fair assessment."

He looked down at the dirt of the path for a moment, and when he looked back up at her, the haunted expression in his eyes finally made her feel a bit more sympathetic. Maybe more than sympathetic—

Hold on there, girl. Don't let that pretty face and those big brown eyes make you forget. He's the original Love-'em-and-leave-'em. Mister Drifter. He likes having no ties.

Though I don't think he likes the feeling of having someone like Maureen walk out on him—they were a pretty tight little item, and the chemistry sure seemed to be there.

"I didn't mean to, Beth," he said quietly. "I didn't mean to string her along. If she'd said something, I'd have told her."

She sighed. "I believe you. I just wish for once you'd look at what you're doing before it gets to scenes like this. Holy Saints Paddy and Bride, you never do things by halves, do you, Banyon?"

She shook her head; he hung his.

"All right, now that I know what happened, I can at least see what I can do to keep your reputation out of the mud. I'll try to put in a good word for you with the Admin people, too, convince Caitlin that you couldn't avoid it, wasn't your fault." He started to turn away. "And by the way—"

"What?" he replied, lifelessly.

Come on, bucko. Keep looking down in the dumps, and I may bed you just to cheer you up. Pure therapy.

Sure, Beth, and I've got this beachfront property in Nevada . . .

"We've got another gig over in that place on Van Nuys, and we'll keep a corner of the stage warm for you. You're welcome to come on by, usual split. It's been a while—would be nice to have you back, you and that whistle of yours."

He gave her a miserable attempt at a smile. "Thanks, Beth. I just may do that. Hey, Spiral Dance is a helluva lot better than that dump deserves—how come you keep going back there?"

"We have our reasons." Which I wouldn't tell anyone unless they're one of us. Not even you, m friend. 'Sides, I bet you wouldn't believe it anyway.

"Oh,"

Beth passed him the flask for a last swig, then headed back the way she had come, towards Woods

Stage and the jam.

But as she walked down to the stage and pulled out her ocarina, she spared a last, pitying thought for the lonely figure trudging off into the dusk. He really doesn't understand it at all. He tries, but he doesn't. Banyon, Banyon, when are you ever going to grow up?

Beth already had her ocarina out, adding the tiny wooden whistle's voice to the jam session's version of "Kesh Jig" before she even reached the stage. Eric watched her join the others, then sighed.

Yeah, dammit, she's right. But what am I supposed to do? I can't lie. I can't. And I don't want to change.

From the stage, Beth glanced up at him, as though asking him if he wanted to join the circle of friends and musicians. He sighed again, and turned away.

No. Not tonight. I just want to be alone.

He headed farther into the Wood, where the gnarled oaks clustered closely. Far away from everybody, that's where I'll go. The edge of the Wood and beyond. "Ten leagues beyond the wide world's end ..."

Most people wouldn't come back this far, past the last palm-reader's booth and the faint lingering chemical reek of the porta-johns. Dirt and trees and me. Seems real good right now.

It was in a small grove of oaks, set back against the hillside, where Eric finally set down his flute case on a handy rock. He sat on the ground beside it, opened the case and took out the silver pieces of his flute, carefully fitting them together, as if, by taking especial care with the task, he could put his life back together again. For a moment he just sat there, the chilled metal slowly warming against his fingertips.

This wasn't the first time he'd broken up with a girl, but it had to be one of the worst. Maureen had been—nice. Not pushy. Always there for him—the way he'd tried to be there for her.

Only it was pretty likely she wasn't going to be there anymore. Until this moment, he hadn't realized what that meant in terms of loneliness. He'd gotten used to not being lonely.

God, it hurts inside, it hurts. I can't believe she's left me. I just can't. We were so tight . . . Maureen, Maureen,

I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. I didn't want this to happen.

His fingers moved gently on the familiar flute keys; remembered patterns so deep he didn't have to think about them, bringing back other memories, of music, laughter, late evenings with his friends, drinking and playing.

God, it hurts . . .

He brought the flute up to his lips, taking a deep breath and playing a soft note, hesitant. It hung in the air for a moment, followed by another note, quavering, equally uncertain.

Then the notes grew stronger, louder, more confident. He began to play an ancient Irish air, "Brian Boru." It was a melody created a thousand years before he was born, by someone else who was also mourning, hurting. Someone else who had longed after something that had been—or was it something

that could never be? The tune seemed to hold all of his heartache.

The last note drifted away, fading into the darkness around him. Damn. Is this what it always comes to, sitting alone, playing sad music? Trying to say whatever's inside me, when I can't say the words out loud? I always end up in a place like this, alone and lonely, no one in sight. Christ. Is this how I'm gonna end, too? What's the use? When am I ever going to find somebody who can hear what I'm trying to say, instead of hearing what they want me to say?

His fingers shifted on the flute, as though of their own accord, forming the first notes of "Sheebeg Sheemore." Yeah, old O'Carolan, now there was a modern bard. Crazy old blind guy, wandering the Irish countryside and writing melodies for his friends. Like this one. What a story, you don't even need to know what it's about to feel it. The elves of Eire, two rival groups of Faerie—kind against kind, kin against kin. Maybe even once-love against once-love, love gone sour and turned into hate.

But it's a pretty melody, not like "Boys of Ballysadare," where you can almost see the Scottish bodies piling up. I guess elves don't believe in really ripping each other apart, not like us humans. Not like Maureen, anyhow. Yeah, a beautiful song, even if there's no such thing as Faerie.

He could feel the music starting to change as he stopped thinking about it; just playing, trying to take what was aching inside him and transform it into the melody. It was as though something had taken hold of his mind and body, and that something was flowing through him and the music. Like his soul was talking directly through the flute, pure, unambiguous. It was the feeling he had once in a long while, when he was playing and everything was working and it just clicked.

And it was happening now, as he played the O'Carolan tune, every note flawless and clear as crystal, every inflection and trill absolute perfection. But not a cold perfection, mechanical—no, this was music straight from his heart, all emotion, with no unhuman intellectualism intervening.

Eric felt a hush, a quietude, as though the grove itself was suddenly still, not a single bird echoing his flute, as though the night itself was holding its breath. As though everything that could hear his playing was listening to him, to the music, to what the music was saying; listening with every pore, and watching him. The ancient oak trees, branches gnarled and bent, seemed to draw closer to him, as though concentrating intently.

He closed his eyes, ignoring them. What an illusion. Oak trees can't move. Too much whiskey, Eric, m'lad.

He continued playing, adding all the extra trills and ornaments he'd always wanted to, but never dared try. Then he reached the last delicate run, straight down the scale, that was the end of the tune—

—and he kept going. Something inside him, all the pain and sorrow, was suddenly in the music, and he couldn't stop. It was a different melody now, his own, original. And the music was flowing through him, wild and fey, relentlessly pulling him onward.

It built to an impossible climax, a last fiercely defiant high note that seemed to shatter the still air, then—

—silence. Profound and absolute. As though the world was waiting, watching for something to happen. Nothing marred it, it was the kind of silence born of anticipation, as though a door was opening, and everything paused for a moment, expecting Someone to step through—

Eric took a deep breath, hearing a quivering echo from the trees as the last notes faded away. His heart

was pounding, his fingers clenched tight upon the flute, trembling. Damn. Was that really me?

God, I should have some lady break my heart more often, if that's what it does to my music!

Something startled him, and he sat up suddenly. For a moment, Eric thought he heard something, an answering song from the grove, not just the last echoing notes of his melody.

Then the wind kicked up, sending swirls of dust and dead leaves scattering around him. Eric's eyes began to sting from the dust—as he blinked to clear them, he saw something glinting across the grove, a brief flicker of green light.

Green light?

He felt a chill run down his back; a thrill of wonder and expectation—then his good sense kicked in and brought him right down to earth again. Probably some Faire kids playing Jedi Knight with lightsticks on the hillside. And scaring the local rattlesnakes half to death, I'm sure. Don't they know that no one is supposed to go up into the hills? B'Jaysus. Where in hell are their parents?

He looked down at the flute, still cradled in his hands. I wish I had a tape of that. Damn. I'll probably never play like that, ever again.

Eric took the flute apart, moving carefully in the dark, replacing each piece in the case by feel. There were times when he loved that instrument more than any human. He wouldn't play any better than that tonight, and he wasn't going to try.

He stood up, dusting off his jeans. Might as well call it a night. I've got that bottle of Irish back at camp, and I think this is a good time to start on it. A real good time.

Eric felt his way to the edge of the grove, walking with care to avoid tripping over anything, then glanced back. Something gleamed among the oak trees, another glistening trace of pale green light, as verdant and alive as spring leaves. It swirled right where he'd been sitting for a moment, then vanished. It reappeared a heartbeat later, half-hidden behind a sprawling oak tree, then faded again.

Kids. I wonder if they're playing at saving the universe? Must be too young to realize that you can't.

He headed down the dirt road towards his campsite.

Eric managed to avoid meeting anyone by carefully planning his route, but it took a lot of detours. He was tired and footsore by the time he reached the camping area, and feeling the effects of the long and stressful day inside and outside.

An hour later, Eric was tumbled in his sleeping bag in a faded blue tent that had seen too many Faïres, groping for his bottle in the darkness.

If I make a light, they'll know I'm here. No, not tonight. Not tonight.

His hands closed on the cool neck of the bottle, and he set himself for a bit of serious drinking.

A half hour later he was falling asleep—or passing into unconsciousness—with the better part of a fifth of Bushmills becoming one with his bloodstream.

And since he was the only one with a vantage point—and the only one not engaged in nocturnal activities that precluded idle observations—he was the only one of the Faire folk who noticed the activity over the hill. The verdant green glow that flickered and vanished between the trees, in the hidden oak grove he had left to sing to itself.

Eric would have chalked up the effect to the Bushmills, except that he'd seen it start before he took his first drink.

It was still playing its little games among the tree trunks as he passed out, and his last coherent thought was to wonder if it would continue until dawn.

•2•

Echoes From the Forest

"Shit! Quarter till nine, and I can't find my goddamn socks!"

"Damnation, Seamus, I'll ne'er be o'er thar in time! Run on wi'out me, laddie!"

Eric Banyon awoke to the absolute cacophony that was the usual "morning song" of Faire. The assorted cries and shouts of the actors and musicians in the campsite mingled with the clanking of pots and pans. The gabble of voices in a dozen conversations nearby echoed vilely in an unholy concert with the pounding in his head. He opened one eye warily, felt the bright sunlight kick him in the face, and closed the eye again.

God, I'm going to die. Please God, let me die. I think I drank too much. No, strike that—I know I drank too much.

If I'm going to die, I sure hope it happens soon . . .

He reached a hand out without opening his eyes, and felt around the floor of the tent; when his hand encountered the coolness of glass, he picked up the whiskey bottle, shaking it slightly.

No, strike that again—I couldn't have drunk too much. There's some still left in the bottle.

He opened his eyes long enough to take a healthy swallow from the half-empty whiskey bottle. Mmm, good old Irish Breakfast. I'll bet this is the only reason they never conquered the world.

He swigged again, and sighed.

I think I'm going to live. Which means I'd better get on 'site.

He pried both eyes open again and crawled out of the sleeping bag, blinking blearily. Eric found his faded brown breeches on the other side of the tent, where he had discarded them last night, then rummaged through his backpack. A fresh Faire shirt, one that used to be white but now was a shade between gray and brown, replaced the one he had slept in last night. He pulled breeches and shirt on, and scratched his head, trying to remember what came next.

Feet. First, find your feet. Then find what you put on your feet. New socks came out of the bottom of

the pack; he pulled his moccasin boots on over them without jarring his skull too much. After a brief moment of panic, he found his belt beneath the jumble of assorted props and costumes on the floor in the "storage" corner of his tent.

Erie fastened the money pouch, wooden comb, and flask on the belt, took another swig of whiskey, and he was ready to face the world again.

Well, maybe not, but I'll give it a try . . .

Taking a deep breath, he unzipped the door to the tent, stepping outside. As he expected, it was a beautiful morning, clear blue skies over the green-brown hills, with almost everyone in sight already in costume and heading into the Fairesite.

He staggered to the large water tank at the edge of campsite, and braced himself.

Here goes—

He stuck his head beneath the faucet and turned it on. The water, cold as a mother-in-law's heart, hit him like a hammer on the back of the skull, and froze him all the way down to his toenails. He was shivering when he straightened up again.

Much better. I think.

He used the metal side of the water tank as a mirror as he combed his hair, trying without success to make the shoulder-length brown mop look presentable.

Some day I'll shave it all off, honest to God. Hell, it worked for Yul Brynner, didn't it?

"Good morning, Eric!" one of the dancers from the Irish show called to him from across the sink.

Some people are just too damn awake in the morning.

"Bah, humbug," he replied, somehow managing to sound cheerful enough.

Brigid, that's her Faire name, if I'm remembering correctly. Don't remember her Mundane name. He gave her a long, appraising look as she sauntered away from him with a definite swing to her hips. Scenic. Very scenic. Lovely from the front, lovely behind, terrific dancer's legs. Well, now that I'm a bachelor again . . .

Oh, hell. Maureen, that should be you wiggling your hips at me . . .

He watched the dark-haired dancer start towards the Main Gate with morose appreciation for a moment, then returned to his tent for his flute.

Besides, Brigid's a morning person. I could never cope with somebody who's that happy at nine in the morning, never.

He slipped the flute case into his embroidered gig bag (gift of Kathie, late of the Texas Faire, two girlfriends before Maureen) and started down the hill towards the Main Gate.

I've had my Irish Breakfast; I'd better get a real one before I fall on my nose.



Eric expertly dodged through the thickening Faire crowds, a tankard of coffee and a stack of hot sticky cinnamon buns balanced precariously in his hands. He found a quiet haybale near one of the smaller stages, and sat down to break his fast.

Three Commedia dell'Arte actors were on the stage, wearing the brightly-painted leather masks of the legendary Italian comedians.

"... Isabella, don'tcha know you're a-breakin' my heart?"

"An' that isn't all I'll break, Harlequino!"

Eric laughed with the travelers seated around him as dainty Isabella chased Harlequino around the stage, waving a rolling pin with wild enthusiasm.

Except Isabella's hair was long and vivid red, and her voice was a little too strident.

Almost operatic.

A piece of cinnamon bun stuck in his throat.

Eric stood up abruptly, leaving the show even as Harlequino protested his innocence to the furious Isabella.

He walked through the Faire, eyes niostly on the dirt road littered with pieces of hay and sawdust. "Boothies" were briskly doing business with the crowd of travelers, haggling over handmade jewelry, leather pouches, intricately-decorated costumes. Hawkers were already calling to potential customers: "Ice cold milk and hot fruit pies!"

"Turkey legs!" "Beef ribs, two hundred pence!"

I don't have anywhere to go, anything in particular that I have to do, at least not until the 11:30 show. Christ. Nothing to do at all. . . except brood.

Well, if I'm going to brood, I might as well do it melodically.

He took his gig bag off his shoulder, removing the flute case. He fitted the flute together, slinging the bag back to its comfortable place at his side.

The travelers looked at him peculiarly. It wasn't all that odd to see a costumed musician walking the Faire, but a flautist was a rarity, and the morose melodies he chose were definitely out of keeping with the "merrye spirit of Olde England" that everyone else was projecting.

Eric finished a rendition of "Coleraine"—Funny, you never think of how an Irish jig could be so depressing— and began another slower, even sadder tune. He was so lost to the melody and his own depression, that he really didn't notice the two step-dancers that smoothly moved in and escorted him around the corner.

Until they each grabbed an elbow.

"Hey, wait a—"

"Och, don't ye be frettin'. Master Eric," one of the dancers said with a wicked grin. "We've been sent to fetch you, we have."

"But—"

"No arguments, sar, we shan't listen to them!"

"But—"

One of them carefully took the flute from his hand, replacing it in his gig bag before they hurried him through the crowded "streets."

Suddenly he realized where they were taking him. Eric's eyes widened.

"No, not the washing well!" He tried to pull free, but the two young women had him past escaping—unless he wanted to take this out of the realm of a street bit and practical joke and into a serious scuffle.

"We've brought him. Mistress Althea!"

The heavysset woman, her dark hair tucked up into a clean muffin cap, looked him over with a practiced eye. "Well, then, he does seem truly the scruffiest of minstrels. We can't have this. Before we take 'im over, first we'll need to give 'em a bath ..."

No, not a bath! Not in the godforsaken filthy washing well!

Mistress Althea took him firmly by the ear, pulling him over to the washing well to the vast amusement of the onlookers. "I'll get even with you for this, Susie," he whispered, too low to be heard by the mundanes.

"But not till after I've had a good chance to wash your ears," she whispered back, barely able to keep a straight face. "This'll teach you to clean up your act before you come on 'site."

Eric suffered through having a scrap of cloth, dipped in the well, rubbed over every inch of his face.

Finally, Mistress Althea pronounced him cleansed, and fit for human company. "Now, girls," she said sonorously, "do take him onward to his next stop."

My next stop? All right, who's playing games, here?

Eric let the two girls drag him onward, down the dusty road to the stage where Sunday Mass was in progress.

Father Bob, wearing a Roman collar over his Elizabethan costume, dutifully blessed Eric as the girls paraded him up to the front of Mass. "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, Lord, who watches over fools and children, wilt Thou see that somebody please keeps an eye on this minstrel boy? Thank you very much, God."

Eric stared backwards at Father Bob as the dancers pulled him away again. The priest was trying not to break into laughter. Yes, something definitely strange is going on here . . .

The two girls—Eric realized he didn't even know their names—pulled him down the lane, past the glassblower's booth and the stall hanging with dozens of bota bags, directly towards the Kissing Bridge .

. .

Now wait just a second—

Before he could react, they were halfway across the bridge, beneath the colorful garlands and ribbons that festooned the wooden archway. They stopped, keeping him trapped between them, and the two dancers kissed him expertly, one after the other.

More than a bit bemused, Eric let them. After his initial surprise, he helped them.

Well, this is definitely an unusual experience . . .

Then they tugged his hands to draw him onward, across the bridge and down the lane to the Laughing Fool Tavern. And there was Beth, waiting with the other musicians by the gate.

Oh, now this is all starting to make sense . . .

The two dancers delivered him to the tavern gate, bobbing a quick curtsy to Beth. "An" here he is, mistress, clean and blessed. And warmed up. As 'twere."

"Why, thank you, my dears," Beth said, her eyes never leaving Eric's. "I do truly appreciate your efforts." She took Eric's arm, leading him into the tavern.

"Beth . . ."he muttered, "I'll get you for this."

She let go of his hand and stepped up onto one of the rough-hewn tavern tables, calling out for silence in a clear voice. "M'lords and ladies, we have here a lad who has been well and truly heartbroken, who spent last night all alone with only a bottle for comfort . . . and we all know that a bottle is a rather cold and miserable bedmate, not like a saucy wench!"

Eric felt himself blushing as the crowd of travelers outside the tavern cheered rowdily.

Beth smiled. "Seems he needs a hand. So, what shall we do for this poor lad, I ask you?"

"Give him to the German mercenary wenches!"

"Sell him to the gypsies!"

"Make him play us dancing music!"

Beth turned to him, her voice slightly softer. "Well, sirrah, what shall it be?" She looked him up and down. "I dare say we shouldn't get much for you from the gypsies. Too skinny, methinks. So, it's the girls, or the tunes. A spritely dancing tune, or the meaty paws of the German wenches?" Beth grinned evilly, and added in an undertone, "I'd play the tune if I were you, Eric. Karen Wolfsdottir has been yearning to get her mitts on you all season.

Eric was already reaching into his gig bag for his flute.

The first tune he played was "Banish Misfortune," as lively and cheerful a melody as he could think of. The Faire folk, seated at the wooden trestle tables, began to clap and pound the table with their tankards in rhythm with the tune, and then he saw Ian and Linda sneaking up from the back of the tavern, drum and fiddle already in their hands. Oh, Bethie planned this one in advance, methinks! Okay, then, let's do it right!

He leaped up on the table without missing a beat, startling the two peasants playing a game of Cathedral next to him. With Ian holding the beat steady on his bodhran drum, and Linda deftly carrying the melody for him, Eric continued to play the flute, but also began to hop and skip down the long table, to the raucous cheers of the onlooking travelers. Beth clapped her hands in glee, watching him from a precarious perch atop the tavern fence and laughing wildly.

Winded, he jumped off the edge of the table, landing in the straw next to the two giggling dancer girls who had brought him there. He stopped the tune in mid-note and grabbed the older of the two girls, the one with the long red-gold hair and wicked green eyes, and kissed her soundly before letting her go. She landed on her posterior in the thick hay, still laughing.

Eric doffed his cap at her and her companion. "I thank ye both for bringing me here," he said in his finest Elizabethan accent. "You're both lovely lasses, and I implore you to dance for us all!"

The two girls looked at each other uncertainly.

Beth called from her position on the rickety tavern fence. "Oh, and come on with you now, lasses! Show us what ye can do!"

And they did.

Eric applauded and cheered with the travelers and Faire folk as the red-haired girl helped her companion up onto the table. Then they moved into proper stepdancer position, arms linked, one foot raised with the toes delicately pointed forward.

Linda and Ian were watching him for the signal. "Athol Highlander's!" he called, then hit the first note of the rollicking Scottish jig straight on, Linda joining in a moment later with as sweet a bit of fiddling as he'd ever heard her play, then Ian tossing off a few clicks on the rim of his bodhran before settling into some serious drumming.

The girls danced down the long table, skipping and pirouetting to the shouts and calls of the audience. Then, as the tune wound to a close, they also leaped off the table, startling Eric so much that he flubbed the last note. They both laughed with him, as he shook his head in disbelief.

It only got better after that.

After several more dances and tunes (including a very bawdy Elizabethan song that sounded almost prim when sung solo, but when you sang it in a round, the words made the most amazing sentences), Eric relaxed at one of the tables. A tankard of the Fool's best was in front of him as he watched the expert belly dancer strutting her stuff to a Scottish strathspey.

Well, it may not be "period," but who cares at this point?

Beth sat down next to him, taking the mug from his hand and draining a long draught. "Is life treatin' you better now, Banyon?"

He sighed and reclaimed the tankard from her hand. "Well, I still think telling Susie to wash me in the well was a rotten trick ..."

"Agreed. But I couldn't let you in here with dirty ears." She leaned close to nibble on his right ear. "Do you see why?"

He took a moment to recover. Uh, yeah.

"I'm glad." She stood up, taking his hand. "I think we've caused enough mischief for one morning. Want to take it elsewhere?"

Eric glanced up at the main trestle table, where the two dancer girls had kidnapped two Spaniards and were trying to teach them to stepdance, to the laughter of all onlookers. "Sounds good."

Beth led him behind the tavern, through the back gate and across the lane. Directly towards the Kissing Bridge.

Oh no, not the Kissing Bridge again . . .

She pulled him onto the Bridge, already populated with lingering couples. "There's only one cure for a broken heart, Banyon, and I've taken it upon myself to administer it. Don't take it personally. This is for purely therapeutic reasons only."

"Bethie—"

And she kissed him.

A significant amount of time later, he managed to find his voice again, "Uh, Bethie—"

"Mmmm?" She cuddled even closer.

"You know, I have half of a perfectly good apartment that's free for the taking, anybody could move in. And it could really use someone with a nice feminine touch—"

Beth suddenly stiffened in his arms. "Don't even think it, Banyon. Someday you may find someone who's right for you, but I'm not that lady. Don't get me wrong, I like you a lot, but let's not complicate it past that, all right?"

"Okay." He kissed the tip of her nose, making her giggle. "I just like you a lot, too." His lips moved lower, down her neck. "The offer's there if you want it, all right?"

An apologetic voice, somewhere next to his left ear, interrupted what had been a fascinating progression down the strong line of her shoulder, "Er, ah. Mistress Beth, they're about to start the Mainstage show, and Carl really is wondering if you're planning on joining us today."

"Oh, damn." Beth retrieved herself from Eric's arms, quickly straightening her costume. She gave him a wry grin. "Well, duty calls. Master O'Banyon. I'll look for you after the show."

Eric watched regretfully as Beth and her showmate disappeared into the crowd of travelers on the street. I never can manage to hold on to that girl for more than five minutes at a time. That's all she's interested in

with me. I guess some guys would like that, a lady who's just a good friend and a willing bedmate. The perfect situation, right?

Damn.

He walked away from the Bridge, wandering aimlessly. After a while, he realized that he was back on the road above the Laughing Fool. Since he and Beth had left, the tavern had returned to its usual quiet state, a few actors conversing over a mug of ale, some "peasant women" eating lunch at another table.

Eric found himself an empty haybale near the tavern gate, sat down, and took out his flute again. He touched the keys lovingly, as the metal warmed to his hand.

Hello, old friend. Just you and me again. He remembered how he had argued with Admin over playing a metal flute at a "period" Faire. I don't know what I'd do if they hadn't given in. I can't see doing a gig without you. I think they knew that, and decided they'd rather keep me and be anachronistic than watch me walk out. He played an experimental run, thinking about how the red-haired dancer had laughed after he had kissed her. I should write a tune for that lovely, something she and her friend can dance to. He smiled as a tune began to shape itself in his mind and fingertips, a lively little melody that brought pleasant images, recollections of Faires past; of laughing girls, dainty feet tapping out an intricate highland dance, and of chilled ale on a hot Faire afternoon.

Then his spirits dropped again, and he settled down to some seriously morose music.

"Cliffs of Moher," there's a good one. And "Kid on the Mountain," that's challenging and depressing.

Without his realizing it, Eric's sad fluting brought in a crowd of listeners to the edge of the tavern fence. He looked up to see the travelers listening intently to him, and smiled sadly to himself, thinking: They don't understand. He continued to play.

Eric looked up again. Something in that mass of faceless travelers had looked strangely familiar . . .

. . . yeah, that skinny guy, the tall blond, the one with the embroidered cloak . . . wait a minute—his cloak—my cloak!

Eric leaped up from the haybale, diving over the wooden fence like an avenging angel. The young man in the shrouding cloak took one look at Eric's snarling face and ran like hell.

A matronly female customer screamed as Eric catapulted past her, one hand reaching for the trailing edge of the ankle-length cloak. Other travelers scattered out of the way as Eric pursued the young man past the astonished washerwoman at the well and right through a colorful troupe of morris men dancing in the middle of the dirt street. Angry shouts and the sound of clattering leg-bells followed them down the road.

The thief crashed through the bota-bag booth, sending the hanging wineskins flapping wildly at their tethers. Eric followed close on his tail, waving his flute like a deadly weapon. "Stop, you lousy bastard! Thief! Thief!"

The cloaked robber dashed under a monger's carefully balanced tray of fresh tripe and crossed the Kissing Bridge in one desperate leap. Eric vaulted after him, thoroughly disrupting the amorous affairs of the kissing couples on the Bridge.

Then he saw the kilted Scottish troop directly ahead of him, carrying their pikes at attention as they marched down the street. Eric skidded to a stop, not wanting to crash into the Scottish warriors—and their six-foot spears.

But the cloaked man kept running.

Right through the formation of marching pikemen.

Eric stared in disbelief as the nimble thief danced past the warriors and their deadly spears. Somehow he made it look simple and easy as he dodged between them. Then the thief was across, on the other side of the formation without so much as causing a single pikeman to miss a step.

Several of the watching travelers applauded, doubtlessly thinking this was part of a show. Eric just stood there, staring after the escaping thief in amazement.

Nobody should be able to do that. . . .

Eric took a deep breath and ran after him, straight into the pike formation . . . and three seconds later, he found himself sprawled on the dirt with several pikes lying around him, and a half-dozen irate Scotsmen glaring at him in disgust.

Then the dark-bearded Scottish chieftan himself walked over and looked down at Eric.

"Oh, Eric, lad, you've done yerself quite a turn this time, ye have," the Chief said sadly.

"Sorry, Boss," Eric muttered, trying to stand up without much success. His ankle hurt. Not to mention his pride.

After yesterday, there wasn't anything left of his dignity to hurt.

The Chief crouched down in the dust close to Eric. "By the way," he said in a quiet voice entirely devoid of Scottish accent, "Caitlin wanted to see you in Admin. Something about the Mainstage show yesterday."

"Terrific," Eric said morosely. One of the Scots helped him stand, dusting him off. Eric thanked him, then scanned the crowd for any sign of the thief.

Nowhere in sight. Damn.

So much for my favorite Faire cloak. I wonder how that little rat got past Security and into my tent?

The pikemen lined up into their formation. The Chief gave Eric one last, pitying look, a look Eric caught out of the corner of his eye as the troop of Scotsmen marched off towards their encampment.

Well. Better get it over with.

He headed for Admin Hill and the offices directly behind the large brightly-colored Faire mural.

Caitlin's a good lady; she usually understands these things. I mean, she's the one who got me out of that jam last year with the Maypole dancers. They're not going to can me ... I hope.

Eric moved carefully through the thickening traffic on the dusty lane, past the travelers haggling with the boothies over their wares. He stepped carefully over three peasants sprawled out "drunk" in the street and doffed his cap at the bored Security guard at the office entrance.

Inside the musty, crowded office area, costumed actors and musicians were relaxing, several smoking some definitively non-period Marlboros, others drinking sodas and catching up on gossip. Eric crossed to the hanging burlap flap that was the door to Caitlin's office, and took a deep breath. "Caitlin?"

A tired female voice answered. "Come in."

Eric walked into the makeshift office. Caitlin looked up from the stacks of paperwork on the table, her everpresent can of diet soda in her hand. "Hello, Eric. Is it Fate or bad luck that you always end up in my office?"

"A bit of both, I think." He sat down on a folding chair across from her. "Does it help if I tell you that I really try to avoid this sort of thing?"

"Yes, a little. I was starting to wonder if you got in trouble just so you could flirt with me in my office." She leaned back in her chair, wearily running her hand through her short auburn hair. Her long blond wig, with the floppy hat she usually wore as part of her costume, was lying on the table near the papers.

Eric stared at the wig to avoid meeting her gaze.

"So, Eric, you and your girlfriend decided to break up, right behind the four-thirty Mainstage show yesterday. Made it quite interesting for the audience. I understand your ex-girlfriend has quite an operatic voice."

Eric winced. "Yes, she does. Great projection, too."

Caitlin almost cracked a smile. "You're classically trained too, aren't you? Somebody told me you studied at Juilliard. Is that true?"

"Yeah, I was at Juilliard. Two years." He shifted uncomfortably, a knot already beginning to tighten in his gut at the mere thought of those two years. He flashed on his last recital—

Playing better than he ever had in his life; playing his heart out. Then putting the flute down. Announcing to the panel—"Today was my birthday. Last night somebody-threw rocks at my window all night long to keep me awake. This morning somebody else jammed the lock on my door so I had to climb out my window to make it here on time. I can't take this shit anymore. I'm eighteen and my parents can't do a thing about me now. Gentlemen, ladies, you can take your goddamned classical education and shove it."

And the long, absolute silence as he walked out.

Six months before I could bear to touch the flute. Eight before I could play again. Three years before I could even listen to Bach.

Damn. I really wish people wouldn't ask me about that.

Caitlin was watching him with knowing eyes. "Eric, you're a sweetheart, and one of the best musicians we've ever had here, but somehow you're always getting in trouble. I'll clear you on this one, cover you for the people Upstairs, but—try to avoid this kind of thing in the future? Just try, all right? Promise me?"



He sighed. I don't know whether to be relieved that she let me off easy, or embarrassed because I know she's letting me off just 'cause I'm good. Guess I'd better just count my blessings.

"Thanks. I'm really sorry about this." He stood up to leave. Caitlin's voice stopped him before he reached the door.

"Eric?"

He turned back to her.

"I know you're going through a rough time, your girlfriend walking out on you and everything. Just don't . . . leave, okay? I heard what happened in Texas, when you had girlfriend problems there. Don't just walk out on us, Eric. I'd really like you to finish out the season with us, okay?"

He nodded, and lifted the burlap flap, walking out of the relative quiet of her office into the overwhelming noise levels of the Admin area.

So. Somebody told Caitlin about my Texas adventure. Shouldn't be surprised, I guess.

- Damn it, what's so terrible about just packing up and leaving when things go that wrong? God, if I'd stayed at Texas Faire—between us, Kathie and me, we'd have had the place divided like the Civil War all over again. So I split, and now everybody treats it like some kind of sin. And Caitlin, she's acting like I'm about ready to run from Southern California. She doesn't have any reason to think that. Except—

—except, well, maybe I did think about it last night. Okay. So maybe I have a tendency to get out while the goings good. It's not like I'm the only musician they've got. Why should I stick around anyhow? Maureen's left me, probably already moved out all her stuff from the apartment. I could leave next week, no one would care. I don't have a steady gig here, they don't need me for the show. Nothing I promised to do, just Bethie and Spiral Dance once in a while, and this Faire, and both of them could keep running fine without me ...

Caitlin's words echoed in his mind: "Just don't walk out on us, Eric."

And Bethie, sure, she'll give me a roll in the hay, but nothing more than that. I may not be Mister Commitment, but I'd like a little more than just that in a relationship, y'know? Maybe not True Love, but—Serious Like? Honest Lust?

He left the Admin building, walking through the crowded streets. At least Caitlin didn't throw me off the Fairesite. Thank God for that, I guess.

He sidestepped a group of Faire children playing tag in the middle of the lane; narrowly missed a collision with a black-velveted noblewoman and her retinue.

"Oops, milady," Eric said respectfully, doffing his cap, Lady Anne Millesford (AKA Terri Leiber of Riverside, California) just gave him a disdainful look and flounced onward.

Then he heard them, the exuberant Gaelic shouts and keening and general noise, approaching from twelve o'clock high.

Oh shit, I forgot about the show! He dashed through the crowd of travelers and Faire folk, towards the

Scottish parade marching past. The double line of Celtic warriors, the Chief and his household walking within the protective row, processed past the washing well as Eric caught up with them. With an expertly timed move that he had down perfectly after years of always being late for stage shows, he ducked under the closest Scotsman and slipped into his proper position with the other musicians.

He hollered the Gaelic gibberish (that he really didn't understand) along with the rest of the marchers, the ululating cries of the women echoing in his ears. As they marched up to Mainstage, he joined the other musicians on stage right. The Chief began the show patter: We're traveling through England and Donal just up and croaked, so we're holding a party—I mean wake—for 'im.

The frazzle-haired Dancemistress ran through the show order as Eric and the others did a last minute tuning check, ticking off the numbers on her fingers. "Jig set, two-hand reel, slippjig solo, Gaelic song ..."  
She turned to one of the other dancers. "Hey, remind everyone that we're doing 'John Ryan's'—you know, 'Boom Boom'—right after the song, so everyone should line up fast." She emphasized the "Boom Boom" with a quick shimmy of her hips, and the dancers laughed. "All right, let's do it!"

The dancers ran out to center stage, grabbing partners by the hands and forming sets.

Looks so impromptu, they never guess we practiced these routines for four weeks.

Linda kicked off the tune, a lively fiddle version of "Top of Cork Road," and Eric joined in with Ian on the fifth measure.

It was a good, solid show, one of their best all season. The audience applauded and laughed at the right places, the music was at the right tempo, no one tripped or missed a step in the strathspey-reel, and—Thank God—none of the stepdancers sprained an ankle. Not like last weekend, two casualties in the Saturday 11:30 show alone, not to mention the three the weekend before.

And Maureen's comment when he told her about the sprained-ankle victims: "Probably wouldn't have happened if they did decent warm-ups, like we do at the Chandler ..."

"Och, and now we'd be after hearing our fine musicians play us a tune, indeed we would!" the Chief called out in a voice that carried to the last row of haybales. Musicians' solo time. Well, here we go again . . . Eric and the other minstrels moved to the front of the stage. " 'Banish Misfortune' into 'Drowsy Maggie,' two and three," Linda called.

Eric gazed at the audience, row after row of attentive faces, waiting, watching him . . .

Bright lights, starched collar of my concert shirt scratching my neck, the orchestra ready and waiting behind me, taking a deep breath and beginning to play...

That damned program book: "Eric Banyon, flute prodigy, performing Dances Sacred and Profane" . . .

Then he heard "Banish Misfortune," as wicked and sprightly an Irish jig as he'd ever played, and Eric realized in dismay that the band was already halfway through the A part and he hadn't even noticed that they'd started. He tossed in a quick trill, hoping that it sounded like he had meant to join in in the middle of the tune.

Linda's giving me that "raised eyebrow" look, though, I don't think I fooled her! I'll probably catch hell for this later . . .

Then Aaron gave the signal and they dived into "Drowsy Maggie," half again as fast as "Banish" and twice as lively. They ended in a flurry of wild notes, and the audience applauded enthusiastically.

Oh, that was fun. Maureen, you would have liked that one . . .

That brought a sudden pain to his gut, his throat tightening. Damn it, Maureen, I thought you'd love the Faire, I thought we'd be terrific together, soprano and flute. You'd actually get to be close to your audience, see their reactions, how much they like your music; three feet right in front of you instead of on the other side of the orchestra pit. I thought you'd be happy here, and understand why I love doing this, playing Faire.

Why did you have to walk out on me?

He marched with the "Celtic bus" halfway back to the Hill, leaving the parade formation just outside the Turkish coffeehouse. Eric waited in line at the counter, already imagining how the sweet iced coffee would taste. Then he reached for his belt pouch to get out some cash, and—

—and there were only the leather strings dangling from his belt, neatly cut just below the knot.

Oh SHIT!

Somebody stole my money pouch! GODDAMMIT, this isn't FAIR!

He started to get angry—but he ran out of energy, halfway through "disgusted."

Flat-lined. Emotional burnout.

Eric left the line, walked slowly to a convenient haybale, stretched out and closed his eyes in numb despair.

What a truly revoltin development. First Maureen walks out on me, then someone steals my cloak, then I damned near get thrown out of this Faire, then somebody cuts my belt pouch. All the money that I made yesterday, busking with Maureen and the others. Gone.

I can't believe all of this is happening to me.

"But it could be worse."

The low male voice spoke quietly, directly into his left-ear. Startled, Eric sat up, looking around.

And realized that no one was within ten feet of him. The closest person was a four-year-old girl who was busily smearing baklava over her face while her mother and a friend were watching the dance show on the small coffee-house stage.

Terrific. Now I'm losing my mind, too. Just what I always wanted.

The little girl held out a sticky hand to Eric, gravely offering a piece of straw-coated baklava. He smiled and shook his head, then stood up.

Maureen s left me, he thought at her, as if she could hear him. Then someone stole my cloak, I nearly lost this Faire gig, and a cutpurse got my cash pouch. It only had fifteen bucks in it, not the end of the

world, but that was all the money I had on me.

Methinks I need something stronger than Middle Eastern pastry, sweetling. But, in the interest of the Faire's pristine reputation, I'll get out of the way before I look for it.

He waited until he was in the hidden grove, far from the thick dust and crowds, before reaching for the corked flask at his side.

Then Eric proceeded to become thoroughly, profoundly drunk, for the second time in twenty-four hours.

I love the smell of fresh dirt—but I wish my nose didn't hurt. He opened his eyes a little, and saw—

Brown.

Oh. I'm lying facedown in it. That must be why it's a little difficult to breathe. Eric tried to roll over onto his back, and failed. He tried again, then gave it up as hopeless.

S'okay. I really don't want to go anywhere, anyhow. I've always wanted to be a worm, anyway. Worms can have a good time all by themselves and never know the difference. "Oh, you're my tail? I thought you were my girlfriend."

He lay there in the dirt and oak leaves, imagining a beautiful red-haired woman smiling at him. A particular beautiful red-haired woman.

"Eric, I've decided it doesn't matter to me what you do with your life, all I want is to be with you, always."

Then she leaned forward to kiss him and ...

Dream on. Banyon.

Oh, Maureen . . .

He managed to get his head turned to one side, and pillowed his cheek in the crook of his arm. He blinked back tears and sniffled, startling a bluejay who had been investigating him curiously, doubtlessly wondering if all that hair would make a good lining for her nest. Great. I'm lying in the dirt, completely wasted. Now I'm going to start leaking from the eyes. I'm going to make mud to lie in. A perfect ending to a thoroughly delightful weekend.

"Bard? Bard? I need to talk to you."

The voice spoke softly, low musical tones, definitely male. Eric tried to open one eye to look at the guy, but decided it wasn't worth it. "Go 'way. 'M trying to meditate."

"Please. It's very serious. I would not disturb your meditations, but I must ask some things of you."

"Nothing's that serious. Here, have a drink." Eric still had his hip flask in his other hand. He blindly shoved the flask in the direction of the voice. "Feel free to join me, there's plenty of whiskey, plenty of room here on the ground. It's quite comfortable, really. If you don't mind having rocks poking holes in your body."

The voice sounded profoundly puzzled. "No, thank you. But please, I must speak with you. I have many questions, and you are the only one who can tell me the answers."

"Why? Who put me in charge? Go ask Caitlin or somebody."

"Why? You must—you're the one who Awakened me." The voice became desperate. "Please, Bard—please."

Eric tried again to lift his nose from the dirt so he could see whom he was talking to, then gave it up as a lost cause. "S'sorry. I didn't mean to wake you up. I just talk to myself when I'm drinking, can't tell how loud I am, you know, just happens."

The voice wasn't paying any attention to him. "Please, you must answer my questions. Your song Awakened me last night, and I don't know how long it has been. I cannot find any of my own kind here, and ... I heard disturbing talk. Bard. They are saying that this place will be destroyed soon. You, of all people, you must know what that will do to all of us. And the others—are they still Dreaming, or has something worse happened to them?"

Either I'm more drunk than I thought, or this guy is talking about something really and truly bizarre.

Third possibility. Whatever he's doing has sent him into another reality. Bad drugs, Eric. Humor the man. "Is this part of some street bit? I'm not in on it. Maybe you should save it for the travelers, m'friend."

There was a long and profound silence, during which Eric felt his tenuous grip on consciousness slipping even further from his grasp. Yeah, passing out right now does seem somehow like the appropriate thing to do.

Oh, Maureen ...

He choked on a sob; remembered he wasn't alone, and held it in. All of it.

Stillness, unbroken by so much as the fall of a leaf. Then a single word.

"Oh."

Then someone's hands gently rolled him onto his back, removing the rocks and sharper branches from beneath him, piling leaves to create a comfortable bed for him. He tried to open his eyes and thank the stranger, and couldn't manage either.

"Rest now. Forget a little. I will find you later, when your heart is not in such pain."

Eric smiled as an unseen hand brushed the stray locks of his hair from his face. In the alcohol-confused haze of his mind, the gentle hand could only have belonged to one person.

Mmmm, Maureen, that's nice, feels good . . .

The last he heard was quiet footsteps, crunching through the dry oak leaves as the stranger walked away. When he awoke several hours later, the sun already fading from the leafy branches above him, Eric was alone in the grove.

## The Unfortunate Kake

Eric managed to pry one of his eyes open, and looked around blearily. God, I feel awful This is getting to be a habit.

He pried open the other eye, and his head reacted with a predictable stab of pain.

Maybe I'd better think about changing my habits.

He sat up. Slowly.

Was there somebody here earlier, or did I dream that?

He succeeded in getting into a sitting position and realized that he'd been nestled in a snug little bed of leaves. I sure didn't have the sense to do that. No, he was real. Guess he went back to Fairesite. His stomach lurched, and he lay back down before it could turn rebellious on him.

Wonder who the guy was? I didn't recognize the voice.

He looked up at the darkening sky through oak branches above him. Sun's setting. I must have been here for hours.

All right, Eric. Time to return to Reality. Or, at least, the Fairesite. He made a second attempt at mobility, a successful one this time, and staggered to his feet, wincing as he bent down to pick up his abandoned gig bag. Gods, I ache all over, just like I've been—

—drunk all weekend.

Yeah.

Well, it seemed like a good idea at the time . . .

He beat the dust out of his breeches, and walked-carefully—back towards the main grounds of the Faire. I wonder how badly I've managed to screw up. I did make my show before I went facedown in the bean dip. I didn't get drunk in a public place. But I wasn't making the rounds. He sighed. Oh well. The worst they can do is fire me. Then I will have a reason to head north.

He entered the Faire grounds—cautiously. The boothies were packing up, carrying boxes to the cars and pickups parked in the narrow streets.

Andrea and Tom were loading up the last of their hand-made costumes into Andrea's Honda as Eric walked by. "See you guys next weekend," he called to them. Andrea called out a good-bye to him; it got lost in the noise of one of the water trucks passing by, liberally soaking everything in its path with fire retardant. Andrea's Honda joined the line of cars on the dirt road leading out of Fairesite, kicking up a small cloud of dust as it chugged up the hill.

Eric walked past a small covey of actors carrying their props, ungainly stuffed hobbyhorses embroidered in bright colors, then he saw Judy, struggling to carry her large hammer dulcimer.

"Need a hand?" he asked, catching up with her.

She flashed him a grateful smile. "Thanks, Eric. You're a sweetheart."

He took the dulcimer stand and her costume bag from her hands, knowing she'd rather carry the musical instrument herself. "So . . . did you have a good weekend?"

She sighed. "If you don't count that drunken idiot who tripped over my Pass-the-Hat bowl, then threw up almost on my feet."

Eric winced.

Judy gave him a very direct look. "But that was the only bad spot in an otherwise terrific weekend. I heard you weren't so lucky."

He shook his head ruefully. "Damn, but bad news travels fast around here."

"A lot of people were really concerned about you, Eric. I remember what happened out at Texas Faire a couple years back ..."

He stiffened slightly. "Well, this is different. I'm handling it just fine."

Just fine, half the weekend drunk off my ass, barely managed to do my shows, didn't even play street at all.

Yeah, that's really handling it, Eric.

Judy set down the dulcimer on a haybale outside the Turkish coffeehouse. "I'm meeting some folks here before heading out. Maybe play a few last tunes before returning to Mundania. Want to join us?"

Eric propped the dulcimer stand against the haybale, the costume bag next to it. "No, I think I'm going to wander for a little longer, see who's still hanging around the 'site. I'll probably see you on my way out, though."

He headed back into the main area of the Faire, not certain what he was looking for, or who. Looks like everyone's packing it up for the weekend. I probably should, too.

Two of the Scotsmen were lifting up stacks of pikes, lashing them down in the bed of a faded Dodge pickup.

Hope they tie those down good. I sure wouldn't want to be driving on the freeway behind them and suddenly see a dozen pikes flying point-first toward my windshield.

I can see the headlines now: Man Skewered by Runaway Medieval Arsenal? Killer Scottish Pike Strike Massacre?

Spear Today, Cone Tomorrow?

But I bet Maureen's land-tank is tough enough to handle a pike assault. I'll wager on a Chrysler any day against a Scottish brigade . . .

Oh, damn. Maureen's car—she was going to give me a lift home. I'm sure she isn't coming back to get

me. I'm stranded out here. Terrific. One last lousy touch on a truly wretched weekend.

Maybe if I can catch up to Judy . . .

He hurried back to the coffeehouse. As he approached, he heard the faint sounds of hammered dulcimer, bodhran, and fiddle. Well, that's a break. I probably can talk Judy into giving me a lift home.

He recognized the tune—"The Butterfly," one of his favorites. Eric quickly pulled his flute case from the gig bag, and was playing along with the melody by the time he reached the jam session at the coffeehouse.

Judy was intent upon her dulcimer, hammers dancing lightly across the strings, but the four other minstrels smiled in welcome as Eric joined them.

The four Northerners, that's right. Damn, but they're really together, really tight. I'd bet my flute that they've done a lot of gigs together.

The dark-haired fiddler girl suddenly grinned impishly at the others and switched into a harmony that Eric had never heard before, beautiful and haunting. As the tune came back around for a second time, Eric smiled to himself and began playing counterpoint.

For a moment, it was almost as good as the melody he'd played in the grove, every note falling perfectly, the counterpoint transforming the music into something more than just a tune.

When it was over, the last note fading away, Judy was the first to speak. "Eric, that was nice."

"Damn good playing," the bearded bouzouki player said. He pulled a flask from his belt, offering it around the circle of musicians. Eric took a draught, smiling as the Irish Mist burned with a heartwarming fire all the way down his throat.

He handed the flask back to the man, then noticed that the drummer girl was gazing at him thoughtfully. "Where do you play? Are you touring with a band, or playing concerts?"

Eric shook his head. "I do Faires, street stuff. Haven't been in a band on a regular basis in years, or played concerts ..." since the day I walked out of Juilliard. No more. Life's too short. "Mostly I just sorta sit in."

"Haven't you ever thought of doing something more with your music than just busking? You're a damn sight better than any flautist I've ever heard on the Faire circuit."

He shrugged. "This is all I want to do. I'm happy. That's all that matters." He turned to Judy. "Listen, I came back because, well, my girlfriend was supposed to give me a lift home, and you know what happened with that..."

"You're in Van Nuys, right? No prob, although ..." Judy glanced up at the sun, barely visible above the hills.

". we should start out soon. The traffic's going to be something fierce on 101."

"But one last tune, Judy?" The fiddler's fingers were twitching. "Not a Faire tune, we've been playing them all weekend. How 'bout something a little different . . . ?"



She raised her bow to the strings, and began the opening violin solo from "Danse Macabre."

And stark terror reached out to grab Eric by the throat.

Oh my God, no, please . . .

He tried, but couldn't block the memories rising up in his mind to drown him. He backed up without knowing he was moving; half fell over the haybale behind him, landing on his knees in the straw and dirt, shaking and retching, unable to think or speak. No, it's just music, it's nothing, it can't happen again . . .

"Eric!"

"What's wrong with him?"

He heard the concerned voices, somehow distant, unreal. The only things that were real were the bright lights of the stage and the shadowy darkness of the concert hall, and the nightmare stepping out of his mind and into reality . . .

It's only a memory, it happened over ten years ago, it's not real. Dammit, it's not real!

But he could hear them, the whispering voices, could feel them closing in, calling to him, reaching for him . . .

Then he felt a human hand gripping his shoulder, yanking him back into the present. Judy, staring down at him with eyes that were wide and frightened, her hand clutched tight on his shoulder.

"I'm . . . I'm okay," he said weakly, looking up at her. The others were gathered around him, worried. "Probably just food poisoning from that damn Hungarian pie booth," he said, hoping that his voice sounded calm. That it didn't shake the way he was still shaking inside. "I got sick after eating there opening weekend, shouldn't have done it again today." He took a deep breath, steadying himself.

He managed to stand up, the blond bearded Northerner helping him regain his feet. "Thanks, man. This hasn't been one of my better weekends. I . . . I think maybe I should go home." He tried to grin, but by the looks on their faces, it wasn't convincing. "Is that all right by you, Judy?"

"Yeah, sure." She quickly packed her dulcimer away in its case, slung it over her shoulder. "Let's hit the road."

Judy's tiny car disappeared around the corner, leaving Eric alone on the street, the ominous bulk of his apartment building looming overhead.

Home to the concrete jungle. Maybe Maureen's upstairs, waiting for me to get home, wanting to talk it over, work things out.

Not bloody likely.

He unlocked the security door, and the children playing in the courtyard stopped to look at him curiously as he headed for the stairs, yes, kiddies, it's the refugee from the 16th century, home from the wars.

Eric opened the door and walked into his apartment. He stepped into the living room, took one look,

then wearily sat down on the battered couch.

No, I don't think Maureen wants to talk things over . . .

With no more than a glance, he knew she was gone. The Beethoven statue, the Japanese flower vase, that "Ride of the Valkyries" poster with those funny little Vikings climbing all over it—she's taken all of it. All of her stuff.

His record collection was neatly stacked on the floor, next to a now-nonexistent record cabinet. He looked through them briefly—she hadn't taken a single record of his, from what he could see, and she'd even left the ones they had bought together, over the last few months.

Like she didn't want anything to remind her of me . . .

He walked into the kitchen, and saw the note on the fridge: "I took the cat. You don't deserve her. Goodbye, Eric."

Great. Terrific. At least that scrawny furball will have a good home. Now there really isn't anything holding me in Los Angeles, not even that damn cat ...

Maureen, how could you do this to me? Why?

He sank down into a chair, his head in his hands. Oh, Maureen . . .

Something clicked behind him, the sound of a door closing. Eric sat up abruptly, looking around. My God, is someone in here with me? Eric slid to his feet, quietly moving to the dish rack and palming a large sharp steak knife.

All right. I've been ripped off twice this weekend already, and this is it—if anybody's in the apartment, they're toast!

He slipped off his Faire boots, padding silently across the living room to the closed bedroom door. The knife clenched tightly in his fist, Eric suddenly flung the bedroom door open and leaped inside—

—and tripped on a pile of his clothes. He barely managed to avoid cutting himself with the knife as he landed face-first on the floor. He sat up slowly, gingerly rubbing the new sore spot on his chin.

Oh. That's right, Maureen was the one who bought that standing wardrobe. I guess she decided to take that, too.

The bedroom window was open, the curtains fluttering in the breeze. That must be what caused that noise. There's no one in here.

Just to be safe, he checked the closet. As he closed the closet door, Eric had the strangest sensation, as though something was moving just on the edges of his vision. He turned quickly, but there was nothing in the room but scattered clothes and the unmade bed.

My brain is draining,—it's turned to yogurt, and it's draining. I'm seeing little green men who aren't there. Bad booze, Eric.

He returned to the kitchen and opened the fridge, wondering if Maureen had cleared out half of the food

as well. He reached into the freezer for one of the many identical stacked dinners of genuine frozen food-shaped plastic, and realized that the bottle of iced Stolichnaya was missing.

That was a low blow, Maureen. Sure, it was a Christmas gift from a friend of yours, but it was to both of us, remember?

Eric absently shoved the frozen dinner into the oven, turning on the gas, then leaned back against the cabinet, trying not to feel too much.

He took the carton of milk from the fridge, drinking straight from the container, as he sat down again at the kitchen table. Well, it's not the End of the World. I've lived through this kind of thing before. I'll live through it this time.

I always do, whether I like it or not.

His feet were chilled, bare skin against the cold linoleum. Eric reached down for his Faire boots, and—  
—and his hand encountered empty air.

He looked down. No boots.

I think I'm losing my mind.

No, Eric, you're not insane, just stupid. Okay, you must have moved them and not thought about it. Absentminded. Pre-Alzheimer's. And you drank too much this weekend. . .

He ate dinner in silence. No Maureen, to tell me all about the rehearsals at the Pavilion, all the little inside jokes and gossip. No damn cat, even, trying to steal my dinner. This is the most depressing meal I've had in a long time.

Eric finished the pre-packaged dinner, leaving everything on the table. I'll clean it up tomorrow. Right now, all I want is a hot shower, and a toke, and crash.

Half an hour later, drying his hair with a towel and wearing a second one around his waist, Eric returned to the kitchen for a glass of juice.

And the abandoned frozen dinner tray had vanished. The fork and knife were missing, too. After a moment, Eric realized that they were in the dish rack, dripping wet.

This is very, very weird. I don't remember washing the dishes. I hate washing dishes. And why in hell did I wash the tinfoil thingie?

He shook his head, and looked at the dishrack again, but the stuff was still there. Okay. Too much whiskey, too much stress, and not enough sleep. But, I can cope. Though maybe I'd better just call it a night now before I start speaking in tongues and telling the neighbors to find Jesus . . .

He returned to the living room, and sat down on the couch. On the low table were a carved wooden pipe and a small plastic bag.

At least she didn't take the stash.

Eric filled the pipe with the fragrant weed, lit it, and smoked in silence for a few minutes.

Uncle Dan's cure for heartbroken insomniacs. When I see him I should thank him for scoring this for me at such an opportune time.

He felt his head beginning to fog; the hurt inside started to seem less important. He always seems to come up with things I'm gonna need before I need them. I wonder if he knew what was going to happen? Wouldn't surprise me— Beth, Allie, Dan, all those Spiral Dance crazies, they're all a little strange that way.

The pipe went out, and he stared at it in mild surprise. Amazing how fast it goes. Huh. Just like the Bushmills last night. Now, say goodnight, Eric. Goodnight Eric.

He took pipe and bag and tucked them carefully into the nook under the corner of the couch frame. Paranoia never hurt. God. Thank God this weekend's over . . .

He stood up, slightly unsteadily, and staggered to the bedroom. He had to wade through the piled clothing to reach the bed, and had barely enough cognizant thought left to pull the blanket over him before all of his sorrows faded away in a deep, dreamless sleep.

Dreamless? Well . . .

There was a voice in his head. Just a voice, though, and a presence that . . . comforted.

Heal, saddened one. You feel the song? It is yours; you have only to follow . . .

A non-dream like ones he'd had, a long, long time ago, when he was a child and music was spun of equal parts of melody and magic, and he could hear things in his sleeping mind that slipped maddeningly away when he woke.

Follow, and find healing . . .

Oh God, it's morning again. Eric blinked at the bright sunlight shining through the open window. He glanced at the alarm clock on the nightstand. Well, almost afternoon, I think. Ten o'clock. I'd better start moving or I'll miss the lunch crowd downtown.

He stood up, stretching, and looked around the room. And found himself smiling. Amazing. I actually feel good this morning. Almost human again. He rummaged through the piles of clothing on the floor, and found a pair of jeans and a T-shirt that were relatively clean and unrumpled.

Time to pay the rent, I guess. Energy filled him, and he discovered he was looking forward to getting out on the street with anticipation. He hummed as he laced a pair of ancient tennis shoes on his feet, and sang a little as he slung his gig bag over his shoulder. Five minutes, and he was ready to head out.

He grabbed a leftover donut from the fridge on his way out the door, whistling "Banish Misfortune" as he strolled down to the bus stop. This is really a beautiful morning, blue skies—well, bluish-brown, this is L.A. after all—and I feel terrific. Surprisingly good. I don't even miss Maureen—

A lump in his throat suddenly sprang up and interfered with the passage of his donut.

Much. He swallowed donut and lump and resolutely grasped after his earlier cheer. Dammit, I am not

going to let this ruin the rest of my life!

To his amazement, some of his cheer returned. Wow. Instant self-psychotherapy. I wonder if it was Dan's grass?

He saw the bus approaching the corner and ran for it, his gig bag bouncing off his side. He caught up to the bus just as the driver started to close the door, and leaped inside just in time.

Maybe this is to make up for the weekend? Reverse Instant Karma?

Eric took the last seat at the back of the bus, propping his feet up and gazing out the window as the bus trundled down Victory Boulevard. Another day, another twenty-seven dollars and thirty-three cents. At least, that's what I made on Friday. I sure hope this Instant Karma helps with the busking, too.

He got off the bus at Broadway over an hour later, with the steep hill ahead of him, the unmarked border between the crowded, dirty downtown area and the classy and immaculate business district.

He found his favorite busking spot and set down his gig bag on the bench. It was a street corner near the YMCA, with a small outdoor cafe and a small lawn area that was terrific for relaxing and wriggling your toes in the thick grass. Best of all, I've never had a single problem with the cops over here.

Most of the "suits" walking past didn't even look at him as Eric set up for busking, "salting" the hat with a handful of dollar bills and quarters, positioning his sign just right:

"Yes, this is my real day job. Please support the Arts." But a few of the businessmen and women recognized him, and smiled or waved hello. Eric smiled in response as he fitted his flute together and played a few quick notes to warm up.

Then he began busking in earnest. Light, lively Celtic tunes, with the occasional phrase of a classical piece thrown in for kicks. The serious-faced suits walking past stopped to listen; when he finished the tune medley, there was a burst of spontaneous applause, and no few of them reached into their pockets for change to toss in the hat.

Hey, not bad for first thing in the morning. And the lunch rush hasn't even hit yet . . .

He began "Irishman's Heart to the Ladies," one of his favorite jigs. Several corporate types, apparently on their way to a meeting, stopped to listen, and one of the silver-haired businessmen kicked up his heels in an impromptu jig step. They moved on, but not before the older man dropped a five-spot in Eric's hat.

Eric doffed his cap, grinning from ear to ear at the departing businessmen. All right! Let's hear it for that kindhearted gent and the Instant Karma!

An hour later, as the lunch crowd thinned, Eric's energy dropped as well. He began to play slower tunes, trying to find a spot on the corner that wasn't in the bright sunlight.

Too damn hot. He stopped playing in the middle of one tune to wipe the sweat off his forehead. L.A. in May, it shouldn't be this hot yet. This is almost as bad as Faire last year. A hundred and ten in the shade, and all of us doing shows on those blacktop stages . . .

He mustered the strength to play another fast tune, "Fox Hunt," one of the best slipjigs he knew.

"Hey, Misty, listen! He's playing the 'Foxhunter's Jig!'"

Eric looked up in surprise at the three suits gawking at him. He finished the tune with extra energy, adding a last trilling ornament and long, intricate run, then bowed elegantly as they applauded.

The blonde woman was shaking her head in disbelief. "A Celtic musician playing on the street! They'll never believe this back home!"

"Where are you from?" Eric asked, wiping sweat from his brow.

One of the men smiled. "Tulsa, Oklahoma. We're all Celtic music fans, but had no idea that people played Celtic stuff on the streets of L.A. This is quite a surprise."

"Well, there's not many of us," Eric said. Winded by the fast-moving tune, he sat down to catch his breath. "Most everybody plays at the Faire or in bar gigs, but there's a few of us that play street as well. There's one lady, a terrific singer who lives in the South Bay, she sings traditional ballads. And a few others, like a fiddler that I know. There aren't very many buskers in this town, not nearly as many as in San Francisco, but we do all right."

"That's really wonderful." The woman smiled, then asked hesitantly, "Maybe . . . could you play 'Rocky Road to Dublin' for us? It's one of my favorites."

Eric nodded, and took a deep breath. It was one of his favorites, too—a fast slipjig that was difficult, but not impossible. He added in extra ornaments on this tune as well, and was very pleased by the wide smiles on their faces when he finished.

"Thank you, so much. You've made our trip out here something special." The woman knelt down, setting a folded bill in his hat. "I really hope we'll see you again."

The younger man handed him a business card. "If you're ever in Oklahoma, give us a call. Maybe we can help you get some gigs, introduce you to people." He also slipped a bill into the hat.

"Thank you very much," Eric said, pocketing the card. Well, that'll be handy if I ever move to Oklahoma. God only knows why I'd ever want to do that, though.

The three walked away, leaving Eric alone on his street corner again.

Eric picked an easy tune to play next, "Fair Jenny's," as sweet as an Irish tune could be. A man in a five-hundred-dollar suit walked by, stopped briefly to listen, reached into his pocket and tossed two pennies into Eric's hat.

Oh, that's cute; Real cute. I bet you think you're really clever, mister, tossing in your two cents' worth. Give me a break. Eric sneered disdainfully at the man's retreating back. What a twit.

But those Okies, they were something. I wish there were more folks like that, in L.A. So good-natured and friendly . . .

Still, the local business suit types, they're all pretty much the same. They think the world is theirs. And hell, who knows, they may be right. There isn't much an individual can do against the corporations, the government, and the ones with the bucks. Not when they have the power and the cash to hold on to it.

He finished "Fair Jenny's," and began a fierce, angry rendition of "Tamlin's Reel." Yeah, look at the Faire, it's going under because some corporation guys decided that the land would be terrific for a shopping mall. Sure, people are trying to stop them, but I'm betting on the corporation. They always win.

Well, I've got money for groceries, and a good start on next month's rent. Might as well pack it in. Otherwise, this heat will do me in. I can just see the Channel 13 news bulletin: Itinerant musician melts into puddle on downtown L.A. street. News at six, film at eleven.

Eric completed the tune, ending on a mournful, unresolved C sharp. Yeah, that's how I feel today. Very unresolved. Though not especially sharp . . . He disassembled the flute, and replaced it in the case. Tomorrow, maybe I'll try the bushing outside Century City, haven't played there in a few weeks. The business crowd around there is usually pretty good on tips, not like the tourists in Hollywood. He smiled, remembering the gawking faces of the Japanese tourists, doubtlessly trying to figure out why this gaijin was playing classical flute next to the Chinese Theater.

He walked down to the steep hill, toward a crowd of rookie cops learning how to direct traffic on the corner below. I've never seen so many cops in one spot in my life. But I bet somebody's car could be ripped off fifty feet away and they'd never even notice.

Eric strolled past the Chandler Pavilion, with its endless glass windows and the huge chandeliers just visible inside. Maureen's probably in there right now, rehearsing for "Traviata." And probably listening to that crazy guest director endlessly scream things in French. I wonder if he's figured out that none of them can understand him?

Somehow, though, thinking about her didn't really hurt at all. He remembered when he first met her, not far from where he had busked today; a beautiful red-haired woman who listened to him play, then improvised a harmony to the old O'Carolan tune. How he joined her and her friends for lunch the next day at one of the hangouts the Pavilion people frequented, then went backstage with her, climbing around the high walkways above the stage. God, we had fun. Walking on Venice Beach, laughing as they dodged the kamikaze rollerskaters. He thought about the late nights they'd spent talking, singing impromptu duets, making love.

Eric tested the memories gingerly, like someone worrying at a sore tooth, and was surprised to feel no resulting heartache. Just memories, good memories of all the times we spent together. It doesn't hurt anymore.

He smiled suddenly, clicking his heels in a quick jig step, and reverenced to the huge Pavilion building. Ave atque vale, m'lady Maureen. I hope you'll find someone who'll make you happy, I really do. Goodbye and good luck, my mistress of music.

The rookie cops looked at him suspiciously as he danced past, whistling. They probably think I'm on drugs. But I'm not. At least I don't think I am. I just feel good. As though everything is about to change for the better—

He waited at the bus stop, and was surprised to see the RTD bus show up exactly on schedule. Hot damn, something is right with the universe. These buses are never on time . . .

He stopped briefly at the supermarket, picking up a sixer of Guinness, two cans of chili, a hunk of plastic-wrapped cheddar cheese, and a package of Hostess cupcakes—Yeah, I feel like celebrating, tonight. A real feast. Today was a great day for busking, and I feel terrific. I think I've even gotten over Maureen.

But the moment he unlocked his apartment door, he knew something was wrong.

Eric glanced around the living room, and his eyes narrowed suspiciously. I didn't leave those books lying, out on the floor, I know I didn't. And my leather jacket, I know Maureen didn't take that out of the closet. It was hanging there last night . . .

Moving quietly, Eric set the bag of groceries down by the door, and reached for the baseball bat, propped against the wall. f thought I was just imagining things last night, but I think there really was somebody in here. And I was too zoned to catch them.

Oh God. Maybe they're still here now . . . He glanced into the kitchen, then crossed to the bathroom, looking inside. Nothing here.

He pushed the bedroom door open with his foot, carefully leaning inside to look around.

The clothes were sorted. By color. And stacked in careful piles along the wall.

But his bed was a mess, and he'd made it before he left. Oh God—whoever was here—is here—is a serious loony. He tried to remember what drugs did things to your head like that. PCP? No. Acid, maybe. Acid and THC? Could be— He swallowed with difficulty, and gripped the bat a little harder. I could be in for a world of hurt here. He backed out of the bedroom and into the kitchen. The drift of cold air over his feet told him that his intruder had left the refrigerator door slightly ajar. He edged over to the fridge and opened the door enough to look inside.

There hadn't been much in there in the first place—but now anything that had been left was useless. Because everything, everything in the refrigerator had had one neat bite taken out of it. Including the apple-shaped candle he kept in there as a joke.

If he'd had any doubts about there being an intruder, they were gone now.

Oh God. Oh God. I'm dealing with a real, genuine lunatic here.

He shut the door firmly and crept into the living room—

Where the first thing that met his eyes was his own Faire cloak, draped over a chair. Except it hadn't been there when he came in.

He felt his jaw dropping open; stared at the sweep of wool—

And a red rage swept over him. Maureens gone—my purse gets cut—my cloak gets stolen—and then the bastard that steals it follows me home and eats my food and sleeps in my bed and makes a mockery out of me!

"Get out here!" he screamed, brandishing the bat. "Goddammit, I know you're in here—you get your ass out here, you bastard!"

Sure, Banyon. Like he's going to— a tiny, cooler corner of his mind thought—just before the young man stepped into the bedroom doorway, smiling shyly.

He was very tall, taller than Eric; he was very blond, white-blond, hair that was too silken and curled too



tightly to be real. He was muscular, but slim—and he was wearing Eric's clothes.

Eric's jeans, Eric's favorite Faire shirt and Eric's black leather vest—

And my goddamn boots!

That was too much for flesh and blood to take.

Eric charged him, swinging the bat. You lousy sonuva—

The young man flung out his hand in a gesture of warding—

And music. Hit. Him.

A wall of music. A chord so pure there were no overtones or undertones, no pulsings of harmonics. A progression of four notes of blue-white, crystalline clarity. Perfection.

Oh, he thought. A major.

And the floor rose up and hit him.

"Bard?" said the soft, frightened voice. "Oh please, Bard, I didn't hurt you, did I? You startled me—" I'm lying down. On my back. Cool, slick surface under his right hand, his left lying across his stomach.

Umph. He took inventory without opening his eyes. Hide of nauga, with a lump just under my left kidney. I know that lump. Maureen complained about it often enough. I'm lying on the couch.

"Bard?"

With a nut-case bending over me.

Eric cracked his right eye open, cautiously. And was caught in emeralds.

Eyes, he told himself. Those are just eyes. You can look away—

Only he couldn't, not until they blinked, and the generously sensuous mouth under them smiled in delight and relief.

They're eyes. They're green. Like a cat's—

Ohmigod.

"Bard?" said the owner of those green, slit-pupiled eyes, touching his face, gently.

Bad drugs, Eric. Really bad drugs. Serious bad drugs. This is a hallucination.

The hallucination bent lower, his face shadowed with concern. Tendrils of that unbelievably white-blond hair fell into his unbelievably green eyes, and he tucked them behind one pointed ear in an unbelievably graceful gesture of annoyance.

He used the same hand to touch Eric's cheek—

Pointed ears?

The figment of his fevered imagination frowned, then bit his lip. "Bard? Can you speak?"

Pointed ears?

Another touch, the concern deepening in the hallucination's eyes. But the almost-caress was no hallucination, though it was the lightest of feather-strokes.

Pointed ears? Like—an elf?

Ohmigod. Eric blinked; then blinked again. Ohmigod. Either I've gone crazy, or there's an elf coming orr to me in my living room.

He squeezed his eyes shut. Please God, let it be crazy, and I promise I'll never do drugs again . . .

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the i aerie Reel

Eric opened his eyes, and wished he hadn't.

The elf was still there.

Please, God, don't let this be real. This has to be a drug flashback. It just has to be.

"Bard?" Again, that soft, hesitant voice. It bordered on timid. It was certainly diffident. "Please, talk to me, tell me you're all right. Bard?"

It's not real. I'm just seeing things. There isn't an elf in my living room. I'll close my eysss, and when I open them again, he'll be gone, or he'll be a rubber tree, or maybe a unicorn. Eric shivered, his head throbbing, and closed his eyes again. If he's still there—I won't think that. This isn't happening. If there isn't an elf, if it's all in my head—

It has to be in my head. If it isn't in my head—those nightmare things—were—

Real. No. Oh God. Please, no. Not again. I can't face them twice.

"Bard?"

I cant even face an elf. Maybe if I don't talk to it, it'll just go away.

The hallucination sighed deeply, and said something that Eric couldn't understand, a brief phrase in a language that was liquid and musical, even if it did sound like a muttered curse.

A hand traced a delicate line down Eric's cheek; rested on his shoulder.

He shuddered away from the touch Just go away, please . . . don't be real.

Then an electrical shock slammed into him, he'd gotten hold of a live wire once, helping set up for a gig, and this felt exactly like that all-too-unforgettable incident. Eric yelped and somehow managed to leap into the air from a prone position, levitating in midair for a brief moment before landing again in a painful heap on the couch.

He glared accusingly at the hallucination, who was smiling broadly, his grin bright with relief. "Oh, good, you weren't hurt at all! I was ..."

That was all the elf had time to say. Eric was goaded past being afraid. The creature froze at the rage in Eric's eyes, and then he gurgled as Eric reached over and grabbed him by the throat.

The next exciting thing Eric experienced was the unmistakable sensation of having his face flattened against plaster as he slammed against the far wall of the living room. With a groan, he slid down to the carpeted floor.

He did not want to move. Not at all.

Not for four or five days, anyway.

His head rang with the impact and with a strange polyphonic harmony. This can't be a hallucination, he thought dazedly, tasting salty blood where he had bitten the inside of his cheek. It hurts too much.

"Bard?"

Oh God, he's still here.

"Please, Bard, you have to stop attacking me. I don't want to hurt you anymore."

Eric turned over—slowly—then blinked a few times, as the room spun wildly around him. "Yeah," he muttered thickly, "I don't want you to hurt me anymore, either."

He pulled himself up into a sitting position, and shook his head to stop the ringing in his ears, then looked at his unwelcome house guest.

Eric stared in fascination as several identically-blond elves moved towards him from across the room, then slowly reformed into a single figure that knelt down beside him.

"Let me see," the figure said, and lightly touched Eric's forehead. Eric winced at the sudden pain that lanced through his head, front to back.

"This is my doing. I shall take care of it," his imaginary visitor said quietly. To Eric's surprise, the pain began to recede as a soft melody (somehow as close as the wall, and as distant as the moon, simultaneously) echoed lightly in his mind.

If anybody ever puts that in a bottle—he thought; then he wasn't thinking, just listening. Listening to music that seemed to be becoming a part of him Like the very first time he'd ever listened to anything on a really good pair of stereo headphones, only better, Enchantingly better.

It's like Bach, all the layers of voice, building together.

Finally, the music faded. Eric sat up with a pang of regret, feeling as though he had just awakened from a long restful night's sleep. The elf was looking at him with those large, emerald cat's eyes, eyes that were darkened with concern.

This cannot be real Scratch that. It cant be what it looks like. So what would it be if it wasn't what it looks . . .

Maureen. She's getting even with me. And she must know a bizillion people over in the studios.

Those ears—

The delicate ears, curving to a graceful point— They have to be fakes, like what those Faire kids all dressed up in wolfskins were wearing last season. Eric wondered if the tips would come off if he pulled on them . . .

"Try it," the creature said in a voice suddenly cold and steel-hard, "and I'll knock you on your backside again, Bard or not."

How did he know— "No thanks, I think I've had enough of that," Eric said hastily. He carefully stood up, gingerly touching the side of his face that had impacted so resoundingly with the wall. To his surprise, it was slightly sore, but didn't hurt. Much.

The elf helped him walk back to the couch, and Eric sank down onto the squeaky cushions with an audible sigh. The elf sat beside him.

"This is not going as I had planned," the elf said, looking at him out of the corners of his eyes. "You are not cooperating. Bard."

Take a different angle, yeah. It's not "real" because this has to be some kind of trick. "My name's not Bard," Eric snapped. "Who the hell are you, when you aren't breaking into people's apartments and bashing them into walls?"

The elf straightened, pride written in his staace and expression. Eric's blue jeans and Faire shirt looked incongruous on him, like a polyester business suit on King Arthur.

Okay, so he's an actor, at least. Pretty good one, too.

"I am Korendil, warrior and mage, second to Prince Terenil, leader of the elves of this region."

"Uh huh," Eric replied dryly. "I'm Eric Banyon, street busker. What the hell are you doing in my apartment?"

The hair could be his, could be a wig. Ears are latex. Eyes—contact lenses. You could even do the funny pupils that way; that's what they did in "Thriller." Korendil, Terenil, they sound like somebody lifted those names right out of Tolkien. And—yeah. He didn't read my mind, he read my eyes. I looked at his ears—he's gotta know that the first thing anybody would think is, "Are they real?" And he's too smart not to figure I'd try to yank on them.

"I followed you here," Korendil said, some of the pride draining out of his stance. "I followed you from the place-of-festival."

Cute. "Place-of-festival" instead of "Fairesite." Oh, you're good, fella. But I'm not that stoned, no matter what Maureen told you about my habits.

"You followed me, huh?" Eric sat back and rubbed the sore side of his face. "Why?"

"I was trapped in the Node-Grove, the magic nexus at the place-of-festival, trapped by our enemy, Terenil's and mine, the traitor we once harbored in our midst."

"You expect me to believe elves have traitors?" Eric laughed. "Come on! You'll have to do better than that."

Korendil glared. "You, who play 'Sheebeg Sheemore' with such feeling, how can you be such a great fool as that?"

"Watch who you're calling a fool, buddy," Eric growled.

He's got the script down good, that's for sure. "Just what is this guy supposed to have done to you?"

"He caught me unawares and bound me in sleep in the oaken grove. Until you Awakened me."

"Say what?" Whoever wrote this script sure has a weird imagination. And Maureen sure gave him a lot to work with.

Korendil leaned forward, earnestly. "You Awakened me, Bard. With your song, two nights ago. And you freed me from imprisonment in the grove."

Music, wild and fey, the trees bending closer to listen, then that moment when everything had clicked, that moment . . .

And how the hell did he know that? Maureen wasn't there. There's no way he could know what happened Saturday night.

Okay, wait a minute. He was at the Fairesite, he stole my cloak. He probably talked to people who know me, knew I tend to slink off to that grove to be alone. Hell, he probably was hiding in the trees and listening to me!

Bastard. You almost had me falling for it.

But I didn't hear or see anyone, and I would have. Wouldn't I?

"You're stoned, mister," Eric said slowly. "Yeah, I played in that grove on Saturday night, but I didn't do any more than that."

"But you are a Bard—and Bards are the greatest of mages. Bards control the magic of creation, the magic only the most skillful of High Adepts can use. Even untutored, you are a greater mage than I or even the Prince. Untutored, you can break the spells of lock and ward simply by wishing for freedom as you play."

I wanted freedom—and—

Damn, he's good. He almost suckered me in. I wonder where Maureen found this guy? The annual

Screen Actors Guild Christmas party? "You still haven't said why you followed me home."

"It is a long tale—" Korendil looked at him doubtfully.

Eric spread his hands wide. "I've got nothing but time. Humor me."

The elf cleared his throat, and took on that proud posture again. "Once we lived freely in this land," he said, his words sounding as if he was reciting some chronicle. "We came here from across the sea, seeking freedom from fear even as your kind sought it. We spread farther and faster than your kind, and were well settled by the time they came upon us again. We welcomed them. Our groves were scattered among the humans' dwellings, and we lived in peace with them. That changed; in the way of humans, so swiftly that we were taken unawares. You humans began to build with cold iron in this valley, more and more as the years went past, and slowly our people were cut off from each other."

Eric shrugged. "So? What's that got to do with anything?" Logic; let's have some logic here. How'd he do what he did to me? How would you fake magic?

"We have been cut off from the Node-Grove, the nexus, the source of all our magic, by the walls of cold iron you humans have built. That has weakened our power, and—"

"So move," Eric interrupted. "Do what everybody else does. Head for the suburbs." He's SAG, I bet Using some kind of special effects. Bet Maureen can just wiggle her hips and have forty techies begging to do her favors.

"We are tied to our groves," Korendil explained, as if to a particularly stupid child.

Eric bristled a little, and Korendil continued, apparently not noticing. "Without the magic of the Node-Grove, most of us are bound to the groves where we anchored ourselves in your world. We cannot travel far from the home-trees without much pain and further weakening. Only those of the High Court, who need no anchoring to dwell on this side of the Hill, remained free to move. They could not, and would not, leave the others."

Eric was only half-listening, sizing the guy up. He could be a martial artist. He's got the build for it. That would sure account for him being able to toss me across the room. And if Maureen gave him her key, he could have been in and out of here all he wanted.

"Uh huh," Eric said vaguely, shifting his weight so that the couch creaked. "So, they're stuck. What's so bad about that?"

"What's 'so bad,' " Korendil said acidly, "is that when elves are cut off from each other and the source of their magic, they fall into Dreaming."

The capital "D" was as plain as if Korendil had written the word.

"Dreaming what?" Eric replied, interested in spite of his anger at the trick being played on him. Whoever came up with this should write a book. It's better than half the fantasy schlock I've picked up lately—like telepathic horses, or ancient Aztec gods invading Dallas.

"Dreaming ... it is a—" Korendil groped for words.

This part must not have been in the script.

"It is a state," he said, finally. "A state in which only 'now' is important. There is no memory of the past, or thought of the future. All that matters is existence and amusement."

"Sounds like half the kids hanging out at the malls," Eric replied, uncomfortably aware that Korendil was describing something very like his own life.

"And that is where you find them," Korendil said, nodding. "In the malls. What little magic they have left to them, they use to help steal what they want. Things of amusement, entertainment, and clothing that catches their fancy. Surely you have seen them, and yet never noticed them, nor noticed that they are not to be seen outside of your malls."

God, what a concept! Eric suppressed the urge to laugh. Mall-elves! Tolkien invades Southern California! Christ, it's as hokey as a Saturday-morning cartoon show! Like that one I saw a while back—what was it called? Jewel?

Damn, but this guy should really write a book!

"Even the Prince has been lost to the weakening of magic," Korendil continued sadly. "Even he has begun to give up all hope. So—I turn to you. Bard Eric, and I offer you your heart's desire."

Eric crossed his arms over his chest, and put his feet up on the scarred coffee table. Okay, this is too clever and too consistent to be some lunatic's private fantasy. So let's hear the pitch I'm supposed to fall for. "And just what is that?" he asked.

If he has a Taser up his sleeve, that would account for the electric shock too. I think I've got you figured out, fella. I'm willing to play the game through before I throw you out. Make you work for your money.

"I offer you," the elf said, proudly, "a cause to fight for."

"What?" Eric laughed aloud. "Go around playing reveille for all your little mall-elves?" He shook his head. "I'm a flautist, not a trumpeter."

Korendil's eyes darkened and narrowed. "No," he said coldly. "Have you heard nothing in the past three days? The place-of-festival is doomed—and all magic for this Valley originates there at the Node-Grove. Bad enough that my people are lost in Dreaming, but if the nexus is destroyed, all magic here will die. My people, unable to flee to a new source, will fade and die. And you mortals stand to lose as well—mark you. The Node-Grove is the reason for Hollywood and all that is associated with it being located here. If the Node-Grove is destroyed, your connection to magic and creativity will be lost, and the dreams and hopes that make your short lives worth living will be destroyed as well."

You slipped up, fella. One minute you're talking forsoothly, the next, about the Industry. Uh huh. Gotcha.

Eric laughed in the impostor's face.

"Sure," he said, deliberately sneering at him. "And I'm the only person in the whole of L.A. who can help you. Right. Where'd you get this idea, anyway? Some script you couldn't sell? Well, you can't sell it to me, either."

"You mean—" Korendil looked aghast. "You mean you don't believe me?"

Still playing the part. He's good, I'll give him that. Wonder why I never saw him at Faire before this?

"Damn straight I don't believe you—and even if I did, I don't see anything in it for me." He shrugged. "And you can tell Maureen I said she's not gonna be playing any games with my head anymore."

"But—the magic here is one of the reasons you play so well," Korendil cried, his face twisted with anguish. "You respond to it, and it responds to you, don't you see? You're a true Bard, like Merlin, like Taliesen—"

"Like bullshit," Eric interrupted. "You can tell Maureen that I didn't find her little trick very funny, and I didn't fall for it. I hope she paid you a bundle—you earned it, that's for sure. But, no matter what she told you, I'm usually in pretty good control of my reality. And I don't like this kind of practical joke, mister. So you can just pack your act up and get the hell out of my life."

"But I'm not—" the phony elf started to say.

"Bye," Eric said, wriggling his fingers. "You'll pardon me if I don't get up. I've had kind of a strenuous day."

Korendil rose from the couch-

Probably a dancer, too. Maybe he's in ballet. Too tall to get a lead part, though; he must be six-five if he's an inch. Wonder if he's gay? It sure seemed like he was coming on to me for a while.

I wonder if that was part of Maureen's little game, too? Would it make her feel better about the breakup if she found out I was into guys?

"I will be back," the elf-actor said, making the words a promise. "I will be back. I will convince you somehow, Eric Banyon. That, I swear!"

Eric shrugged. "Just don't expect Maureen's key to work again. I'm having the locks changed."

The elf wrapped anger and frustration around him like a cloak, and glided out the door, which—despite Eric's assumptions—did not slam shut behind him.

Christ. What kind of an idiot did she take me for, anyway? A few special effects and a fairy tale, and I'm supposed to fall for it. Hell, he wasn't even dressed like an elf, he—

He was wearing my clothes!

Shit! And he took them with him!

Bastard!

Eric sat up slowly, feeling a residual ache in too many places. Christ, Maureen, why did you have to do this to me? I never thought you'd stoop so low—

—or that you hated me this much.

The elation he'd had earlier was gone.



What did I do to make you hate me like this?

He looked around the living room, seeing only the empty places that used to be filled with Maureen's posters, her Beethoven, all the other reminders that someone else lived here. Funny. Most of the things that made this place look like a home instead of Howard Johnson's were hers. Everything I care about you could put in a couple of backpacks.

If I died tomorrow, nobody'd miss me until the rent was late.

Helluva note.

From the high of the afternoon he slid abruptly into one of the lowest lows he'd had in a long time. He rubbed his eyes, as the silence around him oppressed him further still.

I can't stay here alone tonight. I can't. If I do, I'll go crazy, or drink everything in the apartment, or do something equally stupid. Maybe I should call some people, set up a jam.

Wait a minute—

There's Spiral Dance, they're playing in Studio City tonight. Beth wanted me to join them, the usual split. Hell, the money would be good, and I sure don't want to stay here tonight, staring at the ceiling, listening to the water pipes play percussion solos.

His throat felt tight, and he shivered.

Maureen is probably in Westwood tonight with her Pavilion friends, drinking wine and laughing about that idiot flautist she walked out on.

Eric closed his eyes tightly, fighting off the impulse to bury his face in the couch pillows.

Dammit, I am not going to cry. I'm going to get off my ass and play a gig tonight, make some cash, drink a few with Beth and the Spiral Dance folks. And have a good time. I sure did the last time I did a gig with them.

He thought back to his last gig with Beth Kentraine and her wild crew of folk-rock musicians—which had climaxed with Beth launching herself. Fender and all, from the stage and landing on one of the tables, much to the surprise of the customer, sitting there.

She didn't even make the table rock. God, she's crazed.

He began to smile, and his depression slowly lightened. Yeah, I'm up for that. Old Celtic melodies with electric suitor and trap set. Black leather and studs, and Bethie's dark velvet voice, singing an ancient, gentle Irish air.

Oh, they're crazy, but fun-crazy, terrific to play a gig with. Now they might have taken that pointy-eared joker seriously.

That's a good reason not to get tied up too closely with them, though. There's something kind of weird about them—like how they cancel a gig if someone has a bad feeling about it. All that weird shit. Like too many people at Faire, acting like their characters are real. Caught up in some reality I don't understand.

Hell. They got a right. Beth and the Spirallers are good people, damn fine musicians. Even if they are a little weird.

That's it. I'll go gig with them tonight.

He pried himself off the couch, and headed into the bedroom to look for his gig clothing. His black leather boots, his least-faded pair of jeans, a dressy shirt, bright red with little fake-pearl buttons. Yeah, that's me: Eric Banyon, the hottest rock-flute player in L.A., and a snappy dresser too.

I really wish that SAG guy hadn't walked off with my leather vest, though. That was pretty cheesy, taking off with my clothes. And my Faire boots.

Damn it, Maureen, that was a low trick! But I'm not going to let your stupid games spoil my life, or even one night.

Eric retrieved his cloak from where the actor had left it, draped over one of the chairs. He fastened the brass clasp at his throat, then walked over to where his gig bag was lying on the chair.

And stopped at a tug on his throat. Something isn't right- He looked down. The cloak was six inches longer than it had been the last time he wore it.

But it used to fit me perfectly, exactly ankle length. I don't—wait, that pointy-eared actor was at least six-two, closer to six-five, and I'm five-ten. Could he have had somebody add more material to my cloak, make it longer so it would fit him right?

Eric examined the hem of the cloak, and shook his head in disbelief.

Nope. No sign of anything added Not even that the hem got let out. It's just longer. Besides, how in the hell could he have matched the plaid lining?

Okay, okay. It's wool. Wool stretches. He got it wet, and it stretched. Let's get real about this.

He let the cloak fall, trying to ignore the fact that it was dragging on the floor with every step he took. I'm not going crazy, it's just that somebody is playing mind-games with me, messing with my head, and dammit, Maureen, it isn't funny!

Screw that. I'm going to play a gig and enjoy myself.

Eric slung the gig bag over his shoulder, and stopped, one hand on the doorknob.

Okay, the cloak got stretched—but how in hell did that guy fit in my jeans?

Don't ask, Banyon. Just—don't ask.

Deliberately whistling a jazzed-up version of "Banish Misfortune" with determination, he locked the apartment door behind him

The RTD bus bounced and swayed along Van Nuys Boulevard, the driver honking angrily at someone who was blocking the street in rush-hour traffic.

Eric added that syncopated rhythm to the tune he was composing. He smiled at the elderly woman in the seat across from him, who was glaring silently at him as he whistled another brief snatch of melody then quickly scribbled the sequence in his notebook.

That's what I like about L.A., everybody is so friendly . . .

Eric leaned against the grimy window. His depression was gone, just as quickly as it had descended. Everything seemed somehow brighter, touched by the red-gold of the sunset, the wisps of multicolored clouds overhead. The Hollywood hills were a reassuring presence on the right.

All those rich Industry people, just waiting to discover a talented musician like meself—

Ahead, Burbank and Pasadena vanished into the thickening brown-blueness of the sky, the last glint of sunlight reflecting off the distant antenna towers capping Mount Wilson, high above the Valley.

Looking down at the street, Eric watched the moving crowd: the shoppers, weighed down by packages; the high school kids walking in clusters, like some modern kind of herd animal. A policewoman directed cars as a broken traffic signal flashed its single red light forlornly.

I don't know what it is, but I like this city. Of all the places I've lived, or just wandered through, I really like L.A. the best. Sure, it's crowded, and smoggy, and dirty, but there's such a feeling of life to it. Maybe it's the dreams—all the hopes and dreams of all the people who live here make this place come alive.

The little old lady on the opposite seat suddenly gasped with surprise. Eric stood up quickly and looked out the window as two motorcyclists, both wearing skintight red-and-white racing leathers, arced past the bus, barely avoiding the cars ahead of them. One motorcyclist dropped down on one foot, the bike banking sharply, then gunned the engine and followed his friend down the boulevard.

The elderly woman muttered something about hooligans and reckless drivers, and transfixed Eric with a dark, accusing look, as though all of this were his fault. But Eric barely noticed, watching as the bikers disappeared into the late afternoon traffic.

They're crazy. But beautiful. I wish I could do things like that with a motorcycle. Though that's not too likely, not unless I could find a bike that somehow drives itself! But they really are beautiful to watch. Like dancers.

Eric sat back down in his seat, looking out the bus window. Even through the glass, he could hear the pounding beat of a rap song.

A group of kids were breakdancing on the sidewalk. Eric watched in disbelief as one boy moonwalked backwards, flipped over into a handstand, then rolled to the concrete in a tight backspin. The kid vaulted back up onto his feet, moving aside so one of his friends could take his turn on the pavement.

Damn. Another thing I wish I could do! He laughed silently at himself. "If wishes were fishes we'd walk on the sea. They make it look so easy, but I'd probably kill myself if I tried any of those stunts.

A white limousine pulled in between Eric and the side-walk, blocking his view of the street dancers. Eric tried to peer over the top of the car—

But his gaze was caught by a movement inside, and he saw a man in the back of the limo, gazing out the

open window. An older man, silver hair, strong features—

I've seen someone like him before, somewhere. I know I have. The curve of his jaw, the high cheekbones—God, he looks familiar . . .

Then the man looked up, and saw that Eric was watching him. Their eyes met; Eric was unable to look away, trapped by the intensity of the man's gaze.

Green eyes, clouded emerald—falling into a bottomless pool of water. Jade mirrors reflecting the shadowed night sky. Something watching, wanting, reaching out and reaching in—taking hold—taking possession—

Eric turned away from the window with an effort, shaking his head. What in the hell is wrong with me?, he thought desperately. I know what it is. He has the same eyes as that actor, Korendil, that so-called "elf," the same leaf-green eyes. No. I'm seeing things. Or else they've both got the same optometrist.

Against his will, Eric slid back to the window, and stared down at the man in the limo again. The man, gazing up at the bus window, smiled—but it was a smile edged in frost. The emerald eyes caught him, drew him in close, and refused to let him go.

Eyes—

Reaching up and through, touching intimately, examining everything, no matter how secret—echoes of scornful laughter—something foul and slimy where no one should ever be able to go—shame—violation—stripping everything away, all the illusions, all the delusions, leaving a rag of self for all the world to see . . .

A wave of dizziness hit Eric like a wall, blocking out everything except the feeling that the world was spinning around him, and there was nothing he could hold onto, nothing that was still him. He clung to the window, his mouth dry, bile in his throat, and clutched for anything that was real.

Nothing I've ever done has made any difference to anyone; nothing I do is ever going to make any difference. I could throw myself in front of a semi, and no one would care. I wouldn't even rate more than three words in the obit column.

This was more than depression, this was despair, bleak, cold, hopeless.

Nobody would ever miss me. Maureen wouldn't. My landlord wouldn't. The Faire wouldn't. Beth might wonder where I vanished to—for about five minutes. Then she'd forget about me. They'd all forget about me. I might as well never have lived.

Despondency weighed heavily upon his soul, and sent his heart plummeting downwards.

Nobody gives a damn about me, and nobody ever will. I've never done anything worthwhile. I've never done anything right. I might just as well take that dive and get it over with—

When he looked out the window again, unable to keep from shaking, the white limo was gone. Nauseated and sweating, Eric closed his eyes and leaned against the cool glass, breathing unsteadily.

Christ. What's happening to me?

I think I'm losing my mind. God, I'm better off dead. . .

He concentrated on the feeling of the glass against his forehead and closed his eyes until the nausea passed. When he opened his eyes again, everything had changed.

The breakdancers were still lounging on the sidewalk, but now they were gathered around an elderly man like hyenas around a helpless gazelle. Eric stared in horror as one of the youths shoved the old man hard against the wall, sending him sprawling facedown on the pavement, where they proceeded to strip his pockets, riffling through the fallen bag of groceries spilling out onto the sidewalk. A gray-haired shopkeeper watched in silence from behind the dubious safety of his glass storefront, then turned away. Even the pedestrians on the street carefully looked the other way as they walked past.

What in the hell is going on here?

Everything is so gray, so unreal. . .

Even the Hollywood Hills, instead of their usual green-brown dotted with houses, seemed to have faded. The sky had darkened to a sullen gray. No one on the street laughed, or smiled, or even looked as though they were enjoying life, or were glad to be alive.

They looked more as if they were enduring the last few moments before their own executions.

Eric trembled and closed his eyes, turning away from the window. God, what's happening to me?

A burst of laughter and applause drew his attention back to the window. Eric saw the breakdancer bow to the gathered crowd, as the elderly man, still carrying his bag of groceries, bent down to put a dollar bill in the cardboard box next to the dancers' tape player.

The bus lurched into movement again, slowly rumbling down the boulevard, as Eric stared at the receding sidewalk and the breakdancers. But I know what I saw—

The despair was fading, almost tangibly.

It's the drugs, Eric. Serious drugs. Definitely too much in one weekend.

He shook his head, hoping to clear it. First a gay elf, then Svengali in a limo, then a remake of 1984. Shit. I hope I can get my act together for the gig tonight, or Beth Kentraine is going to kill me.

•5•

Parcel of Rogues

The club's name was "Diverse Pleasures," but Beth and the band just called it the Dive. Not to the manager's face, of course, but then even the manager must have a hard time justifying this place. Cheap and pretentious, that's this joint.

Eric edged his way past the noisy crowd at the bar, trying not to inhale the overly-redolent aroma of cigarette smoke, cheap whiskey, and cheaper perfume—No wonder this place doesn't have roaches; they have too much self-respect to hang out here—and narrowly avoided colliding with a barmaid

carrying an overloaded tray of drinks. Eric smiled apologetically at her, but the bleached-blonde just sighed, casually sidestepping the drunk reaching for her thigh from the closest table.

Sure wouldn't want her job, either . . .

Eric quickly escaped to the relative quiet of the back-stage area, and the small offices that served as warmup rooms for the bands that played the Dive.

Beth was tuning the Fender, the guitar propped carefully on her knee. She looked up, surprised, as Eric walked into the cluttered room, then grinned. "Hey, you made it! I was hoping you'd show tonight." The smile faded. "Dan's got the flu, so we're down on electric bass tonight. Allie can try to cover with the DX7, and Jim says he'll just pound the hell out of the drums, but three people isn't much on stage, y'know?"

"Yeah, I know." Eric sat down on a packing crate next to her. "How much time till we're on?"

"Twenty, twenty-five. It's a good crowd out there, for a Monday night. Bo promised to turn down the TV when we go on."

"That's nice of him. Not that anybody would be able to hear a damn thing once we start playing, anyhow." Eric fished his flute case out of the gig bag, quickly fitted the pieces together. He played a practice run, and Beth grinned, echoing the line on the guitar. Even in the relative quiet of the back room, he could barely hear the trill of the unamplified electric guitar, but caught the touch of bluesy ornamentation that Beth tossed in with the run.

"Even without Uncle Dan, it should be a good gig tonight," she said, setting the guitar down. "We'll do a sound check in fifteen, okay?"

"Okay." Eric stood up, his fingers moving absently on the flute keys, then set the flute back down on its open case. "I'm getting a drink, I'll be back in a few."

"Sounds good." He started towards the door, and Beth called after him. "Hey, Banyon!"

He turned. "Yeah?"

"Thanks for showing up tonight. I really appreciate it. Honest to God."

He nodded, a little embarrassed by the look on her face.

Beth Kentraine, looking grateful, like she actually needs me. I've never seen Beth look like that at anyone ever before. She's always in control of the situation, always knows what she's doing. Probably the most "together" person I know. One helluva lady . . .

A real changeling, too. Today, hard-rock lady, yesterday—

Oh yeah, yesterday. Standing on the Kissing Bridge with Beth Kentraine in my arms, now that was the one nice sideline to the afternoon. I wouldn't mind it if that kind of afternoon became a permanent part of my life.

He felt a twinge of pain. I liked that. I liked that a lot. But that's all she wants. A casual fling. That, and another permanent person in her band. Not necessarily another permanent person in her life.

And I could never go to bed with someone who only feels sorry for me.

At least tonight, I feel useful. Eric flagged down one of the barmaids, requested a Scotch and water, watched as the brunette shimmied back toward the bar. It feels right. And I'm glad I came. This should be a good gig tonight.

When the barmaid returned with his drink, Eric found a quiet corner of the club, sat back, and took a look around at the crowd. The Scotch burned a comfortable path down his throat, relaxing him, wiping away the last vestiges of stage fright.

I always feel nervous before a gig, don't know why. God knows I've only done a few hundred performances, so far. But I don't think that'll ever go away.

Someone walked past him, laughing lightly at her companion's words. Eric caught a glimpse of bright eyes, iridescent green beneath a tangle of black curls, before the young woman vanished onto the crowded dance floor with her friend.

Eyes, glowing; like a cat's, emerald green—

No way. It can't be.

How many people in this town are going to the same damned optometrist?

Eric stood up, moving towards the dance floor. The rock rhythm held them all in thrall. Even as he pushed past the swaying bodies of the dancers, no one even glanced at him. He moved in closer to one of them, a slender woman with a riotous mane of black hair, lost in the beat, trance-dancing with an inhuman grace.

Her ears . . .

Just visible through the dark curls. Delicate, curving, pointed ears.

What in hell is this, anyway? Some kind of fad?

He looked around the crowded club, the gathered circles of dancers on the floor, the tables with clusters of drinkers, laughing and talking. He began to count them, the different ones—

The clothing, wild and costumey; the hair done in more styles than he could count, like off the set of a sci-fi movie. The glitter of jewelry: incredible jewelry, rings, belts, necklaces, and things he couldn't define, like the dragon, with emerald eyes just like its wearer's, that perched on one dancer's shoulder, wings wrapping over her neck and shoulder and tail down her arm. Or the necklace that turned into a breastplate of chains that turned into a belt studded with thumbnail-sized gems.

This was not the Dive's usual Monday-aight crowd. Oh, they got some flashy customers, maybe as many as half a dozen—but half the club?

My God. They're real. Or I'm nuts. Or both.

He stopped looking for them and began looking at them.

They move very gracefully, that's for sure. Terrific dancers.

He noticed something else. You can spot them by the faces, too. Oval faces, fine cheekbones, sharp chin, and those eyes . . .

He stared at one table after another, silently tallying up the numbers.

Half the people in this club look like Korendil. Elves. Maureen couldn't have gotten to this many people. One, but not dozens. Oh God. They're real.

This club has been taken over by elves.

I wonder if the management knows that they're catering to non-humans? He shook his head, afraid to believe what he was seeing.

That's it; I'm going crazy. I'm losing my mind. Instead of pink elephants, I'm starting to see green-eyed elves.

But there's a shopping mall here in Van Nuys, only a block away from this club. One of those older malls, where they decided not to cut down the trees but left them standing, a whole grove of old trees—oak trees—

What if I'm not crazy? What if that guy was telling the truth?

What if there really are elves, living in Los Angeles?

What if I'm completely, utterly insane, and all this is my delusion?

I think I'd rather be insane. I think.

But—they're so ... beautiful—

He started shaking, and had to hold onto a support pillar for a moment to keep his knees from giving out under him.

Beth is going to kill me I'm supposed to play the gig tonight, not have a nervous breakdown. Shit.

Eric found an empty chair, and sat down heavily, draining his Scotch in a single swallow.

Okay, so what if the club is filled with refugees from Middle Earth? I have to play a show. Right, Banyon. The show must go on. Afterwards, you can go crazy. Offstage, preferably.

He set the empty glass down on the table and headed backstage.

Another thrilling night at the Dive. Beth adjusted the Fender's strap, wishing that the band could find a better weekly gig than this club. It helps pay the rent, and we can use the practice, but I really wish we could find a better gig.

Maybe there'll be a rich promoter sitting out there tonight, scouting for talent.

She sighed. Might as well wish for Eric Banyan to permanently join the band. That's about as likely.



I shouldn't think that way about him. Oh hell, I shouldn't, but it's true He doesn't seem to think twice about getting involved with any of his lady loves, but try convincing him to take on any other commitment, and he runs like hell.

He's a damn fine flute player. I just wish he'd get his act together.

If he ever did—

No Beth, you'd be crazy to get involved with a man like him. Give him your heart, and he'll probably leave town the next day

But, if he ever did get his act together—

She glanced at her watch. Strike that. I just wish he'd get in here! "Sound check!" she called to Allie and Jim, who were carrying the DX7 out from the practice room. She followed them out onto the stage, the Fender's pickup line coiled in her hand. Dammit, Banyon, where are you?

She saw his face, the mop of unruly shoulder-length brown hair backlit by the dance-floor lights. He was walking quickly through the crowd toward the backstage door. For one moment, it looked as if he was glowing.

Right, Both. Saint Eric. Fer sure.

She blinked again, and the glow was gone. She shook her head, made a mental note not to try the house brand of Scotch again—

Probably has diesel oil in it—

—and headed for the stage.

The Dive's overworked electrician/sound engineer was checking a mike cable as Beth stepped up onto the stage "Bo, we've got our flute player with us tonight, we're using the AKG mike for him. I think I wrote down the board settings last time," she said, plugging the Fender's cable into the appropriate socket. Bo nodded, jumping off the edge of the stage and heading for the sound board controls.

Beyond the darkened stage, the crowd was only a blur, lit by the colored glow of the dance floor and the occasional flash of a cigarette lighter. The noise of Spiral Dance setting up their equipment was lost beneath the pounding beat of whatever Top Forty dance-rock song was currently playing over the speakers. No one even glanced up at the stage.

Well, let's see if you can still ignore us when we start playing, hey?

At least there's a good crowd tonight. I don't know what pulled them in, but it's almost twice our usual Monday night crowd. And they're all dancing.

This should be a terrific gig . . .

Eric hurried onto the stage, flashing a quick smile at Beth. "Are we ready?" he asked, moving in front of the fourth mike, where Dan usually stood.

What the hell. Let's see what the crowd really wants.

She glanced up at Bo, half-hidden in the shadows, and he gave her the thumbs-up signal. The Top Forty song ended, and the dance-floor lights faded away. The stage was still unlit, leaving most of the club virtually pitch black, completely dark.

Now, let's have some fun . . .

Beth moved close to the microphone. "Ladies and gentlemen ... we are Spiral Dance."

Behind her, Jim began the drum line to "Missing You," starting softly, then gaining in intensity. Allie followed him on the synth, minor chords building up to an impossible climax.

Beth hit the first notes on the Fender, just as the lights came up on the stage, blindingly bright. A moment later, Eric dived in with the descant, leading right into the first verse.

Lovely bit of work there, Banyon—

Then she leaned in close to the mike, and let the song pour through her. Hard rock, her voice nearly breaking on the high notes, but strong, the strongest she'd sung in a long time.

"Too long, too many nights, no reason left to try,

Too far to go to see a glimpse of light.

Don't tell me you don't know. don't give me reasons

why,

I don't care, 'cause I'm missing you tonight..."

Beth could hear Allie and Jim, their voices blending perfectly with hers on the chorus. Then she glanced up at Eric, who nodded. All yours, bucko-

Second verse, and Eric took the solo.

Eat your heart out, Ian Anderson! Beth couldn't help but grin as the flute solo, first low and breathy, then building to a wailing intensity as Eric caught the melody line, caught the audience and took them with him, high with the music.

The shouts and whistles after the solo almost drowned out the words of the chorus. Beth caught a glimpse of Eric, grinning like crazy, as the crowd cheered wildly.

Damn, but that was good!

The floor was overflowing with people dancing, some just standing by their tables instead of fighting for space by the stage. And one young man, very tall with flowing silver-blond hair, just standing near the edge of the stage, not dancing. Just staring at Eric.

It's hard to see with the stage lights, but it almost looks as though his eyes are glowing green—no, that's impossible, must be a trick of the lighting. Ye gods, I'm seeing everything in fireworks tonight.

She shifted position just a little, and caught a glimpse of something in his expression before the crowd swirled between them.

Need.

She started. Ye gods—was he— No, scratch that. It wasn't sexual. Or at least, it mostly wasn't sexual. Not that Banyon isn't a honey by anybody's standards—

But this was something—desperate. What has our whistler been up to?

The song finished with a sudden chord, and the lights cut abruptly.

The applause was deafening, and she dismissed the question from her mind.

This is definitely turning out to be a fantastic gig . . .

As the lights came back up, Beth gestured to Allie, who began the first notes of "Come by the Hills," an old traditional air.

"Come by the hills, to the land where fancy is free ..."

This song was as gentle as the first rock song had been wild. Eric joined her on the first chorus, the flute weaving a bittersweet counterpoint around her voice. Then he took the solo again, a delicate melody line, beautiful and fey, and aching with unspoken longing.

It was hard for her to see the crowd, past the blinding lights, but something was happening out there—

They're not dancing, they're not walking away to the bar, they're just standing there. Standing, and listening, and swaying with the music. Some of them holding hands, and all of them looking up at the stage, at us, at Eric. Like they're in some kind of a trance.

This is definitely the weirdest crowd we've played to in a long time.

Then a flash of movement out on the dance floor; a pair of gracefully dancing figures whirled elegantly across the floor, and the crowd moved back to give them room. Looks like some kind of waltz, but not quite—not ballet, either, but it's close. Damn, but they're good! I wish I could find out who they are—I'd love to see them dance when I don't have to concentrate on the music. They're truly lovely.

Slowly, other dancers joined the pair on the floor, until all Beth could see was the beautiful swirling patterns of color and movement, strange and wonderful. Something about their flowing clothing caught her attention for a moment.

God and Goddess—you don't buy that stuff off the rack! At least not at J. C. Penney's. This is not our usual draw. Not by a long shot. What in hell happened tonight? Did we just get discovered by the Rodeo Drive crowd?

What's happening to us tonight? We're so hot, the energy is so damn good, it's incredible. It's more than just having Eric jamming with us—it's something else, something that I don't quite understand—

Four songs later, though, she didn't care about understanding anything. All I want to do is sit down. Just

for a few minutes. She glanced around, and saw that Allie and Jim were also looking faded, though Eric looked like he could keep going on all night.

One corner of her mouth quirked up in a lopsided grin when she picked up on that.

Damn him, he probably could!

She signalled Bo, then spoke clearly into the mike. "We'll be back after a break." Then the stage lights darkened mercifully.

The break room seemed like an oasis of calm after the set onstage. Beth propped the Fender against one of the packing crates.

"I think I'm going to die," Allie moaned, and slumped down on a wooden chair. "That far left stage light has been shining right in my eyes all night. I can't see anything except purple and blue spots."

"I'll tell Bo," Jim said, leaving the room.

"How are you holding up, Bethie?" Eric asked, sprawled on the floor.

"They're really a demanding crowd tonight," Beth replied thoughtfully. "Really alive. I feel like they're taking everything we can give them and then a little bit more."

And they seem to be focusing on you, my friend, though you're too modest and unassuming to notice it. I really wish that you would join Spiral Dance for more than an occasional gig. Especially if all the gigs could be like this one.

"I think I'm going to die," Allie said, staring at her hands. "There's spots crawling all over my skin."

Beth reached over and mussed Allie's hair good-naturedly. "Close your eyes, hon, you'll live. I played an all-night gig once, with bright green lights shining right in my eyes. I thought everyone in the audience was an H.P. Lovecraft Cthulhuoid after that."

"I'll get you a wet paper towel," Eric offered. "You can lay that over your eyes, maybe that'll help."

"Anything," Allie said mournfully. "But I won't guarantee that I'll still be alive by the time you get back."

Eric opened the door, admitting a blast of noise and cigarette smoke, then closed it behind him, shutting out the bedlam outside.

Beth eased herself to her feet. "I'm going after a beer, Allie. Want anything from the bar?"

"Some Guinness to pour over this poor musician's grave," the keyboardist said solemnly.

Beth couldn't help but laugh. "All right, I'll snag you a Guinness. I'll be right back."

She stepped into the hallway, waiting a moment as her eyes adjusted to the dim light. And my lungs adjust to whatever in the hell is in the air tonight. Smells like weed—God, I sure hope the cops don't bust this place while we're playing! That's all we need. A police record would be a real boost to our careers.

Someone was standing near the entrance to the hallway, silhouetted by the flickering light from the dance

floor. He caught at her wrist as she walked past.

"Excuse me," Beth said, trying to be polite as she disengaged her arm from the stranger's grasp.

"Hey, pretty lady," the man said, his voice low and hoarse. "You sing real nice."

"Gee, thanks," Beth said, attempting to move around him. "You'll hear some more in a few minutes." Who is this guy? Jeans, boots, leather jacket—one of the usual bar crowd, and drunker than hell.

Wonderful. This is just what I need right now—

His hand tightened on her shoulder, refusing to let go even as she pried at his fingers. "Hey, we can go out back, have some fun, smoke a little. I've got some fine stuff, nice and dusted. You'll like it."

Smoke? With this guy? And pigs fly, my friend . . .

. . . dusted? Shit, he can't mean—oh God, get me out of this! He's talking about PCP!

"I don't think so," Beth said carefully. This guy's eyes are so dilated, he probably shouldn't be able to walk. "That's really not my scene. Listen, I've only got a few minutes before we're starting again ..."

She glanced down the hallway. No one in sight. Shit. And this guy is dusted, I could break his arm and he'd never feel it. I can't handle this alone—

Before she could move, the man suddenly shoved her away from him, knocking her off-balance into the wall. "Whaddaya mean, not your scene? You don't like me or something?"

Oh shit.

The man moved closer, blocking Beth's line of escape. She pressed back against the wall, looking for anything she could use as a weapon. Nothing in sight. Terrific. What now, Kentraine? If I break his instep with my heel he won't even blink. If I give 'im a knee, he might get angry.

"Come on outside with me. We're going to party, right? Have some fun." The man's fingers gripped her upper arm tightly, digging in. Beth knew she'd have bruises from that by tomorrow morning.

If I get to see tomorrow morning. If I live that long. He's drugged out of his mind! If I shout for help, who knows what he'll do? And if I give in, go outside with him—

Lord and Lady, get me out of this!

Eric moved quickly through the crowd, trying not to drip water from the paper towel in his hand, and trying not to look intently at the people around him as he walked past.

Yeah, don't stare at the elves, Eric, it isn't polite.

I know I'm going crazy, now.

Well, everybody thinks that musicians are crazy anyhow, right?

He dodged a drink-laden customer, staggering in the direction of the Johns, and saw a vivacious

redhead, eyes made up like a pair of iridescent butterfly wings, laughing merrily with some other friends. Green-eyed, of course.

Damn, but there's a lot of green-eyed people in the club tonight . . .

"Bard?"

Eric froze in mid-step. I know that voice.

No. It can't be him again. It can't. I can't deal with this.

"Bard? I must speak with you."

Eric steeled himself, and turned to face Korendil. The elf-actor was staring at him beseechingly, that impossibly blond hair cascading over his shoulders . . . and my leather vest! Damn it, he's still wearing my clothes!

Be nice to the man, Eric. Or he'll probably knock you into another wall.

"Uh, hi," Eric said eloquently, very aware of the water dripping from the paper towel onto his jeans. "The name's Eric, by the way. Remember?"

The blond man nodded quite seriously. "I know. Bard. I heard your name at the place-of-festival, when the beautiful witch was trying to aid you. And you told me again this evening."

Beautiful witch? Do I know any beautiful witches? Who is this guy?

"Please, listen to me, Bard. I know you did not wish to see me again, but you must hear my words." The—elf. He is. He's an elf—spoke earnestly, his green eyes pleading with Eric's, reaching out to him . . .

Green eyes—can't look away—that man in the limo-

Eric broke away from Korendil's gaze with an effort, shuddering at the memory.

What's happening to me? I thought nobody could be hypnotized against his will!

"Look," he said, trying to think of a way to get out of this conversation. "I'm in the middle of a show, I can't talk right now."

Korendil gestured at the hallway to the break room, and the back door beyond, where Beth was standing, talking to some guy. "Bard Eric, can we go outside to speak? Just for a few minutes?"

Eric shook his head. "Not 'Bard Eric.' Just Eric. And no, I don't want to go outside, I have to be back onstage in a few minutes."

And if I have to talk to you, I want to do it where there's witnesses. In case you decide to slam me into a wall again.

The elf—no, dammit, he's as human as I am, it's just makeup and FIX—looked at him in shock. "Do you think I would purposefully hurt you? I would never do so, I promise. But I need your help. We all

need your help."

He really means it. "You're serious about this, aren't you? You're an elf, and somebody's trying to kill your people, and you need me to help you?"

Korendil nodded, gravely earnest. "Will you help us? Even as we speak, our enemy is marshalling his forces, preparing to destroy that which gives us life itself ..."

Eric tried to keep a straight face. Come on, Eric, you've got a few friends with—unusual—realities. This guy's no worse than any of them. Besides, he's trying to be nice, and you should be nice right back to him. Instead of laughing in his face, and then calling the cops.

"I don't know, I need some time to think about all of this, really." Yeah, just get away from him, that's the first step in dealing with a loon—

Something doesn't feel right. A ripple of honest-to-God fear—fear with no cause—rolled down his spine. Something is very, very wrong—

Eric glanced over the elf's shoulder, and suddenly what he had seen a moment before registered: Beth, cornered by a man near the back door, glint of shiny metal—oh shit, he's got a knife! He's holding a knife on Bethie!

Korendil's eyes widened just as Eric gathered a breath to shout for help, and the blond man whirled—stared—

Less than a microsecond, Eric would have sworn to that. Surely not enough to have seen what was happening, much less think of anything to do. Yet suddenly he was crossing the distance between them and the hallway in a few quick leaps.

Eric dashed after him, pushing people out of his way. How in the hell did he get through the crowd so fast?

He skidded into the hallway, just as the blond actor—elf?—dived between Beth and the stranger, shoving the man away from her. Eric caught a glimpse of her frightened eyes, then the man with the knife was on his feet again, facing Korendil, hissing words almost too low to hear.

". . . mess with me, mister, you don't . . ."

The words suddenly faded away, as the man stared up into Korendil's eyes. They seemed momentarily frozen, all of them: Beth, crouching back against the wall; Korendil, gazing in the man's eyes; and the stranger, the knife only inches from Korendil's face, not moving . . .

What in the hell is going on here? That guy's still holding the knife, but he's not moving, just standing there, staring into Korendil's eyes. My God, isn't he going to do something before the guy goes for his neck?

Then the man dropped the knife suddenly, the blade clattering on the floor. He staggered backwards, hitting the wall and sliding down into a sitting position, blank-eyed and shuddering.

Eric stared at the man, who was clutching his hand and whimpering, as Korendil moved to Beth, his voice quiet and concerned. "Are you all right, Lady? Did he harm you?"

Beth was shaking her head, wiping tears from her eyes.

Bethie, crying? I've never—oh shit, that guy's about to—Eric shouted a warning as the man on the floor suddenly moved for the knife. "Korendil, look out!"

The elf turned just as the man lunged with the knife.

Freeze-frame.

A flash of fire—no, a rope of fire—

Next frame.

Fire coiling, lashing out at the man's wrist—

Music up.

A burst of melody, a discordant B-flat minor that could break your eardrums—

Resume speed.

-as Korendil's fist slams into the man's face, and the surprised look on his face as he falls— And the thought, lingering in Eric's mind: That can't be real. But it wasn't a special effect. That was real.

I've gone crazy, the whole world is crazy. I've completely lost it.

The stranger twitched once and then was still, sprawled unconscious on the floor.

Eric was suddenly aware of the dripping paper towel, forgotten in his hand. The blond actor—actor?—held Beth gently in his arms, murmuring something as he brushed away her tears. Beth was trembling, her hands shaking uncontrollably.

The break-room door opened suddenly, and Allie looked out blearily, blinking at the dim light. "What in the hell?"

Her eyes widened as Beth, half-carried by Korendil, staggered unsteadily into the break room. "Beth?" She focused on Eric as he walked past her. "Eric, what—"

"I don't know, some guy attacked Beth," Eric said, watching as Beth, with Korendil's help, sat down on a packing crate. "He's out cold on the floor. This guy decked him."

Beth, her face in her hands, tried to push Korendil away from her. The blond man shook his head, said something too low for Eric to hear, and rested his hand on her shoulder again.

For a moment, Eric thought he could hear a faint melody, echoing from somewhere in the room.

Very classical, sounds maybe like a variation on the third Brandenburg Concerto—

Why am I thinking about music at a time like this?



"Beth?" Eric asked hesitantly, sitting on his heels at her feet, and looking up at her anxiously. "Are you okay?"

She nodded without looking up.

Then Beth took several deep breaths, and spoke quietly. "It's all right, I'm okay," she said. A moment later, her voice was stronger. "Allie, could you tell management that there's an unconscious sonuvabitch lying in the hallway? They'll probably want to call the cops."

She's starting to sound like herself again. Eric tried to banish the image of Beth Kentraine, crying, barely able to walk. She's Bethie again, she's okay now. Thank God.

Allie nodded silently, and walked out of the room. Eric shifted uncomfortably, looking at the way Korendil's hand was still resting on Beth's shoulder. "Listen, uh, Korendil, I, uh—" Might as well spit it out. "Look, Korendil, I still think you're crazy, but—thanks for being here."

He wanted to say something more, but the look in Korendil's eyes stopped him short. Eric left the room quickly, but he could feel Beth's and Korendil's eyes intent upon him as he closed the door.

The L.A.P.D. officers hauled the man away, slumped between them. Eric watched from the edge of the hallway. Damn, but whatever that guy Korendil is, he sure knows how to deck somebody in one punch.

And whatever he did to disarm the guy—

No. That wasn't real. You can't hit somebody that way, not with fire and music. It didn't happen.

Doesn't matter what I thought I saw. It wasn't real. It didn't happen. It's a drug flashback or something.

Or something.

Eric glanced at the half-empty dance floor, and noted the cluster of people over by the club's restrooms.

Amazing, how many people suddenly had to go to the bathroom when the cops showed up. Eric snickered to himself. Sure hope they didn't clog up the toilets with all the stuff they were flushing down 'em—

He walked towards the break room at the end of the hall. He stopped outside the closed door, hearing quiet conversation within.

"... what I can't understand is how anyone could profit from something like that. I mean, they'd lose the magic, too, right?"

Beth's voice.

She's talking to that loon about— Oh, terrific. He's probably telling her how I have to be the Great Savior of Middle Earth. What did I do to deserve this?

He opened the door. Beth and Korendil looked up. "Hi," Eric said awkwardly, wishing he had knocked first. Beth and Korendil were sitting very close together on the packing crates.

Too close.

"Bo thinks we should start up real soon," Eric continued, noting the way the elf—actor's!—arm was around Beth's shoulders. "Take everybody's mind off all of the cops that just came through the club."

Beth disengaged from Korendil and stood up, dusting off her black pants. "Sounds good." She smiled at Korendil. "I'd like to talk some more, Korendil. Maybe after the show?"

Eric felt something tighten in his throat, at the warm way Beth and Korendil were looking at each other, so intense and intimate.

Damn it, it's her life, none of my business—

But he's an elf! Not even human!

No, he's an actor, with good makeup, contact lenses, all of that. He's just another guy. Another six-foot-five guy, blond, built like a dancer, and handsome. Even if I don't swing that way, he's damn handsome. I can see why she likes him.

It's none of my business who Beth Kentraine gets involved with—it's her life, not mine.

Maybe it's just that I'm on the rebound, but it hurts, the way she's looking at him—

"Eric, perhaps you could join us?" Korendil ventured, gazing at him with an intent, worried expression. "I would speak with both of you, if possible."

Oh, great. Now the loon wants to flirt with Beth and drive me nuts at the same time. Very economical.

I can't handle this.

"Maybe later," Eric said, wishing he was anywhere else but here. Even Juilliard. At least when I was there, I had reasons for thinking I was crazy. "But we have to do the show now." He started towards the door, not looking back.

Maybe if I wish for it hard enough, this guy will go back to Oz or the North Pole or Santa Monica wherever he came from. It's worth a try.

I just don't want to think that I've gone completely, utterly insane, that's all—

—and I don't want this to be real . . .

•6•

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"Wait a minute, Banyon."

Eric turned slowly, unwillingly. I don't think I'm going to like what's coming. "Yeah, Beth?"

She pushed her dark, ragged bangs back out from her eyes with a tired gesture. She looked wrung out.

Not surprising.

And preoccupied.

Which doesn't bode real well, either.

"I want to talk something out with you. Now. Just for a couple of minutes. I have this bad feeling that you're going to vanish the minute we finish the show."

Eric warily glanced at Korendil, then sat down on a crate. "What did you want to talk about?"

Beth sighed, giving Korendil a sidelong look. "What do you think?"

They've been talking about the elves, and that "Eric the Bard" bullshit. Damn it, Beth, how did you let him sucker you in so fast? I thought you were smarter than that!

"Uh, I don't know what he's been telling you, but—"

"You don't?" Her lips tightened. "Than you're dumber than I thought, Banyon."

He bristled. "Oh come on! You don't really believe this guy, do you, Bethie? I mean, look at him! He has to be an actor. And those ears are fake, I know it—"

Eric reached out his hand towards the tip of one of Kory's ears, showing through the blond curls.

The fake elf held up his right hand in a graceful, but dangerous gesture of warning. There was a steely glint in his green eyes, a definite challenge, as clear as if he'd spoken aloud.

Touch my ears and you die, white boy.

Eric hesitated, suddenly remembering the pain he'd felt earlier this afternoon as his face met the wall at high speed.

He coughed, and turned his own gesture into a shrug.

Well, maybe I won't demonstrate how the ears are just a latex special effect . . .

He turned to the only other—marginally—sane person in the room. "Beth—listen to me. You're not a ten-year-old, or a member of Hobbits Anonymous. You can't really believe what he's saying. There's no such thing as elves. Or magic. Or any of that crap."

Beth leaned back, crossing her legs and surveying him with a faint smile on her lips. "Really? Then how do you explain what Korendil did to that creep in the hallway? How do you account for three-quarters of the people out there in the audience tonight? Have you taken a good look at some of those outfits? At the way they look?"

So she's seen them, too. "I don't know, maybe they all just showed up from a cast party on the Universal lot. It's a helluva lot more believable than a nightclub full of dancing elves." Eric shook his head, trying stubbornly to break through Beth's conviction. "I just don't believe in Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, or elves. As far as I'm concerned, this guy is playing a practical joke on all of us. I think Maureen paid

him to do it, she's got enough connections. And she's always been a bit jealous of you. She'd be perfectly happy to get both of us with her prank."

"I told you he'd be difficult to convince. Lady Beth." That was from Korendil.

Eric gave him a dirty look.

The elf sighed, ignoring it "For a Bard, he has a very closed mind."

That's it! I am sick of hearing that word!

"Goddammit, I am not a Bard!"

The actor turned to face him. His voice was very soft, yet it demanded attention. "Then what are you?" he asked simply.

Eric was silent for a moment before speaking. "I don't know. I'm a musician A reasonably-talented street musician. Sometimes I'm a composer. I don't know if I'm any good at it. And besides that?" He shrugged. "Not much." rICg

"No." Korendil shook his head solemnly, but with stubborn conviction. "You are a Bard. You must feel it, the magic that flows when you play your music. Everyone else can."

Midnight, alone in the grove, playing "Sheebeg Sheemore," then the music taking over, a melody strange and wild, as the trees bend down to listen—

Korendil continued relentlessly. "You can heal, and harm, and create with your magic. Glimpse the distant past, or—" His voice suddenly took on a tone of desolation. "—touch the future . .

The bleakness of the last three words threw Eric into the waking nightmare of that moment on the bus—

Los Angeles, grayness everywhere, no life, no joy, only misery like a living thing, dragging everything down, destroying all hope—

He shook off the clinging weariness, shook off the despair. How can he know this? How can he reach into my thoughts and know exactly who I am and what's happened to me? That's not possible. Nobody can do that. That's—

—magic.

Fear made him clench his jaw; made him try to deny that last thought.

No. This can't be real.

But—

The rope of fire—the music—

I wasn't stoned. I saw it, back there in the hallway I wasn't stoned on the bus, or this afternoon at the apartment. It was magic. And it was real.

I can't keep pretending that it's all fake. There's too many things that have happened, too much to disbelieve. It's real, as real as I am.

And if it's real—

Then so are my nightmares.

Oh shit.

Eric sat down slowly, before his knees went. "Okay," he said weakly. "You know. I don't know how you know, but—yeah, I saw the future. At least, I think it was the future. It was horrible."

Korendil nodded sadly. "You probably saw what would happen if the magic nexus was destroyed. Now do you see why that must not happen? That is what this city will become."

Eric shuddered, thinking of the desolation on the faces of the people in his vision. "When I saw that—there was a man, watching me from a limo. An older guy, with silver hair, and green eyes like yours—"

Green eyes, reaching inside where no one should see, violation, a hand that fouls all it touches—

"Perenor." The elf's voice was a whisper of apprehension, threaded with pain.

Eric looked up at Korendil, startled. "What?"

Korendil's eyes were clouded, his face as still and pale as a death mask. "His name is Perenor. He was one of us, and now is our greatest enemy. Where did you see him? When?"

Perenor. I won't forget that name.

Eric shivered, remembering the despair, the hopelessness that had almost pushed him over the edge. "I saw him on Van Nuys Boulevard, this afternoon. It was weird—it was like he recognized me, somehow he knew me."

Knew me, and tried to take me apart at the seams—and he knew every button to push. Every twitch. Whatever else is going on, I wasn't imagining that—it was real! What that bastard did to me, it was real!

Korendil's green eyes were troubled with things Eric couldn't read. "I did not realize that Perenor knew of your existence. Perhaps he felt the magic in the place-of-festival when you awakened me, and decided to seek you out. Perhaps it was an accident—but I cannot believe that. If Perenor knows of you, then you are in great danger. Bard. He will hunt for you, knowing that you are the only one who can stop him."

The only—hey, wait a second— His horse sense reared and snorted in alarm. "What do you mean, the only one? You've got other people who are going to help you, right? I mean, you're pretty flashy with the magic, mister—"

"Not compared to Perenor," the elf said, resignedly. "My power is nothing to his. Believe me. Bard Eric, the little power I have is insignificant beside even your own, untutored as you are. That is why we need you so very much."

Beth gave him a look.

"Turn him down, and I just may decide never to speak to you again." Thanks, Beth.

"Even if I do help you," he said, trying to keep from sounding like he was ready to dive under one of the crates, "you don't expect me to take on this guy by myself, do you?"

Korendil gazed at him with rising hope and eagerness. "Then you will help us?"

He froze. Oh shit. I just said that, didn't I? Me and my big mouth.

Well, if I'm going to back out of this one, better do it quick.

He started to open his mouth, started to search for words to extricate himself without Beth disowning him— then stopped again, struck by something he wasn't certain he understood. A feeling that whatever he chose or said at this moment was incredibly important. And a feeling of conviction.

What if I am a Bard, like this guy says? What if I really do have some kind of power that his people need?

What if I'm the only one who can help them?

If that's true, and I walk away from this guy, I'll be doing the worst, lowest thing I've ever done in my life.

I can't live with that.

Eric looked away from those too-bright eyes for a moment. "I—I don't know," he replied, haltingly. "I mean, I'm just Eric Banyon. I'm not some great hero out of the legends, here to save your ass. I'm just a busker, a wandering musician . . . God, it's hard enough for me to stick around one place long enough to finish a run of Faire, let alone fight a Crusade! Aren't there any other bards around who can help you?"

Korendil shook his head, wearily. "No. Not one. Either they do not believe, or they do not have the power to aid us. And most of the elves are Dreaming, trapped in despair and apathy. Even the great Prince, our leader, is lost to Dreaming. It may be too late to save them, I don't know. But if you will help me ..."

He gazed at Eric now with pleading, and something akin to worship.

Or awe. Great. Now I've got an elf who's convinced that I'm the Second Coming of Christ. In addition to whatever it is that he wants me to do.

This really is too weird for words. Even if I really do believe him, I'm still not certain I can deal with this . . .

"So, what are we going to do?"

Eric and Korendil both glanced up in surprise.

Beth Kentraine stretched, standing up slowly. She looked at them questioningly, hands on her hips. "Well? What are we going to do about this?"

"We?" Eric repeated.

"Yeah, bucko. We. Did you think I wasn't going to get involved in this? Get real, Banyon."

She smiled, but her eyes were distant, looking off at someone, something that wasn't in the Here and Now "When I was a kid, a friend of mine told me about elves how they were real. How he'd seen them, talked with them, how there were maybe even a few of them living in California. I believed him, he'd never told me anything else that wasn't true, no matter how strange it had sounded I used to dream about them—but I never really thought I'd see one."

She turned her gaze back to the present; looked from Eric to Korendil and back again. "Now, I have seen them. Now I know they're real—hell, there's one sitting right here in front of me—and I hear that they're in real trouble. What the hell do you expect me to do? Of course I'm going to help." She grinned. "Just try and stop me, Banyon."

Before Eric could speak, there was a sharp knock at the door. "Hey, guys, are you in there?" They could hear Bo's anxious voice through the thin plywood. "We've got a crowd waiting out here, and they're getting tired of the canned stuff. Are you going to start up soon?"

"Just a sec. Bo!" Beth called to him. She turned back to Eric and the elf. "We'll talk more after the gig, right?"

"Right," Korendil said, glancing at Eric.

Yeah, right. Terrific. Now Beth's involved in this lunacy too. I don't know if this is going to be dangerous or not—I don't want her to get hurt—

He followed her out the door, heading for the stage, thinking furiously.

I've got no idea what this is all going to cost. Or even what or who we're going to have to face—like that Perenor guy. He really did mess with my mind; a little more and I would have been playing tag on the Ventura Freeway. What could he do to Bethie?

This could be worse than dangerous. I don't want to think of him doing something like that to her.

But as she took her place in front other mike, he looked at the straight line of her back, and sighed with resignation.

I know her. There is nobody in the world that can out-stubborn Beth Kentraine. Once she's made up her mind, she won't budge. There's no way I'll be able to convince her to stay out of this.

Terrific. Three of us committed to this idiocy: me, an elf, and a rock singer. Against God knows what. Shit. We should be committed.

Maybe we should get some cards made up: The Unholy Trinity. Weddings, Bar Mitzvahs and Parties. Worlds saved, only a modest additional fee—

The Porsche banked sharply around the curve, barely touching the dividing yellow line, then swerved back for the next turn. A professional race-car driver might have taken that curve at a tighter angle, but no one else.

The engine purred as the driver downshifted for the canyon hills that rose stark and shadowed above the accelerating car. The lights of the city reflected off the glistening black paint, glittering against the windshield's glass, brighter than the stars in the night sky above Mulholland Drive.

Another turn, at a speed that most would consider reckless. A policeman would have called it illegal. But for the driver, it was only skill, reaching for the edge. Perfectly controlled. Flawless.

A test of excellence.

Ria Llewellyn clenched black-gloved hands on the steering wheel, ignoring the strands of blonde hair flying hap-hazardly in the wind from the Porsche's half-open window, concentrating on the road, and driving at the limits of her abilities,

Damn him!

The Porsche banked around another tight curve. For a moment, the sports car skidded towards the edge of the canyon, the steep stone wall blurring past, only inches away from the Porsche. Then Ria tightened her grip on the steering wheel, expertly bringing the car back to the center of the twisting canyon road.

Right in the middle of the goddamn board meeting. "Ria, I need to see you. The Japanese restaurant in Studio City, one hour."

And when I ask him what in the hell is so important that I need to leave a critical strategy session at ten o'clock at night, all he says is "Korendil has escaped . . ."

She sighed, brushing long blonde hair back from her face with a gesture of annoyance. As if one person—even a warrior of the Old Blood—could make a difference in this. I told him we've secured the land, it's already signed for, nothing and no one is going to stop it now. Definitely not a fool who's spent the last ten years asleep under an oak tree . . .

Like the rest of those fools. Unable to see the real world around them. Living in Dreaming—hell, living in shopping malls! When everything they could possibly desire is so close, within their reach—

Like Mother, in that commune somewhere—Mendocino? Marin? I don't remember. Not that it matters, I never see her anyway. How could she give up everything that Father could offer her—for that? What a sham she is, to preach about caring, then walk out on us before I was even in kindergarten. And what did she get? Tie-dyed T-shirts, drugs and "love." "Love," what a joke, what

It's all escapism, hiding from reality. That's all these fools are doing. Like Mother.

Except now, it's too late for that. They're going to lose everything. Even if Korendil is free, it's too late for him to do anything.

A wailing siren interrupted Ria's thoughts. She glanced into the rearview mirror, and saw the flashing red-blue lights of the police motorcycle, close behind her.

A motorcycle cop, on Mulholland at night? Unusual. A bit of bad luck that he spotted me. But it doesn't really matter; it'll take only a moment to be corrected—



She pulled over to the side of the road, waiting for the helmeted policeman to dismount from the white police-model Kawasaki. His boots made sharp crunching noises on the rough gravel as he walked towards the black Porsche.

"Good evening, officer." Ria smiled at him through the open window.

How pleasant. A handsome motorcycle cop. That curly brown hair would be quite attractive if he let it grow out a little longer and got rid of that mustache. Why do all the policemen in LA. have mustaches?

"You driving license and car registration, ma'am. I'm writing you up for reckless and exhibitionist driving—"

"Here's my license." She reached down to the black purse on the seat beside her, removed the license from her wallet and handed it to him.

"This says your name is"—he glanced up at her over the edge of the laminated piece of paper—"Arianrhod Llewellyn? Is that correct?"

She smiled, gazing into his eyes. "Absolutely correct."

Brown eyes, ordinary, very human. But reach beyond, brushing past surprise and disbelief, and you can touch, and take control, and change—

Brief struggles, like a small bird fluttering in my hand, trying to escape. They always try to escape, never realizing that it's already over . . .

The cop stared at her blankly, unable to look away, Ria's driving license trembling slightly in his hands. His right hand edged towards the .38 bolstered at his hip.

No. You are mine, now. Be still.

Ria surveyed the man standing beside her, motionless. Unfortunately, I do not have time for you tonight, even if you are a handsome, obviously virile man. But, if I ever see you again—

She released him, breaking the spell. The officer shook his head slowly, dazed. "I—I, uh, I'm just going to give you a warning, miss. Please drive more carefully."

"Thank you, officer." Ria smiled to herself as the cop walked unsteadily towards his parked motorcycle.

Remember me. Dream that one day I will call you.

A pity that Father needs to speak with me tonight. That man could have proved to be an interesting . . . diversion.

She waited until the cop had left, then started the Porsche, driving through the shadowed canyon. At Laurel Canyon, she turned left, and a moment later the lights of the Valley were visible before her, scintillating jewels against the darkness.

Beautiful, but I would rather be back in Century City, finishing up the contract for the meeting tomorrow—

Dammit, Father, why tonight?

Ten minutes later, she parked the Porsche in front of the entrance to the restaurant. The valet opened the door for her. His eyes brightened when he saw the folded bill she handed him with the keys. "Make sure nobody scratches the paint."

"Yes, ma'am." His eyes followed her, hungrily, as she strode to the restaurant door. She smiled to herself and gave her hips a little extra twitch, just for his benefit. She could feel the heat of his eyes upon her as she reached for the lacquered black door handle.

Dream on, little man. Only—this dream costs more than you'd ever want to pay.

She stepped inside, glancing around the entrance. A distinguished older man rose from his seat near the koi pond, and moved gracefully towards her.

"Good evening, dear," the silver-haired man said, and she leaned close so he could kiss her cheek. "You're looking especially lovely tonight."

She offered him a hint of icy smile. Enough so that he could read her annoyance—not enough so that he could read how very annoyed she was.

He took her arm to lead her towards the back of the restaurant. "Kyoshi's holding a table for us. Have you had any dinner yet?"

"Not really."

Damn him, he really wants something from me, I can tell. Of course, he'll never just come out and say it. We'll have to go through this whole dinner routine first. "Some sushi, maybe. And hot sake would be wonderful. It's been a rough day."

"You'll have to tell me about it." He maneuvered them to the table, isolated behind a colorful paper screen and a small stand of potted bamboo.

"Sake, Kyoshi," he instructed the waiter standing patiently beside the table, "and a tray of sushi to start with."

Ria sat back in the chair as the waiter hurried away, and surveyed her father thoughtfully. Was it her imagination, or were there faint lines at the edges of his eyes? Probably not—he was never less than perfect.

As always, his silver hair was immaculately barbered, carefully masking the tips of his long, slightly-pointed ears. But nothing could disguise his eyes, the cold emerald-green, slitted black pupils.

At least my eyes are human. I suppose I should thank Mother for that.

A twinge of something, not quite concern, touched her briefly. He looks tired. This Korendil affair must be worrying him more than I thought. Unless it's something else that he wants—

I suppose I might as well start the game myself.

"As much as I enjoy seeing you. Father, I must admit that tonight isn't the best night for this. Did I tell

you that we're about to sign the investment deal? Twelve million in paper, tomorrow at noon. My execs are still at the office, hammering out the details. And I'm sure they're wondering just what was so important that their boss had to disappear immediately."

To see her father—

His green eyes glinted with hidden amusement. "I'm sure they have faith in you, my dear. They probably just think you're closing another deal, right now."

"Am I?"

Her father smiled. "Perhaps."

You bastard. Games within games, even with your own daughter.

I know what he sees. His beautiful little girl. A corporate executive. Half of the Old Blood, half human. Not quite his equal in power, but damn close. Someone he can manipulate and control, and use in his games.

But you taught me not to trust others. Father. To believe only in myself, and what I can do, and never let anyone past my guard. So of course as I grew older, I realized that included you as well. You never put that variable in your equation, did you?

Now you think you can snap your fingers and I'll come running to help you—

It'll snow in hell first.

The sushi arrived, with two small ceramic containers of hot rice wine. Ria and her father were silent as the wine was poured, a brief respite in the verbal fencing match. Parry, riposte. Feint and feint again.

Ria sipped the steaming-hot wine, then dipped a piece of octopus sushi in the small bowl of soy sauce beside her, savoring the unusual texture.

And waited for her father to make the next move.

Which, of course, he isn't going to do.

Perenor sampled another piece of sushi, then mixed more green wasanabe horseradish into his soy dipping bowl. "Try the crab, my dear, it's really quite excellent tonight."

He's trying to bait me. And, damn him, he's succeeding. I don't want to spend all night sitting here, making polite conversation, trying to figure out what he wants from me. Not when I've got twelve mil in paperwork sitting back at the office.

She heaved an obvious sigh, and gave her head a little shake. "All right. Father. Why are you so concerned about Korendil? What does it matter if he's free? He's just one person, and he isn't going to awaken the Dreamers, or desert them to rouse the High Court; he can't do anything against us. He isn't even one-tenth of the mage that you are."

The silver-haired man was silent for a long moment. There was an indefinable expression in his emerald-ice eyes. "Ria, what would you say if I told you that there was a Bard in Los Angeles? A true

Bard, with all the abilities of the ancient Bards?"

"I'd say that you've been drinking too much sake," Ria said flatly. "There are no more true Bards. Taliesen was the last one, and he died a thousand years ago." She pondered that a moment. "Well, perhaps O'Carolan. But he was a drunkard, and he never used his magic."

Her father picked up another piece of sushi, a pale-orange fantailed shrimp, and gazed at it thoughtfully. "You shouldn't discount what I say so quickly, Arianrhod."

Ria stared in silence at her father.

It's true, then.

A Bard, in Los Angeles. A true Bard.

But that's impossible—

"All right, you've found a Bard." She shrugged. "And Korendil is free. That still doesn't add up to any danger that I can see."

"You still don't understand, do you?" Perenor said tersely. "Korendil is the one who found this Bard, somehow—or the Bard found him. This one has great potential—too great. I saw that when I encountered him, recognized his power, and touched the boy's mind. I've taken steps to neutralize him, but I want to be rid of Korendil before he brings any other players into this game. And for that, I need your help."

Ria almost laughed aloud. Why, father mine, you're not feeling inadequate now, are you? A little bit of self-doubt, here? Is that why you needed my help so many years ago, to trap Korendil in that grove?

You are getting older, even for one of the Old Blood—you wouldn't happen to be getting weaker, as well? Your power fading, even as mine grows in strength? Now, that would be an amusing thought—

"I imagine I could help you with this. Father," she purred. "Of course, I would like to know what's in this for me."

Perenor's fist slammed down on the table, rattling the sake bottles. The young couple at the table across from them glanced up at them in surprise, then carefully looked away.

He leaned forward, speaking in a low whisper. "Don't play games with me; and don't forget, daughter, exactly what is at stake here. This is our chance to finally rid ourselves of any who might thwart us. To avenge ourselves on those who cast me out, who refused to acknowledge you. And to gain such power, power as you've never dreamed of it—"

"I have power," Ria said, cutting through his words. "Power in the humans' world, true, but it's good enough for me. I have my business, and money, and control in this city. Why should I help you? What does it matter to me what happens to any of the Old Blood? They're fading now; they're no threat to anyone, least of all to me. I see no reason to exert myself, to involve myself, just because you want to amuse yourself with another game."

He leaned back a little, his eyes glittering, and toyed with another piece of sushi. "Even if, with a little 'exertion,' you could win immortality?"

Breath failed her momentarily. "What are you talking about?"

Perenor shrugged. "I thought you knew. You . . . inherited . . . certain gifts from me, Ria, but you are half-human, after all. Eventually, you'll grow old and die."

An unpleasant smile passed briefly across his lips.

"I'm sure," he continued, "that I'll still be alive to see it. That, of course, is one of the reasons I suggested that we purchase the Elizabethan Faire land. I was thinking primarily of you, my dear, though, of course, I will gain a few benefits from this as well. Once we have control of the nexus, you'll never have to worry about this again. The power itself will hold time at bay and keep you young."

He reached out, touching a strand of her pale blonde hair with mocking tenderness. "You're so lovely, such a remarkable child. I truly would hate to see you grow old, see your beauty wither away."

She tasted the bitterness of being outmaneuvered. I'm sure you would. Father. I know I'd feel just the same way, if you were the one who was aging and dying.

Very well; for now, our goals are the same. But, when this is over . . .

She laughed lightly. "Father, of course I'll help you. I, I just thought this was part of your fight against the Old Blood, and that was why you wanted control of the magic nexus. To avenge what they did to you, so many years ago. I never dreamed it was more than that ..."

Perenor leaned back in his chair, a faint and satisfied half-smile flickering across his handsome features. "Well, now you know." He glanced at his watch. "There's time enough to deal with this tonight. I know where Korendil is—this shouldn't take very long."

The silver-haired man tossed several bills onto the table, then stood, extending his arm to his daughter. "Shall we?"

"Of course."

But I won't forget this evening. And, once we control the nexus—

—we'll talk again of power and promises. Father.

•7•

Beware! Oh take Care

Korendil, Knight of Elfhome Sun-Descending, squire of the High Court, Magus Minor, and Child of Danann—

Fine titles, but will any of that aid me now?

Korendil sighed, gathered borrowed hope about him like his borrowed finery, and stepped out into the crowded hall of the place called "Diverse Pleasures." Hope was such a fragile thing—and it rested upon

such fragile mortal shoulders.

He watched the young Bard, Eric, follow the lovely witch to their places on the stage. Such frighteningly fragile mortal shoulders . . .

The Bard hardly looked his part. Taliesen—or so Korendil's elders had told him—had been as skilled with blade and bow as with his harp. Eric was small and thin, with a face that would have been sweet, had it not been so wary, so marked with distrust. A very attractive young man—

But not a warrior, nor anything like one. And just now, a hesitant man, one uncertain about what he had just agreed to.

A very young man.

Korendil knew exactly how he felt. Korendil was a very young elf; scarcely two hundred years old as the mortals counted time. There was only one younger than he in all of the High or Low Courts of Elfhome Sun-Descending and Elfhome Misthold, and that was his cousin to the north. There were too many times when he was uncertain; too many times when he felt a fool. Especially of late.

But I cannot just give up. I cannot allow this to happen-

-He glanced about at the Dreaming elves, scatter through the crowd like so many exotic butterflies. I could conjure my own garments, he thought absently, while counting the number of elvenkind who had somehow gathered here, and marking those who seemed by their eyes to be the least lost in Dreaming. I would not look so out of place in them here. Then I could give Bard Eric his property back . . . He recalled the Bard's resentful stare when the young man thought that Korendil was not aware of his glances. They take possessions so seriously, these mortals-- But if I did that, I should only need them again before I left—and besides, I have already altered them to my own use. Would that I knew them well enough to conjure duplicates. I suppose I could try kenning them now, so that I could duplicate them later.

He took stock of himself, first, and decided against the idea.

A distinctly foolish notion. I am no kind of a mage, not really. Subduing that madman expended enough of my magic as it was. I have little power to waste on kenning. Not if I am going to have any hope of Awakening any of the others.

Perhaps the Bard's music will help. That is surely what drew them all here this evening. Although he scarcely seems to believe it himself.

Korendil smiled to himself, remembering Eric's shocked expression when he had first seen the warrior-elf in his place-of-dwelling. So young, so eager to disbelieve. Would that this Bard was a Taliesen, older and powerful, ready and willing to do battle with our Enemy. But if Bard Eric was as skilled as Taliesen, Perenor would have learned of his existence before this, learned of him and taken steps to dispose of him . . .

No. Better this way. At least now, I can have hope that he will quickly learn what he must do to save us. And perhaps, if we are very careful, Perenor will not be able to find us.

He moved out of the little space by the hallway and into the milling crowd. His goal was a table near one wall, with three brilliantly-costumed elfmaids on tall stools about it, like three bright tropical birds upon

their perches. Two of the three he knew, both of the High Court: Variel and Mayanir, sisters; and both—at least ten years ago—Awake enough to know what was happening to them.

Awake enough to have begun to fear.

And that was before the danger to the nexus, he thought soberly, easing between two chattering groups of mortals who seemed as oblivious to the presence of elvenkind as the elves were to them. If there are any that I can Wake—surely it will be Val and Mai.

Loud, discordant laughter made him wince as he passed the bar. His sensitive hearing was suffering in this place.

I cannot see how the Bard can tolerate it. The mortals' world seems to have changed so very much in ten years—but then, that is the way of their world. He sighed. And the world of Elvenkin is different as well. I cannot say that either of them have changed for the better.

He politely declined the advances of a very drunk mortal woman, one with too much flesh crammed into too little clothing. Moments later he declined again—with more grace, and a touch of sympathy—the advances of a shy and bespectacled young mortal man. He was equally drunk, but Kory could Read in him that he had so indulged out of unhappiness, and in an attempt to bolster his nerve.

These mortals were all so rawly open. It was hard to move among them and feel their thoughts and emotions jostling his mind as their bodies jostled his.

And so few of them were here out of joy. That was the saddest of all.

The elves were still, deep pools of silence in this jungle. Too silent—but a relief from the screeching of the mortals. Unless you needed, as Korendil needed, to rouse them.

Finally he reached his goal, the three elfmaids poised beneath an overhead spotlight. In other times they would have been lit softly by their own magic. But that was before the magic was choked off by so much cold iron about us. He stood beside the table, patient in the shadow, waiting for one of them to notice him.

None of them did.

Their eyes were bright but vacant, like all the others he'd seen here this night. They sipped at drinks, listened with half an ear to the music playing, and giggled conversationally to one another, weaving a circle of attention that closed them inside and Kory out.

He decided to violate protocol. "Val—" he said, touching her blue-silk-clad arm, sending a little tingle of carefully hoarded power from himself to her. "Val—"

She blinked, turned very slowly, and looked into his eyes. She blinked again, and licked her lips. "Hi," she said, uncertainly. "Hi. I know you—don't I?"

"It's Korendil, Val," he replied with emphasis, trying to get her to focus on him. "Kory, You certainly do know me."

"Oh, yeah," she said, blinking again. "Hi, Kory. You haven't been around for a while. Have you been away somewhere?"

He reined in his temper, and refrained from swearing.

Is this the depth to which we've sunk?

"Perenor and that half-Blooded daughter of his trapped me in the nexus grove," he said as forcefully as he could. "It's been ten years, Val."

"Oh, wow," she said, a little more interest stirring in the back of her eyes, focusing a little better on him. "Ten years? Gods. That long? Like—you were trapped?"

"Yes," he replied fiercely, fighting with Dreaming for her attention, spinning out his feeble magic to try and pull her back to something like the maid he had known. "That long. Val, listen—" she started to gaze off past his shoulder and he touched her arm again to bring her back. "Listen. This is important. The nexus grove is in danger. Someone is going to destroy it un—"

"Ladies and Gentlemen," Beth Kentraine's voice called over the babble of the crowd. "We are Spiral Dance. We're back and ready to rock!"

Kory cursed in every language he knew. The moment the first note resounded, he lost Val completely. She was off her stool and onto the dance floor; every word, and even his existence, completely forgotten.

He tried again, with another elf he recognized. Eldenor, a warrior of the High Court, who currently sported a purple mohawk and a black leather jumpsuit so tight he must have magicked it on.

Eldenor was alone, sitting in a two-person booth near the bandstand; his eyes fastened on the Bard, drinking in every note the young man played. When Beth began singing a traditional Celtic tune, and Eric built a foundation for her voice to soar over, Eldenor's eyes began to take on a glow of here-ness. A sense that he was at least focusing on something. Kory slipped into the other side of the booth.

"Eldenor?" he said, when the other took no note of his presence.

"Yeah?" The eyes didn't waver from the bandstand.

"Eldenor, don't you remember me?"

"Shit no, man."

Kory closed his eyes, asked for patience, and tried again. "Eldenor, it's Kory. Korendil. You helped train me. To be a warrior. Remember?"

The eyes flickered briefly from the stage to him, returning to the stage. "Oh, yeah. Kory. You went away."

Kory reached out and seized the other by the elbows, sending power in the kind of shock he'd used to rouse the Bard this afternoon. "Eldenor, I didn't go away. I was imprisoned. By Perenor and his daughter—" The shock brought only the barest of responses, and Kory lost his temper. "Damn you, Eldenor," he cried, shaking the other. "This is important! The power nexus is going to be destroyed!"

As if to underscore his words, the lights flickered briefly. Kory sensed that a storm had begun outside.



Eldenor shook his head, and looked at Kory, a faint hint of puzzlement in his expression. "Hey man, chill out," he said. "Nothing's all that important—"

Then Eric began playing a solo, and Kory lost him completely.

He tried several more, but all with the same lack of result, and all the power he used to try and shock them back into an understanding of their peril vanished without a sign of any reaction. They were so drained of magic that it just trickled into them without making an impression. Any glimmer of hope began to fade before despair, and the depression that failure after failure left him with. How can this be, that they are so completely lost? What has happened to them in the ten years since I was imprisoned?

The lights flickered again just as the band finished the Celtic song, and flickered a third time as they began a rock number. And in the moment between those flickers of light, Kory caught a familiar lift of a head, a high, proud profile—and his heart raced.

Blessed Danann. He's here. My Prince—

He shoved his way through the crowd, paying scant heed to those who swore at him or cast angry glances in his wake. He fought to reach the table at the rear where he'd seen that glimpse of majesty—

Only he reached it to find just how ruined the majesty had become.

Kory could feel something dreadfully wrong as he forced his way between packed chairs to the table at the back where the Prince was sitting alone. He knew that the wrongness went deep when he saw the way the Prince was sitting, slouched down in his chair, with his eyes blank, and his hand wavering a little as he reached for his drink.

But when he recognized just what it was that Prince Terenil was drinking he froze in horror. Dark brown, effervescent—

Coca-Cola.

There was a pitcher of the stuff on the table, and it was three-fourths empty.

An elf could drink any five mortals under the table. An elf could shrug off the effects of most of the drugs that left mortals paralyzed or insane. But this—this stuff that mortals imbibed with such careless ease—this was another thing altogether.

Caffeine. Soft drinks, coffee, tea.

To the Old Blood it was deadly.

It enhanced Dreaming; induced hallucinations. Destroyed will, and removed the elf that indulged in it from any semblance of reality.

And Prince Terenil, the pride of the High Court on this side of the Hill, was sitting in a mortal nightclub, his eyes glazed, his hands shaking, and most of a pitcher of cola plainly inside him.

Kory was not even certain that he could hear the Bard's music, much less feel his magic as the others so clearly did.

He had thought he had seen despair at its worst when he had first awakened, and heard the talk of the place-of-festival. How at the festival's end the place would be leveled, the groves of oaks destroyed—including the one that anchored the magic nexus to this side of the Hill. He had thought that there was nothing that could possibly be worse—

Until now.

He looked at the ruin of his liege and lord, and wanted to howl his despair to the four winds.

Instead, he sat himself carefully by Terenil's side, and used most of the last of his magic to try to touch the Prince's mind.

By Danann, I don't know if I can even find it, much less touch it!

He could only imagine one reason for Terenil falling to this state. The Prince had given up any hope of Awakening his people. It must have happened soon after Kory, his friend and closest advisor, had fallen prey to that traitor Perenor, and vanished from the ken of the elves. Perhaps that vanishment itself had triggered the Prince's fall.

"My lord?" he prompted verbally, holding his despair at arm's length.

The Prince gave no sign that he had heard.

Blessed Danann—is there anything left of the warrior that once held us all in awe? And if he has sunk so low—what hope is there of saving the rest?

"My lord, it is Kory. I've returned to you, my lord."

The Prince stared at his hand, and slowly raised the glass of sparkling poison to his lips.

And drank.

Kory restrained himself from slapping the foul stuff out of his hand, and spoke again, as gently as he could.

"My lord, I have news. I have found a Bard, a human Bard. A true Bard, and one of such power as I have never seen. He has agreed to be our Champion, my lord. He has said he will help me Awaken the Dreamers and save our magic."

Still no sign that Terenil even knew he was not alone.

"My lord, I did not leave you willingly. The traitor Perenor imprisoned me in the Grove, after his daughter had lured me there and struck me down with trickery. This Bard that I have found—he loosed the spells of lock and ward, and woke me out of my spell of slumber. He freed me from Perenor's power, and he is untutored! Just think, my lord, when I have taught him to use his Gift—"

Terenil made no response, none at all.

If Kory had been alone, he would have put his head down on the table and wept.

I still may, he thought, swallowing hard. Only let me be by myself—and I shall weep and not be

ashamed. Oh my lord, my beloved lord—

"We have a chance, my lord. With the help of this Bard, we have at least a chance."

He stood, as Terenil continued to stare at his hand, the one holding the glass. Blinking slowly, but showing no other sign that he was still conscious.

I cannot stay here, and still remain sane, he whispered to himself. Perhaps I should go and wait for the Bard to complete his work—

He began to make his way back across the room, when he felt eyes upon him. Eyes with power behind them, watching him with scarcely-concealed venom and contempt.

He stopped, as the lights flickered once again; stopped and turned, scanning the room with all his senses, looking for the one who radiated such power and menace.

The enemy obligingly displayed himself, moving from the shadows to the edge of the dance floor. The light fell clearly on him, flickering blues and greens illuminating his malicious smile.

Kory's despair was quickly forgotten in a wash of something far more personal.

Fear.

Just as there was no mistaking the Prince, no matter how low he had sunk, there was no mistaking this face. Carefully arranged silver hair, hooded, brilliantly green eyes, high cheekbones—and power coiled within, power that showed Kory's magics to be the amateur efforts that they were.

Perenor.

Exiled traitor from Elfhame Sun-Descending. Showing himself arrogantly to the young elf who had been his prisoner for so many years, and now was the only functional Champion in the mortals' world.

The supremely powerful, saturnine elf had avoided elvenkind since his banishment. Perenor hadn't even gone after Kory himself; he had sent his daughter, Arianrhod, to lure him into his hands.

But here he was—and there could only be one reason that he showed himself so plainly.

He knew that Kory had escaped from his imprisonment.

And he was hunting for him.

Kory stood silent, staring at Perenor, unable to look away.

And he knows I'm here. He's searching for me. He knows that I escaped, he knows about the Bard, and he's here, searching for both of us—

As he stared at Perenor, the older elf's eyes continued to scan across the crowd, until they rested upon the object of their hunt.

Perenor smiled at Kory.

:Good evening, Korendil. What a pleasant surprise to find you here.:

Kory froze; and found a single phrase echoing frantically around in his head, a phrase borrowed from mortals—

Oh shit—

Eric stood silently on the stage, the flute held lightly in his hands, listening to Beth Kentraine's warm, rich voice, singing the lyrics to an old Gaelic song. To his annoyance, the lights flickered again, briefly plunging the Dive into darkness, cutting off a half-second of the music as the PA system blinked off and on again.

Great. The thunderstorm must be playing games with the electrical grid. I sure hope we don't have a blackout in this club. That's all we need—ten million drunken idiots trying to run for the doors. And who knows how many drunken elves doing whatever it is drunken elves do in the dark.

The dancers on the floor didn't even seem to notice.

Hell, don't worry about it, Eric. Worry about the solo coming up next verse instead. Bethie's already given me The Look.

This is the next-to-last song. Thank God. Just a little more, then we'll be done for the night, I can crash—

—go home, drink a few, and think about all of this. About Korendil. An elf, for Chrissake, asking me to save his people.

I'm still not certain whether I really believe all of this or not. Maybe I'll just wake up tomorrow morning, and all of this will have been a dream . . .

Yeah, right. Not bloody likely.

Eric lifted the flute to his lips, a quick breath before the phrase. It's a beautiful song, needs some nice ornamentation. I'll just play with it, see where it takes me . . . He closed his eyes and began to play.

The notes were pure and clear, a delicate line slowly growing stronger, like a kite tugging at the string, trying to break free. A little more, holding that high C for just an instant longer, then letting go, falling away, fading. Good. Now Beth is taking the vocal line again—

He opened his eyes, blinking at the sudden brightness of the stage lights. I like that song. We've been doing a lot of the old trad tunes tonight, more than Spiral Dance usually does. Last gig, we only did two slow ballads, the rest was hard rock. Tonight, it's almost half and half. Very strange.

He looked out over the audience, seeing the colorful costumes past the glare, the dancers moving in swirling, regal patterns amid the colored lights. No, not strange at all, not for tonight. The whole evening has been like this, mysterious and—and magical. Well, I guess that when half your audience is non-human—

—strange things are bound to happen. I wonder where Korendil is? I can't see him out there in the crowd.

Thinking of the elf made him flush slightly, uncomfortably. Maybe I should apologize to him. I've been a

real bastard to everybody, these last few days. And I took a lot of that out on him. Sure, I thought he was a nut case, but still, I could have been more polite about it. Of course, he did steal my clothes and he did knock me into a wall, but still—

Then he heard it. A soft whisper, a strange female voice, low and breathy, barely audible.

:Bard. Look at me.:

Eric immediately glanced up at Beth, singing with her eyes closed, intent upon the last verse of the song. Bethie? No, she's not even looking my way. Must have been somebody else—

A faint whisper, lightly pulling at him, like—Like a kite on a string—

:Look at me, look at me . . . :

He looked out at the crowd, too far away for a low whisper to carry that distance. What in the hell? Who said that?

God, no. I'm starting to go crazy again—

Then he saw her, at the edge of the stage. Watching him.

Oh my.

Red silk. Tailored, expensive, and very tight around the right curves. Blond hair, slightly curly, perfectly framing that face, those vivid blue eyes.

What is someone like her doing at The Dive? She looks like a fashion model, the kind of lady you see in Westwood or Beverly Hills, escorted by some handsome guy wearing a five-hundred-dollar suit. Not the kind of lady you see alone in a sleazy nightclub in Van Nuys!

She's beautiful. Very beautiful.

And she's staring right at me.

Oh my God.

Eric forced himself to look away, trying to remember what song he was supposed to be playing. Oh yeah, the Gaelic song. Right. Shit, where are we? Last verse?

He saw Beth looking at him, puzzled. Then her eyes moved past him, to the woman standing in the shadows.

Beth's eyes narrowed.

The song ended, just as Eric remembered what key it was in, and was about to start playing again. He stopped himself, just in time.

Terrific. What's happened to my brain? I think it's turned to guacamole. Thank God, we've only got one more song in the show. I don't think I could deal with anything else tonight.

A moment of applause, then Jim started the intro for the last song, a subtle, light pattern on the rim of the snare drum. Beth joined in a moment later: rough, resounding chords on the Fender. Then Allie on synth, a quick run, leading into the melody. Eric smiled at the intensity of the music, fierce and demanding, building with each moment. Damn, but I like this one.

Then Beth's voice, breaking through, taking over . . .

"Starlight and shadow, end to begin,

Balancing, changing, losing to win.

Make the choice, take the chance,

Reach for dreams and more.

And in that moment you will know

The spiral dance won't ever let you go!"

First solo was Allie on synth, starting quiet, then letting it rip into a jazz run, her fingers moving almost too fast to see over the DX7's keyboard. The audience roared as Jim took the next solo, pounding on the drums like a wild man, his hair flying, looking like it was glowing in the glare of the stage lights.

He's wrapping it, about to hand it to me—now! Eric hit a high D, a rasping trill, wailing descant down the scale. A moment later, he heard Beth echoing the flute line on the Fender, following him down. He smiled to himself, starting a fast jazz break, which she caught and held. Then they went into a counterpoint, the electric guitar and flute fighting each other, each striving to hit harder, higher, then finally blending on the last note, harmonizing, matching each other perfectly. Eric tossed in a final trill, unresolved, a ringing defiant cry. The last note faded into silence.

The lights suddenly cut out, leaving them standing in shadow. A moment later, the screams and cheers of the audience began reverberating around them. Now that was a nice bit of work . . . The lights came back up. From across the stage, Beth grinned at Eric, then leaned closer to the mike. "Thank you, and good night."

The stage lights faded down again, to be replaced by the normal club lights. Eric wiped the sweat off his forehead, glancing back to see Beth hugging Allie and Jim, then starting to help them disassemble the stage gear.

A terrific gig. I should play with Bethie and the Spirallers more often. This was a fun night. Definitely weird, definitely wired, but fun.

Eric looked out at the crowded club, the emptying dance floor.

I wonder where Korendil is? I thought he'd be here, waiting for us at the end of the gig.

Oh, what the hell. I'm too tired to deal with all of that "Save the Universe" stuff tonight, anyhow. Might as well pack it up and head home. Maybe I can hitch a ride with Bethie—

A soft murmur, insinuating into his thoughts.

:Yes. You are the one.:

Eric looked around in surprise. Say what?

Shit. I'm hearing voices again. Dammit, I had myself convinced that I'm not crazy. This isn't fair.

:No. It isn't. Look at me.:

Slowly, he turned to the side of the stage, to the blonde woman that he somehow knew was still standing there.

He dazedly shook his head. Who is she? I wonder if—if she—she looks like she might want to meet me. Talk to me. Maybe—maybe she does . . .

Eric walked several steps towards her, then hesitated. I'm imagining things again. This time, instead of an elf, it's a beautiful blonde, making eyes at me from across the stage. Reality check, Eric. You are not her type.

But her eyes—blue eyes—it's like she's calling, to me—

He took another step, and another, moving towards the blonde woman, unable to look away from that electric blue gaze.

Blue eyes—reaching out to me—drawing me to her—

Something was wrong. Eric tried to remember what it was. Something about being on the bus, looking out the window, and—something—trying to remember—this has happened before. Hasn't it? I—can't remember—

Then the woman smiled, and held out her hand to him.

:Look at me. Bard. Look at me, and dream . . .:

Eric stepped off the stage, his eyes never leaving hers for a moment. He took her hand in his, and touched her fingertips to his lips. He was not certain if it was his thought, or hers, that echoed through his mind, low and seductive, beckoning.

:Yes—you are the one—:

Kory glanced around the shadowed alley, the rain misting down on the dark asphalt, turning everything before him to gray.

I must lead the traitor away from here, away from the Bard. If he realizes that Eric is here—if he realizes that Terenil is here—

Eric undefended, Terenil completely lost in Dreaming. Blessed Danann, how did everything go so wrong so quickly?

The alley was dark, even to elven eyes, but promised a path to safe retreat.

If I can lead him off, then lose him, I can come back to this club and spirit the Bard away to safety.

He could feel the traitor behind him, the menace, the carefully controlled anger—and above all, the power.

How is it that he has such power when the rest have been magic-starved into Dreaming? How—

Oh. Fool. He was High Court, and not tied to the groves. And he has his daughter. She must be keeping him very . . . prosperous. I wonder if she even realizes that he's using her—using all of us—

Anger surged in him, and lent speed to his feet. The heavy rain flattened his hair into his eyes, and soaked him to the skin in a few moments. He ignored the clammy, clinging fabric, ignored the chill.

I have fought in worse circumstances. I have fled in far worse.

He stumbled against something he hadn't seen in the darkness, and went to his hands and knees. He picked himself up immediately, but the power that was Perenor behind him had gained a few precious yards.

If he catches me, that will leave Eric open to him. He uses the mortals, that was the whole centerpiece of his defiance of Terenil; uses them, and discards them. He would take Eric and twist him—turn him into something foul and shadowed, as evil as himself—

Gods. Not the Bard. Anything but that.

The icy rain slashed at him, and he stumbled again on the slippery pavement. Then a flash of lightning from above showed him the end of the alley.

The end of the alley.

A dead end. All too literally, a dead end.

The passage ended in enormous loading-dock doors set into the otherwise blank wall of a two-storied building. To Kory's right, another blank wall. To his left, a building with some few windows set too high above the street to reach from the ground, and a few feet of tall privacy fence.

If I had a minute, I could climb that fence, vanish into the maze of this city.

I don't have that minute.

Kory whirled, just as he heard the slow, deliberate footsteps behind him, putting his back against the wall of the building.

Perenor had brought his own light with him. It illuminated him softly, and Kory saw that he hadn't so much as a single drop of rain marring the careful arrangement of his hair or the expensive gray suit. He was making it quite clear that he had power to spare. Power to waste, if he chose.

He extended a finger, and lit Kory in merciless detail as well. Kory was all too clearly aware of how he looked: hair straggling in soaked, tangled strands dripping into his face and down his back, clothing plastered to his body. He drew himself up proudly, anyway—

Pride is all I have left.



"Well, it is young Korendil, after all," Perenor said, his voice subtly mocking. "You used to have better manners, youngling. Aren't you going to offer me a civil greeting?"

He is going to kill me—and destroy everything with me. Unless I can keep him occupied long enough for Eric to finish the show and leave—and when he leaves, the others will follow. Perhaps. But "perhaps" is all I have . . .

I must give Perenor something to amuse him, to delay him long enough for Eric to escape.

"We did not have a civil parting, Lord Perenor," he replied as coldly, and dispassionately, as he could.

He may kill me now, but I won't let him take Eric and the others as well.

Perenor shook his head. "Ten years asleep, and no wisdom learned in all that time. Korendil, you disappoint me."

I am not going to answer that—except with this—

He used the last of his power to Call his sword. In an instant, the shimmering weapon was in his hand, ready for battle.

Perenor laughed. "Korendil, that is exceptionally foolish even for you—"

And the elf-mage extended his hand again—and the sword vanished in a shower of sparks from Kory's hands, leaving him staring stupidly at the air where it had been. Then Kory moved, drawing light and power from the air, condensing it into a weapon and hurling it at the traitor.

The older elf easily warded off the attack with a single gesture, a snap of his fingers. The magic dissipated harmlessly, leaving Kory and Perenor in the glimmer of witch-light, staring at each other.

Perenor's smile faded, and his face darkened, a moment of calm before the fury.

Kory swallowed. I think that maybe I don't amuse him any more . . .

•8•

Smash the Windows

"Enough of this, Korendil."

Perenor's voice was icy. When he spoke again, it was not aloud, but in the silent speech of the elvenkin. :Korendil, don't be too much of a fool. You know you cannot fight me. Give up now, and I will make this painless and quick.:

Kory flung his response at the traitor's mind, ringing and defiant. :Never! May you rot in the humans hell first, betrayer of our people—:

Perenor shook his head in mock-sadness. :As you wish. You know, Korendil, you would have been

wiser to stay in the Grove, lost in your dreams.: He raised his hand slowly, his green eyes incandescent with resonating power.

Kory edged along the wall, knowing there was no escape, but unable to simply stand motionless like a frozen rabbit waiting for the strike that would kill him. His foot slipped on the wet asphalt, and he fell backwards over a garbage can, landing on his knees in the spilling refuse. The lid of the can clattered loudly in the silence.

No! I cannot die on the ground like an animal! Is there nothing that I can use as a weapon, enough time to—

Kory sensed the burst of magic an instant before the blinding light and heat surged towards him.

Oh Gods, NO!

He groped for anything to shield himself, anything, and recoiled at the touch of Cold Iron. Then, disregarding the soul-scorching pain that lanced through his hands, he grabbed the metal object and desperately hurled it towards Perenor.

A silent explosion . . .

... as the trash can lid shattered into a million shards of light, impacting with the force of Perenor's magic.

Kory blinked, then looked up to see Perenor warding his eyes with his hand, trying to see past the glittering snowfall of multicolored light-specks. Oh, thank Danann, I'm still alive-

-for at least another ten seconds—

He scrambled to his feet and picked up an abandoned piece of wood, not as long as his elven sword, or as balanced, but embedded with several short, blood-colored spikes on one end. By the icy twinge through his trembling hands, he knew that the pointed metal prongs were iron, possibly the only thing that Perenor might fear.

:I will not be easy prey for you, Perenor.: With a weapon in his grip, he felt the warrior's fury rising within him as he cast the challenge at the elf-lord. :Come and fight me, if you dare.:

Perenor smiled, as if approvingly, and conjured his own blade, the bright elf-metal reflecting the lightning ripping through the skies above. :I am pleased, Korendil. At least you will give me a bit of sport before you die . . .:

Without warning, he struck at Kory, the sword arcing down towards him.

Kory rolled under the edge of the blade, somersaulting up onto his feet. I can't let him touch this stick—that sword will cut through it instantly, and then I'll be unarmed again—

He countered, slashing at Perenor's face with the filthy board. The elf-mage dodged back, and Kory kicked the fallen trash can into his opponent's path. Perenor tripped, falling hard on the wet ground.

Now—while I have a chance—

Kory ducked in close, bringing the spiked wood down sharply. But Perenor reacted instantly, his sword

moving up to block.

The blade sliced through the wooden board like paper, then the stroke continued, across Kory's exposed leg—

Kory's scream echoed in the silent alley as he stumbled back, half-blinded by the pain. Oh gods—oh gods— he felt the slick hardness of the wall against his back, the warm wetness coursing down his leg. He tried to fight off the dizziness and overwhelming pain, but it was all he could do to stay on his feet.

He shook his wet hair out of his eyes, frantically tried to make them focus on where his foe had been. Perenor was lying on the ground, the elven sword beside him.

He's not moving. Please, Danann, let him be dead! If one of those pieces of Cold Iron—

Then Kory saw his enemy stand up and reach for the killing sword on the ground next to him. Perenor limped slightly as he shifted towards Kory, and he was no longer immaculate.

At least I did that much . . .

Perenor's clothing was filthy and he was dripping wet. His face was a mask of fury as he turned towards Korendil.

Kory tried to muster anything, a last burst of magic, anything; but all he could do was stand there, fear coiling in his gut, watching his death approaching, one slow step after another.

Perenor smiled, and raised the sword for the fatal blow.

:No! Korendil—:

Fire, green and gold, blossomed around them.

Kory shielded his eyes against the blinding brilliance. When he could see again, Perenor was sprawled on the pavement again, but this time he was looking up with sudden uncertainty and fear visible—for a brief moment—in his eyes.

Kory followed Perenor's gaze to the far end of the alley, where another figure stood, vibrant green light still flickering around his hands.

"Leave the boy alone, Perenor."

The newcomer stepped out of the shadows, the witch-light reflecting off his golden hair and pale features.

Prince Terenil.

Awakened, alert, ready for battle—

—by all the Gods, it's him!

The Prince smiled at Perenor, who was staring at him in stunned surprise. "I'm the one you want—right? The one who named you outcast, who banished you from the Elfhome and the High Court." He drew the

blade sheathed at his side. "Now is your chance to avenge yourself. Fight me."

He's Awake, he was only pretending to be lost to Dreaming, and now he's going to fight Perenor! He lured Perenor into this, he must have!

Perenor nodded slowly, painfully picking himself up off the gravel. Kory watched silently as the two elven lords moved to face each other across the dimly-lit alley, swords at ready.

Another wave of dizziness washed over him. He glanced down, and saw the blood dripping from the long gash in his thigh. He quickly ripped away part of his shirt and bound it tightly around the wound, clenching his teeth against the throbbing pain.

When he looked up again, Perenor and the Prince were circling each other, each waiting for an opening, a chance to Strike.

Even Perenor is no match for the Prince. He never was, which is why he fled into exile rather than face him the last time they met. Another minute, and Terenil will finally defeat the Traitor—

Then fear and dread tightened a fist around Kory's heart.

The Prince's hands were shaking.

No—

As he watched, Perenor fainted lightly, and the Prince responded clumsily, leaving his own side wide open to a killing thrust.

Oh no—no—

But Perenor did not take the opening, only smiled and fainted again.

This—it can't be happening! My lord, my liege—

He's—he's falling to pieces. And Perenor's playing with him! Oh Gods—he's going to kill the Prince!

In that instant, Terenil slipped on the wet pavement, and Perenor lunged, swinging the flat of his blade against the Prince's head.

Prince Terenil collapsed, crumpling on the ground;

Perenor hacked the Prince's fallen sword away from him. As Kory choked on a sob, Perenor reached down and took Terenil by the hair, and forcibly turned his former liege over onto his back.

The Prince stared blankly upwards, unseeing, his body shaking uncontrollably, convulsively—

—like a man caught in the throes of drug withdrawal.

Tears joined the rain on Kory's face.

Perenor set the edge of his sword against the Prince's throat. "What an amusing evening," he remarked conversationally. "I've wanted to kill you for some time, Terenil, but I never thought it would be this

easy."

:NO!:

The weak burst of magic that hit Perenor was scarcely more than a flicker of light, but the elf-lord looked up nevertheless.

At Kory, standing against the wall, his hands trembling.

:No. You can't kill him. I won't let you.:

"Really?" Perenor smiled humorlessly. The renegade elf raised his sword, pointing the weapon at Kory. "And do you really think you can stop me?" His eyes narrowed, bright with eldritch power.

He's going to—

Oh SHIT!

Kory dived for the fence as the wall exploded outward in the spot where he had stood; hauled himself over the top, and tumbled down again on the opposite side. He gasped in pain, feeling something snap inside his chest as he landed hard on the ground.

Just run—keep running—

The backyard of someone's house, shadows of trees, a low hedge. Kory vaulted over the bushes and out onto the darkened street, the pain blinding him to anything but the need to run, keep going—

Sweat was stinging in the small cuts on his face and hands, where he had fallen and hurt himself before and not realized it, and he could barely breathe against the stabbing pain in his chest.

Something's broken inside—a rib—can't catch my breath!

Just . . . keep running—

At the corner, he glanced back once, and saw Perenor close behind him, running at a light, steady pace.

If I can keep him after me, maybe the Prince will be able to get away. If I can keep running . . .

Oh Gods, it hurts!

Another alley, the glimmer of streetlights, far ahead. I can't lose him by running, he'll just track me down with his magic. And I won't be able to run much longer.

He'll chase me until I fall, and then he'll kill me. And he'll go back and finish off Prince Terenil, and then he'll find Eric, and—

—no! I won't let him win!

Cold Iron. That would block his magic. He wouldn't be able to find me, but he'd waste a lot of time trying. Perhaps even enough time for the Prince and Eric to get away.

A glimpse of movement on the street ahead, a large vehicle that Kory could smell even at this distance. He doubled his speed, running desperately, and gathered the last of his strength, channelled it inward, reaching inside, changing—

A small silvery cat, running painfully on three legs, suddenly leaped up at the passing garbage truck, landing in the back among the reeking trash.

The searing touch of Cold Iron, burning through his fur, his skin—

Oh Gods! I can't—the pain!

He clenched his teeth on the feline scream trying to escape from his throat. This is far better than what Perenor intends to do to me—

The silver-haired cat shrank away from the side of the truck, and found a large plastic bag among the refuse. Moaning faintly, the cat collapsed upon the plastic, barely moving.

But it watched with large, frightened green eyes as Lord Perenor stood alone on the corner, staring in silent fury at the empty street before him.

This sure has been one helluva night. Beth Kentraine flipped down the clasps of the Fender's case, then lugged it toward the open back door to the club, and the waiting Jeep beyond. Allie and Jim were already standing in the rain next to Jim's pickup, quickly loading the last of the trap set into the back.

"Beth, we're heading out," Allie said, seeing her walking across the wet asphalt towards them. The keyboardist looked intently into Beth's eyes. "Are you—are you going to be all right, Beth? Bo said you told the police you didn't want to press charges against that guy."

"No, I don't." Beth managed to keep her voice level. "They booked him on public drunkenness and felony possession"—God, the man was carrying a virtual pharmaceutical business around in his jacket pockets—"And I really don't want to get involved in a court case. He didn't hurt me, Allie. Really, he didn't."

Just scared the living daylights out of me, that's all. And he would have done a lot more, except Kory came to the rescue.

Kory—I've never met anyone like him before. Never seen anyone who could do what he did, fighting off that bastard.

And he's gone. He left without even saying good-bye . . .

Is it just bad luck, or do I always fall for the flakes? The Eric Banyons and Korys of this world, the guys that vanish at the first possible opportunity. Leaving me standing out in the rain, literally.

And Eric—

It's hard to believe what Kory said. Eric Banyon, a Bard? Sure, he's a terrific musician, but Eric's so feckless, such a ... a twit. He can't even balance his own checkbook. How in the hell is he supposed to save the L.A. elves?

And, speaking of Banyon . . .

"Allie, are you and Jim giving Eric a lift home? It's almost midnight, and I think he's missed the last bus across Van Nuys."

Allie shook her head. "I haven't talked to Eric since we finished the gig. I think he's back inside the club."

Figures. He's probably expecting me to remember that he's stranded. "All right, I'll check on him. And I'll see both of you at practice on Wednesday, okay?"

Jim grinned. "You bet. This was a wild gig tonight, hey?"

"Yeah." And stranger than you know, m friend.

Beth walked back inside the building, shaking the icy droplets of rain from her short hair. Rain in May. Terrific. If this doesn't dry out in the next couple days, the Faire is going to look like a mud-wrestling competition. Not to mention the fact that I'm going to have a helluva time getting home tonight if I don't leave soon . . .

She walked into the break room and picked up Eric's gig bag, still lying on one of the packing crates. A moment later, she found his flute, abandoned on one of the stage speakers.

What in the hell? Eric never leaves this flute alone for a minute, never. What's going on here?

She put the flute in the gig bag, slinging it over her shoulder, and looked out at the shadowy, smoky club. Most of the crowd had left soon after the band finished their show, but a few were still on the floor, dancing to the beat of the canned music.

Banyon shouldn't be too hard to spot in all of this. He's probably soaking up a last free beer, knowing him. I still can't believe he left his flute onstage. She moved along the edge of the stage, scanning the crowd.

Then she saw him, standing on the far side of the room, talking with someone, a woman she didn't recognize.

Who in the hell is that lady? And what is Banyon doing with her?

Beth stared at the vision of blonde, tailored perfection, laughing at something Eric apparently had just said, her hand resting on his with obvious familiarity. And Beth felt a peculiar emotion rising within her. He's making time with Miss America, that's what he's doing.

Jesus C. Frog, I'm not getting jealous of Eric Banyon, am I?

No, not of him. Of her, maybe. She looks like everything I could never be—beautiful, rich, poised, and elegant. I probably shouldn't even bother to ask him about a lift home. She looks like she'd be more than willing to take him anywhere.

No. I should ask, just in case. Maybe he's trapped in a conversation with this woman, waiting for someone to bail him out. Expecting me to show up any minute to rescue him.

Yeah, right. Sure he is, Kentraine. And you're Princess Di.

Well, I should ask him, anyhow . . .

She walked around the dance floor, sidestepped the gyrating bodies of the two mohawked dancers, wove a path around several others merrily rolling across the floor. As she moved closer, she realized that the woman was even more beautiful than Beth had originally thought. Lady, you sure know how to make every woman in the room feel real insignificant, don't you?

Even her voice is lovely, Beth realized, now close enough to hear the blonde's low contralto.

And to see the way her fingers were tracing little patterns on Eric's hand.

I can't be jealous. That's Eric Banyon, Eric "I'm a twit" Banyon. It's not like there's anything between us, more than just friendship—

—so why do I want to kill the bitch?

Beth walked uncertainly towards the pair, and stopped a few feet away. Neither Eric nor the blonde woman noticed her. What in the hell, am I invisible or something?

"—No, I've never been to the Elizabethan Faire, Eric, but I think that's really a marvelous idea—"

"Hey, Eric," Beth said uncomfortably.

Eric glanced at her. For a stunned moment, Beth thought he didn't recognize her. Then he smiled. "Oh, Beth, hi. I thought you'd left already."

"I wanted to make sure you have a ride home first." Something is really strange here. He's not quite looking at me, or her, or anything. If I didn't know better, I'd say he's had too much to drink. But Eric's not like this when he's drunk—he never gets this strange, distant look in his eyes—

He gets silly, that's what he gets. Or he gets morose. And he can't be stoned, either, or he'd be snoring at her feet, or panting at them like a cocker spaniel in heat. You can set your watch by the fifteen minutes it takes Eric Banyan to pass out after he gets stoned.

There's definitely something weird going on in the three brain cells residing underneath all that hair.

"Thanks, Beth, but I'll just catch the bus."

Beth's voice tightened with annoyance. "Eric, the last bus went by half an hour ago!" You fool, don't you ever look at your watch?

No. That's not it. There's something else going on here. I don't know what it is, but . . . something about this lady is making the back of my neck prickle. That predatory little smile, the greedy way she's looking at Eric. Something is very wrong—

"Oh, I didn't realize it was that late." Eric said after a moment, and smiled vaguely at her. "I guess we should go, then." He turned to the woman beside him. "I—uh, I'm leaving now. It's really been nice talking to you, Ria—"

The vixen gave him a warm, seductive look. "I've enjoyed talking with you as well, Eric. If you'd like, I—" Her lips curved invitingly. "I could give you a lift home ..."



Like hell you will, lady!

The blonde looked up suddenly, as though she had heard Beth's thoughts. Her eyes met Beth's, intense and calculating.

Where did Eric find this wench, anyhow? God, but he looks wasted. Too many drugs, Banyon. I'd better get you out of here.

Beth took Eric's hand firmly, and was startled at the chill of his flesh, the way his hand seemed nerveless against hers. "Come on, Banyon, we're leaving."

:Do you really want to fight me for him, little sister?:

Beth blinked, not certain if she'd heard the woman speak, or had just imagined the words. No, she didn't say it I didn't see her lips moving at all. She didn't say anything.

Then—who did

I didn't take any drugs!

"Banyon?"

Eric had a remarkably stupid look on his face, one that Beth recognized from too many evenings of seeing him passed out drunk at Fairesite.

Banyon, what in the hell have you been drinking? Sterno?

Well, you can sleep it off. Assuming we don't get caught on the road. Woodley Park is probably already flooded from this storm—

"Nice meeting you," Beth called over her shoulder, starting to walk away with Eric in tow.

A delicate hand descended on her shoulder. Beth felt the elegantly lacquered fingernails digging in, even through the thickness of her leather jacket.

"I think you've interrupted a private conversation," the blonde said softly, her contralto voice rich with barely concealed menace.

"No, I think that Eric and I are leaving now," Beth retorted, with just a hint of steel in her voice. Get your mitts off me or you're going to lose them, Blondie.

"Are you?" the bitch smiled, her fingers tightening on Beth's shoulder. "And what makes you think that he wants to go with you?"

Beth glanced at Eric, who was staring off into space, completely oblivious to everything and anything going on around him. Banyon, what is wrong with you? And why in the hell am I defending your virtue?

No. I know why I'm doing this I know what this "lady" is, I can read her loud and clear. Manater. She wants to take the Banyon-boy under her wing, amuse herself for a while, suck him dry, then spit him out again. And laugh as he falls apart.

I won't let her do that to him. He may be a real schmuck sometimes, but he's my friend.

"Because I'm his friend," Beth said, surprised at the way Blondie was gazing intently at her. Like she's trying to burn a hole through me with those eyes. If she stared at me any harder, she'd probably go cross-eyed. "Besides, he thinks I'm cute."

"Does he? So, tell me, dear, just how do you get that particular kind of hacked-off-with-a-knife look with your hair? I've never seen anything like it before, even at my coiffeur's in Beverly Hills. I'm sure Eric finds it very attractive."

Why, you bitch!

"Try hacking your hair off with a knife," Beth retorted. "And, you know, I really do like your remarkable color of blonde, while we're on the subject on hair styles. Do you use Clorox to get that effect, or just hair coloring? It's really you."

The woman's eyes darkened. "My dear, you're treading on very dangerous ground."

"So are you, lady." Beth smiled, showing teeth.

The woman shrugged. "Be that as it may, I do think Eric enjoys my company more than yours. Don't you, Eric?" She favored the flute player with a winning smile.

"Uh, yeah, sure," Eric said dazedly, staring at the flickering colored lights of the dance floor.

What in the hell is going on here? Beth gave the bitch a stiletto glare. "Listen, Blondie, we're leaving, and I'm taking Banyon here with me. I won't let you take advantage of my friend, who's obviously too drunk off his ass to fend for himself. You've struck out, so why don't you go find some other happy hunting ground? Like, in another county?" She bared her teeth again. "Maybe you'd find somebody more your type on Hollywood Boulevard. Or do you prefer to work in Santa Monica?"

For a moment, Beth thought that Blondie was about to haul off and swing at her. Just try it, and you won't know what hit you, lady. I'd love an excuse to knock you flat on your derriere.

Then the woman's eyes narrowed.

:No. Not that. I'm going to do something very, very special instead—something you'll never forget, you little bitch—:

And she smiled, her eyes locking with Beth's.

Blue eyes—icy blue, so cold, so ... murderous. As if she's trying to reach out somehow—trying to do something—

Beth felt a chill run down the back of her neck, a warning tingle. Those eyes, so cruel, reaching—

She gave herself a mental shake, and glared right back.

Well. I hope the silly bitch gets a migraine, staring at me that way.

Beth broke eye contact first, shrugged, and saw a visible ripple of surprise run through the other woman.

What the hell? Did she expect me to run away screaming just because she gave me a dirty look? Honey, I've had nastier looks from my landlady.

"Come on, Banyon, we're leaving. It's been a long night, and you need to get some sleep before heading off to work tomorrow, right?"

"Work?" he repeated dully, looking from her to the other woman.

"Yeah, your day job, remember?" She glanced at the bitch, still staring at her in shock. "Buenos nachos, Blondie. I hope you enjoyed the show."

The woman's astonished expression faded into something else: a thoughtful speculative gaze. Then her eyes widened, looking at something "beyond Beth.

Beth turned to look, and stopped short.

There was a man standing on the other side of the dance floor, a silver-haired man wearing an expensive, stylish business suit.

Well, it had been an expensive suit. Now the trousers and jacket were stained and torn, dark with mud. Blood trickled from a small cut on his cheek, mixing with the water dripping from his hair, plastered against his face and ears.

His pointed ears.

Equally unmistakable was the burning fury in his green eyes, seething as he stared at Beth and Eric. Especially as his gaze rested upon Eric Banyon.

Green eyes, like Kory's. He's an elf, one of them—

No, that look in his eyes, such hatred and fury—I've never seen anything like that before. He's not like Kory, not like the dancers, there's something about him that just feels wrong. I don't know what it is, but—

—Jesus H. Christ, I think I'm in trouble—

The blonde started and crossed the dance floor, hurrying towards the bedraggled silver-haired man. "Father! What happened to you? Are you all right?"

Her dad? That figures. They definitely look like two of a kind. Like a couple of exotic snakes.

She turned to Eric standing openmouthed next to her, and punched him lightly on the arm. "C'mon, Banyon, I'm taking you home."

He looked at her as though seeing her for the first time. When he spoke, his voice sounded distinctly puzzled. "Bethie? I thought—"

"That's the problem with you, Eric. You don't think. Look, I want to get home before dawn. Let's go."

"Yeah." He shook his head. "I just—I just feel funny—"

Terrific. With my luck, he's going to end the evening by throwing up all over the inside of my jeep. Wonderful.

Why in the hell do I bother with him, anyhow?

Because—because he's my friend. And it was hard enough watching that bitch Maureen tear him apart, let alone standing by while somebody else repeats the performance. I wish Banyon had common sense. Or better taste in women.

Though I have to admit that on looks alone, Blondie really is a class act—

"C'mon, Eric, let's go." She gave him a push in the direction of the door, then glanced back at the two across the room. And froze.

They were watching her. And Eric.

I've never seen such hatred in anyone's eyes before, such venomous hatred. And menace, like all they want to do is see our blood leaking out all over the floor.

Sudden fear crawled up Beth's back.

He's an elf. I don't know what she is, but she's obviously with him.

Maybe they do want to see our blood all over the floor . . .

Kory told us about his enemies. No, his Enemy—an exiled elven lord, by the name of Perenor. An older elf, silver-haired.

Silver-haired.

Like this guy, staring at me from across the room. Who looks like he wants to vivisect me and Banyon.

Oh shit.

What—what if Blondie wasn't just trying to lure Banyon into her bed? What if she was trying for something else?

And—

And where in the hell is Kory? I haven't seen him since—

Everything clicked in her mind at once.

Oh holy shit!

Beth grabbed Eric's hand and pulled him bodily towards the front exit. She looked back over her shoulder, and saw the two start across the dance floor. Heading towards her, towards them, striding purposefully through the last of the Monday-night crowd.

Beth signaled frantically at Bo, who was standing at the bar, talking with the barkeep, and pointed at the pair coming up behind them. Bo raised an eyebrow curiously, but nodded and said something quietly to the bartender who stepped out from behind the counter, wiping his hands on a cloth.

At the front door of the club, she took a moment to glance back. Bo, with the barkeep right behind him, had stopped the bitch and her dad and was speaking with them, the words lost in the noise of the blaring Top Forty dance music.

Thank you. Bo. You'll keep 'em busy for a few minutes, at least . . .

She shoved Eric out the door, steering him around the corner to the jeep, parked in the side alley.

"Bethie?" Eric looked at her, very bewildered, the rain dripping down his too-handsome face.

"Just shut up and get in the car, Banyon!" She pushed him headfirst into the jeep, tossed his gig bag in after him, slammed the door shut, and dashed to the other side of the vehicle. Christ, this can't be happening to me.

No. It's real. That guy is after Eric, maybe after me, and he's definitely after Kory—who has vanished. I have a real bad feeling about this—

She turned the key in the ignition, and the Jeep's engine rumbled into life. Thank God, the Beast is actually running this week. I want out of here, right now!

Someone stepped out from the edge of the building, silhouetted by the jeep's glaring headlights.

Oh shit, it's him!

Beth slammed the jeep into gear and shoved the emergency brake off. Baby Beast, don't fail me now!

And a blinding flash of light hit her right in the eyes.

The world vanished into white, images searing into her retinas, impossible colors and shapes. Beside her, she heard Eric Banyon moan softly, incoherently. Something about D minor . . . What in the hell, Banyon?

She cursed and rubbed at her tearing, aching eyes with one hand. Can't see, can't drive—God, I can't believe this is happening to me!

Then she heard the quiet footsteps on the gravel, moving towards the parked jeep.

Christ! I am not staying around to see if he can do something besides fireworks!

She hit the gas, unable to see, but praying. Oh Lady, take pity on us. Whatever happens, I'm not going to stop. Either we're going to get away, or Eric and I will be splattered all over Burbank Boulevard, but I'm not going to stop. Gods, get us out of this—

She tightened her grip on the steering wheel, expecting to feel the bone-crushing impact at any moment—

A split-second later, her vision cleared. Beth glimpsed a gray-suited figure diving to the side of the alley,

barely managing to get out of the way of the accelerating vehicle, just as the jeep bounced off the edge of the sidewalk and onto the street.

Hah! Almost, but not quite, you bastard!

A red sports car screamed to a stop only inches from her, and Beth yanked the wheel hard, the jeep spinning wildly in a half circle across the wide street. Then she had control of the vehicle again, and floored the gas pedal.

She glanced at her passenger, white-faced and shaking in the seat next to her. His fingers, clenched tightly to the dashboard, looked like they would need to be pried off with a crowbar.

The Noble Bard gulped audibly as Beth took another turn at a reckless speed, putting all the distance she could between them and the Dive.

And the Elf-lord that tried to kill us.

Beth laughed, and Eric looked at her like she was crazy.

Maybe I am. But, by the Gods, we're alive!

•9•

The Pleasures of Hope

"—and I still don't understand why you were talking to her in the first place. Anyone, even someone as dense as you are, Banyon, could have figured out that bitch was pure trouble—"

Bitch?

Eric blinked, looking around his apartment in bewilderment.

Beth locked the door behind them, then tossed him the key. He caught it unthinkingly and replaced it in his pocket.

How did we get home? It seems like five seconds ago, I was standing onstage at the Dive—

Beth peeled off her dripping jacket and hung it in the closet next to the front door. "—and of course, I'm the one who has to bail you out. Jesus, Banyon, don't you ever think before you get into these situations?"

Bail me out? What is she talking about?

"I've never been in such a shitty situation in all my life, and it's all your fault. What was that bitch's name, anyhow?"

Eric realized that Beth was looking at him, apparently expecting an answer. "Uh, who?" he asked uncertainly.

"The bitch. You know, the ravishing blonde. The one who cornered you after the show." She glared at him. "The man-eater, Banyon. What was her name?"

Eric shook his head. "I don't know who you're talking about."

Why do I feel so—wet? He glanced down at himself, and did a double-take, startled.

His boots were completely soaked, his jeans wet to the knees.

When he looked back at Beth, she was sitting on the floor, pulling off her boots and socks, then dropping them in a damp pile on the carpet. He averted his eyes as her pants quickly followed.

Beth stood up, rubbing her hands together. "Christ, I think I froze my patooties off. Can I borrow some sweats for the night, Eric? A blanket would be great, too. I expect that couch gets rather cold at night."

For the night?

What in the hell is going on here?

"Uh, yeah, sure," Eric said, more than a little confused. "There's a stack of clothing in the bedroom, on the dresser. Help yourself."

As Beth vanished into his bedroom, Eric looked down at his drenched clothes, then around at the familiar apartment. Slowly, methodically, he hung his Faire cloak on the hook on the back of the door to dry.

What in hell happened to me? What happened to my mind? I've never blanked out like this before, no matter what drugs I'd been doing. The worst I've ever done was fall asleep in the middle of the bagpipe practice.

He sat down, prying off his boots and socks. After a moment's consideration, he peeled off the wet jeans as well. Beth emerged from the bedroom, wearing a blue pair of sweatpants and a worn Faire shirt that were both several sizes too large for her.

"Hey, Banyon, I thought you might want these." She tossed an armful of dry clothing to him. He caught it—jeans and shirt—and pulled the pants on, fastening them quickly.

"Thanks, Bethie." Eric picked up the wet clothing, draping it over the kitchen chairs.

How the hell did we get soaked? Where have we been?

A few feet away, Beth sprawled out on the living room couch, closing her eyes wearily. "I'm glad we managed to get here. For a while there, I wasn't certain if we could get down Hayvenhurst Street. I still can't believe how fast the streets over here flood during a storm. A foot of water in less than an hour. Christ." She opened one eye to look at him, and smiled tiredly. "Thanks for the offer of crashspace, Eric—I'd never have made it back to Tarzana."

"You're welcome," he said. I really don't remember inviting her to stay over. Not that I don't want Beth here, it's just I don't remember inviting her. And—

And I don't remember how we got home, either. He sat down in one of the armchairs, trying to think.

Okay, we finished the show. I was standing on stage, and then—

—and then, here we are, in my apartment. In Van Nuys.

Half an hour's drive from the Dive. And I don't even remember walking out of the club. What was I drinking tonight?

God, just thinking about this is making my head ache—

"So, what was her name, Banyon?" Beth asked again.

He looked up in surprise. "Whose name?"

"Don't tell me you've forgotten her already?" Beth's eyes were intent upon him. "The Blonde Bombshell. The one who was crawling all over you after the show. Christ, I thought she was going to devour you without ketchup, right there on the dance floor."

"Bethie," Eric said slowly. "I don't know if you're going to believe this, but I don't remember a damn thing about any blonde woman."

No, I do remember something—blue eyes, icy blue, smiling at me. A voice. A voice in my head. "Dream of me, Bard . . ."

Who did those eyes belong to? The same person as the voice?

And why can't I remember what happened tonight?

This is definitely too weird for words.

Beth was staring at him, sober and very thoughtful. "What do you remember, Eric?"

He thought about it for a moment. "I remember playing the gig," he said carefully. "That bastard that attacked you during the break, and then talking with you and Korendil. And—you buying into Korendil's little war. Me too. Then we played the second half of the show, did the last song, and—and that's it. I don't even remember unlocking the apartment door just now. Honestly, I don't. Bethie, I think I just lost an hour of my life. And—and I know I didn't drink anything, not even during the break. Well, one Scotch, before the gig. That's all. I didn't do anything, uh . . . recreational. And I'm not drunk now. Just . . . very, very confused."

Beth spoke quietly. "You know, this is starting to make sense, if those two were working from some kind of a plan. First, they do something to get Kory out of the way. I don't know what, but he disappears. Then they come after you, messing with your mind, trying to get you to leave with La Chic Bitch. Then, when I interfere and they think we're going to escape, they try to kill us both—"

"Somebody tried to kill us?" Eric's voice squeaked on the word. "Holy shit, Beth, what happened tonight?"

She ignored his words, apparently lost in thought. "Or, at least, I think they were trying to kill us. Probably they were after you. I suspect I was just an afterthought."

"Oh, that's terrific. That's just wonderful! Christ, Beth, what have we gotten ourselves involved in?"



Beth didn't answer for a long moment. "I don't know, Eric. When Kory told us about this whole thing, how he needs us to help save the elves, I never thought—I never thought somebody would try to kill me."

She sighed. "Eric, I guess you don't remember this, not if that woman was screwing magically with your mind, but this elven guy—I think it was the Lord Perenor that Kory told us about—he did something, and I'm pretty certain it was magic. He threw light at me; blinded me, and I nearly crashed the Jeep." She was shrinking in on herself with each word. "It was . . . real scary, Eric. Scarier even than when mom and dad and I were grabbed by accident by the Greek cops."

Why, she's trembling. Oh, Bethie—

He moved closer to her, gently taking her hand. "Listen, you must have done something right. I mean, we're alive, aren't we? You got us out of there alive and in one piece." He grinned weakly. "You know, that's pretty impressive, come to think of it. I wish I could remember it."

She smiled tremulously, but it faded. "And I'm also real worried about Kory. He never came back after the show—".

"Hey, I wouldn't worry too much about Korendil," Eric said, giving Beth's hand a reassuring little squeeze. "He seems like a pretty tough guy. Hell, he took care of that drunken idiot that came on to you, and knocked me all over the room this afternoon, too. I think he can take care of himself all right."

Beth snuggled closer to him. "I know. It's just I've—

I've never had anybody try to kill me with magic before. When it was happening, I didn't have time to think about it, or be scared, I just reacted—but now, thinking about it, I feel kinda . . . spooked."

"Hey, it's okay." He smiled. "I'd probably be scared shitless, if I could remember what happened."

"Yeah." She rested her head against his shoulder. "Eric— you're not going to back out on Kory, are you? I know, we didn't expect anybody to try to kill us, but he's counting on you to help him."

"No. I gave my word that I would help him. And I will. I know that now. Whatever's going to happen, I won't walk away from him. Especially after this.

Beth smiled up at him. "Have I ever told you you're one helluva guy, Eric Banyon?"

"No, not that I can recall—"

"Well, you are. And—and I might as well tell you the truth now. You should know this. I'm a practicing witch, Eric."

He looked at her in disbelief. "You're practicing to be a witch?"

"No, I am a witch, silly. All of us in Spiral dance are. That's part of why we're together in the band—we're trying to combine our music with magic, reach out to people, make a difference. Music gets to a helluva lot more people than rhetoric."

Bethie? A witch. Makes sense, actually. And explains a lot of stuff about her. Well, it explains the things

she never would explain, or talk about. The other witches I've met, like that group out at the Texas Faire, there were a lot of subjects they just wouldn't talk about, either. "Well, if you know witchcraft, Bethie, couldn't you have just done something back to Perenor when he attacked us?"

"I wish I could've. But witchcraft doesn't work that way. It's a—oh, shit, it's a pattern, a way you start thinking. Like Zen or something." She crossed her eyes, and waved her hands languidly. "Like, man, you go with the flow—" When he laughed she continued, a "little more seriously. "It's not fireworks and special effects. I've never seen anything like what that guy did to us before tonight. I can't do that kind of stuff—and, to be honest, I don't know exactly what he did. But I sure don't ever want to be on the receiving end of that ever again."

"I hate to say it," Eric said, shifting slightly to put his arm around Beth's shoulders, "but if we continue helping Korendil, and try to save the L.A. elves, we're probably gonna see a lot more of that kind of fireworks."

"Yeah, don't remind me, I've already thought about it." Beth sighed, leaning back. "All I can say about it is, well, that Perenor guy may be real flashy with the magic, but I'd like to see how he'd feel about getting bonked by a good old-fashioned baseball bat. 'Cause that's what I'd like to do to him, next time I see him."

"Yeah, me too." Eric smiled, his fingers toying with Beth's punk tail, a single long curl of dark hair. "Though I wish I could remember that blonde woman. I mean, she sounds like she was real interesting—"

Beth swatted at him. "She must've been. I practically had to drag you away from her."

"Hey, I wasn't the one making eyes at Korendil earlier in the evening—" Eric waited for Beth to laugh, then he saw the way she was looking away and biting her lip pensively. "You really like him, don't you?" he asked quietly, obscurely disturbed.

"He's . . . really something. I've never met anyone like him before. It's not just that he's cute—which he is, he's one of the handsomest men I've ever seen—but there's also an intensity to him, and such openness, honesty—"

He swallowed, trying to sound more easygoing about this. "Yeah, I understand that. He's a really special guy— tall blond, and with pointed ears. Who could resist him? Especially the ears!"

Did that come out as bitter as I think it did?

"Eric—" She pressed her fingertips to his lips, trying to get him to shut up, but he shook his head and continued.

"Beth, you know I'd rather see you get involved with someone who's more your type—like, a human being— but if you really want Korendil, that's fine." He took a deep breath. "Really, it is. Besides, I hate to be tied down anyway, right? I hope you'll be happy. I know I won't stand in the way. In fact, you'll probably never see me—mnunph\"

Eric had to shut up then, because Beth was kissing him. A very serious kind of kiss that nearly knocked him off the couch, both from imbalance and the surprise of having a double armful of Beth Kentraine in his arms.

"Uh, Bethie—" he managed, when she pulled away long enough for him to catch his breath. "I didn't

invite you over for this. I mean, I don't want you to think that I—"

She only smiled and kissed him again. "Methinks the gentleman doth protest too much," she said teasingly, running her fingers through his damp and still-tangled hair.

"It's just—mmmf," he said eloquently, as Beth kissed the corners of his mouth, working her way over to his right ear.

He sighed, then gave up any pretense of resistance as her deft fingers began undoing the buttons of his shirt. Oh well, when have I ever been able to deter Beth Kentraine from whatever she wanted to do?

Not that I'm objecting too much to this.

Not that I'm objecting at all . . .

He carefully unfastened the laces of her Faire shirt. Then he moved his hands lightly over her skin, pausing lingeringly at the ticklish spot over her ribs.

Beth, resting her cheek against his shoulder, toying with his shirt buttons, suddenly stiffened in shock, realizing where his hands had stopped. "Eric Banyon, you wouldn't—"

"AAAAAR! There's no mercy for you, wench!" he growled in his best bad pirate imitation, and began tickling her unmercifully.

She laughed, twisting and trying to get away from him "Eric, no, don't—let me go—ack!" Beth tried to pull free but he wouldn't let her go, holding her closely in his arms tickling and kissing her until he couldn't keep from laughing either.

The laughter faded to silence, and a calm expectation that Eric had never felt before. It's as if I knew we'd reach this point, someday. Like I've known that all along, since the day I met Beth. It's just—I never realized it until now.

Beth's dark eyes met his. She was smiling gently. He wondered if perhaps she was thinking similar thoughts Her eyes are so serious, and . . . somehow open, defenseless That's how I feel—as if there aren't any facades or masks between us, no more lies or half-truths. Just Eric and Beth . . .

She leaned forward to kiss him, a light kiss, barely brushing his lips, but somehow that made the kiss more intense, more intimate and passionate, than anything before. It's like that kiss is a promise—a pledge—

Eric called upon the last bit of rational thought left to him, wrapped his arms around Beth and lifted her up. She laughed softly as he carried her to the bedroom, and carefully closed the door behind them.

"Mmmm, Beth?" Eric reached out, gently touching her bare shoulder. "Beth, you awake?"

"Ummf," she muttered, turning slightly in his arms.

No, guess not.

He sat up slowly, looking around the shadowed bedroom. Pale sunlight filtered through the blinds, and he could hear the beginnings of rush hour traffic on the street below.

Beside him, Beth Kentraine was still asleep, curled up against him with one arm outflung across the sheets.

She's so lovely when she's asleep. That little smile on her lips, as if she's dreaming of something wicked. She's beautiful when she's awake, too. When she's happy or sad, frightened or spitting like an angry kitten . . . she's still beautiful. I think I could fall in love with her, given half a chance. I wonder if she knows that? And I wonder if she feels the same way about me . . .

Eric moved closer to Beth, wanting to kiss her, then shook his head. No, she had one helluva day yesterday, between that scum who attacked her during the break, and Perenor coming after us later. I should let her sleep.

He smiled to himself, thinking about last night. I could get very used to this, real easy. Playing street by day, Faire on the weekends, evening gigs with Spiral Dance, and nights with Bethie—

Except she said she doesn't want to get involved with me, when we were talking at Faire. She doesn't want anything serious.

Well, maybe after last night, she'll change her mind.

It's just—I feel that she's a part of my life, now. With everything that's happened to us, I think that if she said, "Well, it's been fun, Eric, see ya around sometime," I'd just want to die. I've never felt that I needed someone so much before.

He sighed, and smoothed Beth's short mane with his fingers.

I need Bethie. I can't just let her walk away from me. I can't—

He stopped in midthought, hearing something from the living room.

What was that?

Eric listened, at first hearing nothing but the distant traffic noises. Then he heard it again, a faint, low scratching noise, coming from the front room.

What in the hell could that be? Giant mutated Angeleno mice?

He stood up quietly, trying not to awaken Beth, and reached for a pair of jeans, folded on the dresser. Eric padded out to the living room, and looked around, trying to pinpoint the source of the sound.

Then he saw the small cat crouched upon the window ledge, peering at him through the dirty glass. The cat's pale silvery fur was stained with blood, it's green eyes shadowed with pain.

Oh, you poor thing. What could have happened to you? You look like you were hit by a Mack truck—

Eric opened the window, and the cat half-fell into the room, crawling a few feet before it collapsed on the carpet, shivering and panting.

I'll wake Beth up, then call the vet. There's one on Sherman Way, we can take this little guy over there right now.

The cat looked up at him with large, pain-filled eyes, and then—

And then—

Blur of chords, sounded on an out-of-tune organ by a musician pushed so far past exhaustion that he no longer heard what he was doing, no longer cared, no longer really knew—

Eric blinked.

There had been a mutilated tomcat on the floor.

Not now.

He stared, not able to really understand what he was seeing. It had been a cat. Now it was Korendil, lying at his feet.

Korendil, looking very different from the confident warrior who had rescued Beth from her attacker, or the eloquent speaker who had tried to persuade Eric that his story about L.A. elves was no trick. Even different from the shy, diffident creature who, in the end, had pleaded with Eric to help his people.

This was a Kory who had been through a meat-grinder.

He lay in a twisted, bleeding heap on the carpet of the bedroom, and panted, like the tomcat had panted; and his green eyes were glazed with pain. Not surprising, since his leg was slashed from crotch to knee, at least an inch deep. He was bruised and burned, and cut in a dozen places, and he shook like an aspen leaf.

"Holy shit. Korendil?" Eric's voice sounded incredibly loud in the sudden silence.

At Eric's words, Kory raised his head. He looked up blankly, then focused on Eric. "Blessed Danann—" he gasped in a horse whisper, his expression warring between relief and pain. "You're safe"

As if he hadn't dared hope for that.

"Oh my God!"

Eric glanced back to see Beth standing in the bedroom doorway, wearing nothing but a startled and horrified expression. "Christ! What happened to him?"

"Perenor—" Kory's words were barely audible. "He knew that Eric awakened me—knew that we were at the place-of-music. I had to draw him away from you, from both of you, he was going to kill you—"

He started to rise—tried to—and cried out in agony. Both of them reached toward him involuntarily. Kory stared at them, his eyes wildly dilated with pain, his hand outstretched, like a drowning man reaching for a lifeline.

"Help me—" he whispered, with what sounded like his last breath.

Eric and Beth touched his hand at the same moment.

Music.

Broken music. Music wounded; music dying. Eric shuddered as the room faded from around him, to be replaced by something else, an aching pain, a silent scream of agony, and music—

Once, in his first year at Juilliard, one of Eric's teachers had described Johann Sebastian Bach's works as "building cathedrals with melody."

This was a cathedral that had been shattered by an earthquake, or the ravages of a bomb. The soaring arches—cracked. The upreaching vaults—crumbling. The flying buttresses—falling.

Dissonance. Broken chords. Savaged counterpoint. More of it fading with every moment. More of it trailing off into nothing, into dissolution.

Dying.

No!

He reached out, reached in, plunged into the midst of it, and began trying to hold it together somehow. He saw, then, how the music was trying to repair itself; how the threads of melody reached for the broken lines, trying to patch them into some kind of a whole again.

But I can do that—

He eased himself into the consort; gave the fading music a strong foundation to rest on, solid chords, the way he played a foundation for Bethie's voice to soar—

He heard her singing at that moment, wordlessly, but outside the whole. She was lending her support to the music, but from outside. It would be much better if she could weave herself into the melody from within—

He reached out without really thinking about it, and caught her up and brought her in. There was a gasp of surprise that might have been his own, then she was with them, singing strongly, confidently.

Three of them now; three songs that were part of a greater whole. The two songs that were himself and Beth moved to bracket the wounded one, lending it power, keeping it from fading, from faltering, filling in the places it couldn't—quite—reach.

It was like . . . like doing a gig, with one member having an abysmally bad day. Picking up for him, filling in for him, supporting him.

The third song, gathered strength from them, began to join with them—closer—stronger—

Like playing a gig? No, not anymore. This was like the Pachelbel Canon, with three voices interweaving, braiding in and out of each other, taking joy from one other and giving it back again, until Eric could no longer tell where his song ended and the others began.

Until they were one song—

And suddenly the music took fire, and now it was Bach again, in the Toscanini transcriptions—no, Beethoven, the Ninth, all the counterpoints fusing into the one harmony —no, Dvorak, Mannheim

Steamroller, Mahler, Clannad, Rachmaniojf—

Emerson, Lake and Palmer. Tchaikovsky. Vangelis. Prokofiev. Kitaro. Everything and everyone and none of them at all. It was Eric setting the melody, and the others following with variations of their own. He couldn't tell where it was going, only it was glorious beyond anything he'd ever heard before—

—pure, untainted, unalloyed song—a melodic joy that raised him to a height he'd never dreamed of—

And then threw him back into reality.

Oh my God, what was that?

Eric shook his head slowly. He blinked, seeing nothing but pinwheels and blobs of light, like he'd seen staring into spotlights too long. His eyes couldn't focus, and he couldn't seem to catch his breath, either.

"Holy shit," he said, after a long moment of silence.

"What the hell was that all about?"

"I'm . . . not sure," he heard Beth say faintly, from beside him.

He blinked again, and finally some of the light-show effects cleared away. Thank God. I can't deal with that when I'm tripping on a liquid dose—I sure as hell can't deal with it when I haven't even had a cup of coffee yet.

Eric heard the faint sound of something breathing raggedly, and looked down. Kory was lying beside him, sprawled on the floor, his eyes closed and his face gray with exhaustion. He still looked like he'd been through a major war, and come out the loser.

There was a dark, scarlet stain under his leg, soaking into the cheap puce carpet.

The landlady's gonna love that. So much for my cleaning deposit . . .

God, how can I think about something like that when Kory's bleeding to death in front of me?

Get your brain together, Eric. First, a bandage, something to tourniquet that wound—

Beth reacted first. She snatched at an old T-shirt, lying on the floor, went for Kory's leg—and stopped short, looking at the slash in the elf's jeans in disbelief.

The long, hideous slash in his leg was closed. Still nasty-looking, but closed as neatly as if it had been sutured and healing for about a week.

A week, not a few minutes.

But I saw that wound. He was bleeding like a stuck pig, his leg cut halfway open. Something like that just can't vanish!

Eric stared at Kory's leg.

It's impossible.

Finally he looked up, and Beth's eyes met his across the sprawled body of the elf.

"Eric—" she whispered in tones of awe. "Eric—we healed him,"

"Excuse me," he said, hearing his own voice shaking, "but he doesn't look healed, he looks like hell—"

"It doesn't happen all at once, idiot," she retorted, already sounding more like herself, with a touch of good-natured annoyance in her voice.

"But—"

"Look at his leg, Banyon! Look at all that blood—and tell me that we didn't heal him!"

He looked at the blood soaking into the tacky carpeting and felt himself pale. He swallowed.

"Look," he temporized, "let's just get him patched up and in bed, okay?"

Beth gave him a sharp look. "What, don't you like the idea that you could have healed somebody, Eric?"

The curious tone of her voice made the words come out that he had been thinking—not words he'd have spoken under other conditions.

"Yeah," he said slowly. "That's the problem. Maybe I like it too much."

Beth caught his thoughtful gaze, and nodded. "Yeah. I know what you mean." She bent down, and carefully got a grip on Kory's shoulders. "You get his feet. We'd better get him into the bedroom."

Eric sat gingerly on the edge of the bed, looking down at Korendil.

The elf. My elf. The one who practically got himself killed, saving my worthless hide.

Why would anybody do something like that for me?

Kory seemed to be peacefully asleep. There were dark blue smudges under his eyes, bruises and cuts still visible on face and neck. He was so pale, he looked transparent.

My God, this is real. He got trashed bigtime. He can get hurt. He can die . . .

Kory's golden curls spilled over his pillow and half over his face. He tossed his head and murmured something in that liquid language of his. Eric reached forward and stroked his forehead, automatically trying to sooth him back into pleasanter dreams—

And froze, fingers still tangled in Kory's silky mane.

What am I doing?

Before he could pull away, Kory opened his eyes, and Eric felt as if he was trapped in that emerald gaze. He only shook himself free when Kory touched his hand.

"Bard?"



"Just seeing if you were all right," Eric replied. I'm trying to be nice to a friend, that's what I'm doing. A friend who damn near got himself killed to protect me. That's all. "Korendil, please don't keep calling me 'Bard.' It doesn't seem right." Deliberately, he finished the motion he'd begun, smoothing Kory's hair out of his eyes.

God, Kory has great hair. I know chicks that would kill for a head of hair like that.

"Would you call me 'Kory,' as you do in your thoughts?" The elf smiled hesitantly. "My friends call me that."

Eric smiled back. "Sure, if it makes you happy. I'd rather be your friend, anyway, than have you treat me like some jerk up on a pedestal." I would, too, he thought, resting his hand on Kory's shoulder. Jesus H. This guy almost died to keep me safe. What did I ever do to deserve

that?

Eric patted the shoulder awkwardly. "You just get some rest, Kory. You aren't in any shape to rescue a cockroach in distress right now."

"And what will you be doing?" Kory's eyes followed him as he got up and moved toward the door.

"Well, Beth thinks she's got a way to keep the bad guys from sniffing you out, so she's gonna do her thing when she gets back with her stuff. Then we're gonna go talk to a friend of hers who might know something. We're kind of short on information. It seems that the Bad Guys know everything about us, and we don't know jack about them."

Kory sighed, shifted a little, and tried to suppress a wince of pain. Eric saw it in his eyes anyway, and moved back beside him.

"Are you sure you're gonna be okay?" He reached toward Kory's shoulder again. "You want one of us to stay with you?"

The elf lifted his own hand with a visible effort, and took Eric's. "No. I shall be well enough. Truly, Eric, I will. What I need now is to sleep. But—thank you. Thank you for everything."

For what? "Hey, you tried to keep those guys from killing me last night, and now you're thanking me?"

"You saved my life this morning," Kory replied simply. "Without being bound to do so, by anything but your word to help save my people. Yes—"

Eric shivered, caught in the grip of emotions he didn't recognize and didn't understand. He's right, I guess. It's just, well, I couldn't let him lie there and bleed to death. I couldn't.

It's funny, though—the way he's looking at me right now, it's more than a little embarrassing. Like I'm everything in the world to him. God, if he was a girl, I'd want to kiss him—

Hell, I'd do more than just kiss him. I'd—oh God—why am I thinking these things? About a guy?

"—yes, Eric. I do thank you."

Kory let his hand go, and the moment passed. Eric hesitated, then brushed Kory's hair out of his eyes again "Okay, guy." he said, gently. "Your thank-you is accepted. And I'm thanking you, too, for trying to save my ass last night. Now, just get some sleep, okay? You leave the fighting to us for a while."

Kory smiled, and closed his eyes. Eric patted his shoulder once more, and retreated from the bedroom before something else he didn't understand could happen to him.

He sat down on the living room couch, his head in his hands.

I don't understand this at all. What's going on in my head? Why am I feeling this way about him? He's an elf, for Chrissakes, not even a human being!

God, I think I need a drink.

Or several.

Or maybe I'll just finish the whole bottle—

•10•

Fighting for Strangers

"Three parts coffee, two teaspoons sugar, one part Bushmills ..."

Eric measured out the whiskey, then threw another splash of it in the mug for good measure.

After everything that's happened in the last twenty-four hours, I definitely need a little Irish Breakfast—

"Isn't it a little early in the morning for that?"

Eric looked up at Beth, standing in the kitchen doorway. He shrugged. "Not all that early, by my standards."

"Methinks you drink too much, Banyon," Beth said, settling a grocery bag down on the counter. She gave him a thoughtful, measuring look; then in a lightning-quick change of mood, tweaked his nose playfully, and kissed him—a warm "hello" kiss.

For a moment, Eric hoped that the kiss might progress into something more than that, but Beth pulled away and shook her head, touching his lips with a fingertip. "Duty calls, bucko. First this, then we'll go talk with my friend, then there's the "Save the Faire" rally this afternoon. I'm thinking that we might be able to find out a little more about who's doing what, and where we can throw a wrench into the works." Something intense burned for a moment at the back of her eyes. "I'm sure looking forward to messing up their plans."

"They," of course, is Lord Perenor and the blonde, who I still can't remember. He let go of her reluctantly, and picked up his Irish coffee—which was warm and potent, but a poor substitute for Beth. Damn, but I wish Beth had less of a sense of responsibility, and more of a sense of, well, timing.

Beth turned away from Eric, opened the shopping bag, and reached into it as the brown paper rustled.

"What's in there?" he asked, leaning over her shoulder to peer inside. It was quite a jumble.

Looks like a lot of Baggies of herbs, some books, and—a knife? Nasty-looking piece of work, that. Probably street-illegal; it must be at least a foot long.

"My bag of tricks." Beth nudged him out of the way, then rummaged through the bag and tossed Eric a bright red apple. He managed to catch it without dropping the mug of coffee. "And breakfast, too. A better breakfast than that." She nodded at the doctored coffee. "How's our patient?"

"Sleeping, last I checked. He's a lot better, amazingly better, really." Eric bit into the apple in his best Tom Jones-eating-scene imitation.

Beth took the long-bladed dagger from the shopping bag, and slipped it, still sheathed, under her belt.

He put a little more soul into his next bite.

She ignored him.

He sighed theatrically.

She continued to ignore him, and poured a glass of water from the tap, then carefully shook out three shakertuls of salt into the water.

He gave up, took a swig of coffee, and returned to the apple without the additions from *The Joy of Sex*.

"What are you doing?" he asked as he sat down at the kitchen table.

She wore a little frown of concentration as she held her hand over the top of the glass. "This is to set up a protecting circle. Then I'll meditate for a while, try to reinforce the idea that nobody's here, not us or Kory."

He accepted that without a blink. A week ago he'd have been snickering into his apple.

But a week ago he hadn't been tossed around the room by magic, or watched a creep get trashed by magic, or—

—or helped heal somebody by magic.

so—I guess I'm getting used to this. This "circle" sounds like a good sort of thing to do. I'm glad Beth knows how to build this kind of stuff. I guess "build" is the right word. I just wish I understood how it works.

Beth unsheathed the long dagger at her belt, stirred the water with the blade of it, then resheathed it and began walking around the living room, flicking drops of water with her fingers at the walls. "This is the actual protection part," she said, as if she had overheard his thought. She flashed him a smile. "Witchcraft 101, Banyon. Salt and water are very strong protection against things you don't want around. You draw the circle with the consecrated salt water, making sure you do the doors and windows—"

"Hey, I've never had a girlfriend who'd do windows before," Eric teased. Beth gave him a look of acute suffering, then continued. "I don't know whether or not you believe this'll work, but figure it's like chicken

soup—can't hurt. I believe, and I'm the one who's setting it, and that's what counts."

She stopped at the window, sprinkled water on the glass, then drew the dagger again. Eric munched on the apple, watching closely as Beth traced a pentagram over the glass, then moved to the next window, repeating the action.

Definitely looks weird. Huh, I should talk. But—you know, somehow this whole routine is just like Beth. Sharp as a knife, always knows what she wants, and more than a little weird at times. I guess that's part of what makes her so terrific. His mind drifted back to the astonishing events of the previous night—what he could remember of them. Like she was last night. She's such a complex woman, sometimes so strong and independent, sometimes sweet and cuddly beyond words. Just looking at her makes me think about—

Eric hid behind the coffee mug, glad that Beth was occupied with the window, and didn't see how he was blushing. God, that's all I ever think about. I just look at her and want to drag her back off bed again. It's something in the way she smiles, the way she looks at me—

His thoughts faltered a little as a memory of green eyes superimposed itself over the memory of brown.

What really seems . . . bizarre . . . was that Kory was looking at me the same way. So serious, honest—like he'd never lie to me, never intentionally hurt me. And like he was worried about me. The careful -way his hand touched mine—

Eric shook his head, trying to dislodge the uncomfortable memory and the equally uncomfortable feelings it was causing. I don't understand it. Beth, sure—I've liked her for a long time, and I could see us getting together, that it could work. But—Kory? He's an elf—and a guy. I shouldn't feel that way about him.

But—

I do feel that way.

God, what's going on in my head? Why am I feeling like this—about another guy?

"Hey, Eric—"

Eric glanced up. Beth had finished trickling water around the living room, and was standing at the bedroom door. "I'll need some quiet for this last bit," she said. "Don't come into the bedroom, or open any doors. It'll just take a few minutes, okay?"

"Sure," Eric replied, taking another swallow of his Irish coffee. "I'll just stay put out here."

"Thanks." Beth headed into the bedroom, and closed the door behind her.

Too many strange things have been happening lately, that's what's going on with my mind. And what I'm feeling about Kory, that's just part of it. Everything's so completely weird right now. Like that big gap in my memory. Like the woman Bethie was telling me about, the one I can't remember—

He closed his eyes for a minute, as something like a twinge warning of headache-to-come hit his forehead. Unbidden, an image rose in his mind, of a beautiful blonde woman holding out her hands to him.

:Bard—are you thinking of me?:

Eric opened his eyes, startled, and glanced around the empty room, suddenly disoriented. What the hell? For a minute there, I thought someone was talking to me. But I'm alone. There's no one here but me— Must be a TV show in the next apartment. Then he heard the voice again, low and seductive, as if someone was speaking right into his ear. :No. I am here, Eric.:

Eric blinked, and his disorientation grew. Say what? :Close your eyes and dream of me, Eric, and I will come to you— :

He closed his eyes obediently, and then saw her clearly.

Blonde hair, cascading over her bare shoulders. Blue eyes, bright as sapphires, and blood-red lips curving in a smile. She was naked, gloriously nude, and the sight of her made his breath catch.

:I have not forgotten you, Eric. I cannot forget you. You are a longing that I cannot deny, a fire in my blood. Dream of me, think of me for just a moment more, and I will find you. And we will be together—:

She moved closer to him, smiling. From a distance, Eric thought he could hear music, a quiet melody slowly building in strength, and another voice, softly chanting.

"By salt and water, blade and Will

None shall harm or wish ill

Upon those within this circle round

That wish with my power, I have bound."

What's going on here?, he thought fuzzily. Why do I feel so strange? He tried to focus his eyes, to stand up, but something seemed to be clouding his thoughts and his vision, slowing everything down to a crawl, turning the world into flitting shadows and impenetrable darkness.

:Do not think, Eric, just feel. Close your eyes, and I will find you—:

Caught by her words, Eric closed his eyes again. Then he felt the touch of her hands upon him, and forgot everything else. She was running her hands down his chest, her breath warm against his skin—Beth? No, she isn't Beth, Beth's in the other room. Who—

The distant chanting voice faded away, barely audible over the pounding of his blood. All that existed was his unseen lover, her body entwining with his, warm flesh like silk beneath his hands. Lips, touching his in the darkness, a kiss that made his heart beat even harder.

Coherent thought fled before the rising fever in his blood, the longing and the need—

And the silent voice, whispering in his thoughts.

:Dream of me. Bard. Just a moment longer, and then I will be with you—:

:Yes—: Eric heard himself answer. :Yes, I will, I am waiting for you—:

He could feel her silent laughter, the richness of her thoughts, drawing closer to him, reaching for him.

:So close—another moment—and—:

Then Beth's voice, loud and disrupting.

"By the innermost fire, grant me this desire

As I will it, so shall it be!"

Like a door banging shut, something slammed down between Eric and the other. He caught a brief snarl of rage, of frustration and thwarted desire, before the whispering voice faded into silence.

Eric opened his eyes, and blinked.

What in the—did I just doze off, or what?

Christ. That—that was quite a daydream. I haven't had a dream like that since I was a teenager and I swiped Jeff's father's Playboy.

He looked around the living room, and slowly shook his head. Jesus. You'd think that after last night, I couldn't be thinking about sex, at least for the morning!

A moment later, Beth walked out of the bedroom, carrying the cup and knife. She glanced at him, then walked over to the table, setting the implements down and looking at him closely. "Are you okay, Eric? You look kinda pale."

"I'm just a little tired." He shrugged, then grinned wickedly at her. "Didn't get enough sleep last night, I think."

She hugged him, and mussed his hair good-naturedly. "I bet. Maybe I'll let you get some sleep tonight." She breathed into his ear. "But don't count on it."

He caught Beth's hands, drawing her to him for a lengthy kiss. "Do we really have to go to that rally? I can think of a better way to spend the afternoon."

"Absolutely," she said. "Besides, our patient is still soundly asleep in the bed. I wouldn't want to disturb him."

"Didn't he wake up when you were chanting?" Eric asked.

Beth looked at him strangely. "Eric—I didn't say anything out loud," she said after a moment's pause.

Yeah? Then what did I just hear?

Oh no. The universe is getting weird on me again. God, I hate this. Like daydreaming about that blonde, just now. Or how I felt when I was with Kory, earlier this morning. I can't deal with this stuff, really, I just can't—

"Does—does Kory look okay? Is he sleeping all right?"

"He seems to be fine," Beth said. "I guess these elves are pretty tough. But I'm thinking that maybe we should move him to my place, later—I've put some serious protections on it over the years. A lot more than I can do in a few minutes over here." She glanced at her watch. "Listen, if we head out now, we can catch my friend at home, and still get to the rally in time. I want you to meet this guy—he's the one who first told me about the L.A. elves."

"Sure," Eric said, standing up. "Who is this friend of yours?"

"Oh, you'll like him," Beth assured him, as they walked to the apartment door. "He's as crazy as we are. He has to be—he's an animator."

Phil always made Beth smile, no matter how serious the situation was. Today was no exception.

"Beth, sweetling, it's good to see you again." The deceptively frail-looking old man hugged her, then stood back a pace and looked at her intently. "You're looking good, honeybunch—there's a nice glow in your eyes, and jeez, you're in terrific shape. Keeping yourself busy, I hope?" He gave Eric a speculative glance.

Eric, of course, began to blush.

Oh, Banyon, I can't take you anywhere!

"I'm doing fine, Phil," Beth said, kissing his weathered cheek fondly. "This is Eric Banyon, a friend of mine. Eric, Phil Osborn. We're here because of another friend of ours, who isn't doing fine."

"Well, come in, sit down, and tell me about it." Phil ushered them into the small apartment, then vanished briefly into the kitchen, returning a few moments later with three cans of Coke. He handed them each a can, then sat down in his favorite old overstuffed armchair.

Beth saw the way Eric was staring at the living-room walls, decorated with animation reels and original sketches, and smiled to herself. Well, we've lost Banyan for a while, I think. I know how I was the first time I saw Phil's apartment!

"Our friend is one of the elves," Beth began, sitting down across from Phil on the couch.

Phil started, then settled back in his chair, a look of speculation on his face. "So you finally got your wish, hmm, honeybunch?" He lowered his voice for a minute. "Should we be talking about this with your young man here?"

She sighed. "He's in on it. In fact, he's further into it than I am."

"Oh." Phil considered that for a moment. "Something tells me your experience wasn't entirely pleasant."

"Most of it wasn't pleasant at all. Uncle Phil." She frowned, and haltingly began detailing the entirely bizarre events of the night before.

And it feels like it was a year ago.

"So things are going pretty badly for all the elves," she concluded. "I guess you must have known some

of that. Poor Kory got more than his share of getting dumped on, though."

"Who did for him, honeybunch?" Phil ran his hand thoughtfully through his thatch of gray-white hair. He was taking her story entirely at face value. Hardly surprising; he was the one who'd told her all about the elves in the L.A. hills when she was a child—and convinced her that they were real when she'd grown up.

"He told us it was an elf called Perenor. He seems to be part of the bunch trying to destroy the L.A. Elizabethan Faire site, the magic nexus." She took a swallow of Coke, and leaned forward. "I remembered the stories you used to tell me, and I thought maybe you might know something that would be useful about Perenor, something we can use to stop him, or something we can do to bring the other elves out of Dreaming so they can get out of here before the nexus goes."

Phil frowned unhappily. "I hadn't heard about this until you told it to me—but then, the elves are so locked up in Dreaming right now I couldn't shake most of them loose with dynamite. So, somebody is figuring on destroying the magic nexus? That's serious bad news, Beth. Very, very serious."

"I know, Phil," she said, patiently. "That's why we're here. If there's anything you know that might help us—"

"Beth says that you know a lot of the L.A. elves," Eric said from across the room, where he was looking at a framed reel of Snow White.

Phil raised white eyebrows abruptly, so abruptly it looked as though they'd jumped halfway up his forehead. "So you weren't B.S.-ing your old Uncle Phil. This is another Believer. Well, well ..." -He turned slightly to get a better look at Eric. "So, Beth told you that I know something about the elves, hmm? Well, that's very true. A lot of them were my friends. Back in the early days, when I first started working in the Industry—did Beth here tell you that I created Defender Duck? He's still my favorite character. Saving the world from Fascism and duck-hunters everywhere—"

"Phil," Beth interrupted carefully, "You were telling Eric about the elves."

"Oh, that's right. Where was I?" He suddenly smiled, a sly, mischievous smile, like a little boy who's just gotten away with something.

Eric was looking at Phil with the stunned expression of someone who can't reconcile what's before his eyes with what he knows.

Is he seeing something I don't?

"Why don't you tell Eric everything you've told me? That way we'll have a different perspective on things."

Phil smiled again. Beth began to suspect something. What, she wasn't sure, but she began to suspect Phil of trying some kind of complicated game on them. "Well, I started in '38 with Warner, then moved over to Disney."

"Uncle Phil—"

"I'm getting there! It was years later—I was working right here in Burbank on the studio lot—when I saw my first elf. We were watching the dailies for one of the early color features—you know what dailies



are, don't you, young man?—and I noticed that someone was sitting a few seats over from me, somebody I'd never seen before. I figured he was one of the execs, dropping in to see what we were working on, but then—"

The old man's eyes brightened, and softened with remembrance. "Then, when they turned the lights back on, I saw him clearly. He was very tall, wearing the strangest clothing, with lots of golden hair, curling all over his shoulders. No one, mind you, especially not an executive, wore long hair in those days. My God, he looked just like Snow White's Prince Charming, the way I wanted to do him. Jeez, what a travesty that was. See, the Old Man had this thing about long hair on guys—he'd've just as soon put crewcuts on the Greek gods!"

"Uncle Phil—"

"Right, the guy. He just sat there, looking up at me and smiling. And the most peculiar thing about it was that no one else seemed to see him. It was like he wasn't there. That's when I saw the ears, and I had it figured: either he was an elf, or I was drunk. And I wasn't drunk, at least not that day. He saw me looking at him, and he kept smiling at me. And then . . . and then he leaned real close to me, and whispered, like it was a big secret: 'Nice work on that last scene, Phil. But you got something wrong—a unicorn's hooves are supposed to be silver, not gold!' "

Phil's cackling laughter rang through the room, and Eric smiled, slowly. "Well, that was the first time I saw Prince Terenil. I wanted to talk with him some more—after all, I'd never seen an elf before—so I just told him right back, 'Look, whoever heard of pastel unicorns, anyway? It's artistic license!' He laughed, and said we ought to go talk about it. I tell you, I was just about to bust out with excitement. I mean, me and an elf. We got some sandwiches from the commissary and sat under the trees on one of the backlots, just talking. Talking about everything—animation, art, elves, humans. Turns out he was a real cartoon fanatic—thought it was amazing how we created living characters out of nothing but voices and blobs of paint. We had a lot in common, for an animator and an elven prince." He shook his head reminiscently. "He really liked the Duck. You know, that Duck was sure my fav—"

"Uncle Phil—" Beth said wamingly, having finally figured out what was going on. "You can put on that senile act with everybody else, but it isn't going to work with me."

The old man raised his cola can to her, not looking the least bit repentant. "Okay, sweetling. Yeah, those were the days. We used to meet a couple times a week like that, sitting in a backlot, eating lunch, and talking." Phil's eyes clouded suddenly. "Until the big layoffs, that is."

He sighed, and leaned back in his chair. "That was a bad time, for me, for a lot of people in the Industry. Leila—my wife—she was alive then, and working days in a department store. We were all right for a while, living off her salary and our savings, but then money started getting tight. Just when I thought I was gonna have to go back to being a security guard. Prince Terenil showed up on the doorstep, with a leather pouch in his hand. Honeybunch, did I ever tell you that Leila could see the elves too? Wonderful woman, Leila. God, I miss her."

He fell silent for a moment, and just stared sadly off into space, so sadly that Beth didn't have the heart to prompt him. "Best thing that ever happened to me, was Leila," he said softly. "She really was. God, I miss her—"

The old man's eyes were so lost, so infinitely lonely, that Beth finally had to pretend to examine her Coke can, overwhelmed by the feeling that she was intruding on something very private.

Phil cleared his throat, and took another sip of his cola. "Yeah, she could see them; she and Terenil had a real thing about keeping me from not going off into a gloom about the layoffs. So Terenil showed up. He said he had a sudden craving for a piece of Leila's pecan pie—but after she'd fed him, he said, 'It's about time I returned a little something for your hospitality.' He opened that leather pouch up over the kitchen table, and then there were all these sparkling stones on the formica. A dozen little gems. I thought my jaw was gonna come off, and Leila—she started crying, and hugging him . . . He would never tell us where he got them, just that he didn't steal them. Leila sold them to a jeweler, and we had enough money to live on until the studios started hiring animators again."

You never told me that story before. Uncle Phil. "It was right after that he took me over to the Elfhome side of... whatever. What they call 'under the Hill.' My, now that was different." His eyes had lost their sadness, and were focused on something infinitely lovely, but very far away.

"Did you ever meet Perenor?" Beth asked. The animator nodded, but his cheerful smile faded. "Oh, I definitely did, Beth. That was quite an afternoon. Prince Terenil and I were at the Elfhome Grove, you know, the one where they all used to meet and party. We were eating oranges and taking—that was when most of the San Fernando Valley was still orange orchards, Beth, years

before you were even born—and suddenly Terenil stands up. He has this intent look in his eyes, like he's listening to something, even though I can't hear anything but the birds in the trees around us. Then he starts off through the trees. I didn't know what was going on, but I followed him."

Phil's lips thinned to a hard line. "And there, on the edge of the oak trees, is this handsome silver-haired elf, with a human boy. They're just sitting there, not doing anything that I can see; but the boy has this look on his face like he's drugged out of his mind. And Terenil starts shouting at this other elf; about how that's forbidden magic, that Perenor's hurting the boy and he doesn't even care. Perenor just shrugged. So Terenil just grabbed the boy and stormed off with him. And Perenor gave me this look, like he wanted to rip Terenil apart, but wouldn't mind killing me instead, so I ran and caught up with Terenil."

The old man stared down into his Coke can, as if searching for an answer that wouldn't come. "That boy was in a real bad way. Like he was lost somewhere inside himself. Like those kids they call 'autistic,' now. I took him home to his parents, didn't tell them about the elves, just that I'd found the kid wandering in the orchards. His parents told me that he'd been a normal child, no, more than normal—really a special kid, a bright little penny, with a singing voice that you couldn't believe. But he couldn't speak, or hear, not after that afternoon with Perenor. And, months later, I came back to see if he was doing better, and found out that the kid had been hit by a car. He was walking across the street and the driver honked and the kid couldn't hear it." Phil paused, taking a long swallow of his soda, as if he was washing away something bitter.

"Later, I heard that Terenil had exiled Perenor from the elven community. All I heard of him after that was a few years later, that he had found himself a human girlfriend, and they had a child, a little blonde girl. Arianrhod, I think that's what her name was. Terenil told me about her, about how she was going to inherit human and elven magic, but I don't remember exactly what he said. It's been a good many years."

A little blonde girl—yes, that makes sense! That's the bitch who was with Perenor last night. His daughter—

Out of the corner of her eye, Beth saw Eric shudder slightly. Maybe he's figuring it out too, or remembering something of what happened last night in the club—damn, but that Perenor and his daughter are a nasty set of people.

"You don't know anything else about Perenor, or maybe his daughter? Something about them that might help us?"

Phil suddenly grinned, raising his can of Coke meaningfully. "Sure. Just take 'em out for a glass of cola, and you'll take 'em out, fast enough."

Beth just looked at him. "What do you mean?"

The animator sipped his soda, then looked at the can thoughtfully. "It's something that Terenil told me about, years back. Caffeine. It's just a minor stimulant for us, but for the elves, it's a deadly and addictive drug. In small amounts, it acts like a trunk, sends the elves into Dreaming, even if they're okay before they down it. Enough of it, and they'll die from overdose."

"Well." Beth thought about that for a moment. "That's useful information, though I don't know how we can hold Perenor down long enough to pour some coffee down his throat." Though I'd sure love to do that to you, you murderous bastard—

"Besides, I don't know if it would work on his daughter, since she's half-human." Phil shifted in his chair, glancing at Eric. "You're being very quiet, young man."

"Just thinking," Eric said, obviously subdued. "They're holding all the cards, aren't they? The people who own the Faire site have already sold it to a developer, it's going to be turned into condos, and that'll destroy the nexus. Perenor's masterminding that, somehow. I mean, he may be a powerful elf-lord, but he's got a corporation doing his dirty work for him. How can we stop that? You don't stop corporations with magic, I don't care how good you are."

"That's one thing that doesn't make sense to me," Phil mused aloud, "that Perenor wants to destroy the nexus. After all, the loss of magic would hurt him as well as the others. He'd fall into Dreaming, just like them, and then when his magic ran out, he'd fade. And then, what the loss of that magic would do to Los Angeles—"

"What would it do?" Eric asked. "I mean, it would just hurt the elves, right?"

Phil shook his head. "Unfortunately, that isn't the case, young man. You don't realize how much we depend on that magic here. That's why the film industry, and most of the music industry, are located here. That magic nexus gives the elves what they need to live, but it also powers human creativity, the human soul. Without it, we might as well build cars. Because our films would have all the soul of a Chrysler, all steel and Fiberglas."

Eric looked at him with a puzzled expression on his face. Phil turned the can around in his hands, thinking. "You know, there's already places where the magic has died—look at downtown Detroit, where the druggies are stealing the aluminum siding off the walls of houses. Think of the Jersey Turnpike. If you lived there, your imagination, your soul, would wither and die. Think about it."

Beth did think about it. Maybe that's why I'm still living in L.A. This place has so much potential, so many creative people, all trying to do something meaningful. That's the magic that means the most, the magic of the human heart. If that magic dies—

"Now, what I want to know," Phil continued, "is how Perenor will benefit by destroying the nexus. I think I'll go out and do a little research. Most of the elves I know, like Terenil, are trapped in Dreaming. But maybe one or two of them are coherent enough to talk to me."

"Meanwhile," he said, glancing at Eric and Beth, "I do think that you should talk to these corporation people. See if they understand what they're doing. Without making yourself sound like loons, of course. I'd really hate to have to spring you out of a mental institution, Bethie."

"I'll try to stay out of trouble. Uncle Phil." She grinned. "And we're going to a protest rally at the corporation headquarters this afternoon. I'm hoping we'll find out something useful." And, with any luck, we'll find a way to stop these bastards—

Eric looked up at the towering building, the opaque glass window exterior hiding everything within. Anything could be going on in there, and we'd never know, he thought, gazing skyward.

So, this is the home of Llewellyn Investment Corporation, the guys who bought the Faire land—I wonder if it's as intimidating on the inside as it is from out here?

All that stone, that glass—it made him think of ... prisons. Buildings like this were meant to trap, to hold, to clutch—

He looked resolutely away from the intimidating facade. Caitlin's inside, talking with some of their execs. She's really doing her damndest with this. She, of all the Admin people, really cares about what happens to the Faire.

He glanced around at the rest of the protestors, looking to see if any of them glowed in that peculiar, silvery way the old animator did. Was that strange, magical light just something that only people who knew elves had? And why was he beginning to see it around people now?

That question triggered another. I wonder if any of these people know that there's more at stake than just an Elizabethan Faire site? Do any of them know about the magic nexus?

Near him the motley group of Faire people (some wearing mundane clothing, others in their colorful Faire garb) milled around uneasily. Beth was several feet away, talking with some of the dancers from her Faire show.

It's strange, I know so many of these people, but here I am, feeling as though I'm standing out here all by myself. It's not that anyone's excluding me, or deliberately not talking to me. It's just that I feel like I'm on the outside, looking in.

He felt odd, uncomfortable—and obscurely unhappy. He wanted to get a little distance from the crowd—but he didn't want to leave them, either.

It's funny, I never thought about it, but I guess that's how I am with Faire people in general. The L.A. Elizabethans, the Texas folks, everyone else I've ever played shows with. I know so many people, but they really aren't friends. Not really.

He swallowed, not liking the direction his thoughts were taking. Maybe this is what Beth was talking about over the weekend, about how I never commit to anything.

But I don't want to get hurt—

"If I don't let them get close to me, they can't hurt me." Yeah, that's true, but look at where I am now. Standing alone in a crowd.

The building seemed to loom over him, gloating at his unhappiness. He could almost hear it in his mind—

Then he did start to hear a strange, slithery voice in the back of his head.

"See," it seemed to say, "see how utterly insignificant you are? See how utterly meaningless this all is? Why, you can't even call any of these people a friend, not really— and what good are friends, anyway? Will they buy you power like this?"

Friend . . . The only one I feel close to at all is Beth, and maybe a few of the musicians. Like Aaron, that crazy fiddler, over there on the sidewalk with a few of the other Irish.

But somehow he couldn't bring himself to join them. Now that I think about it, I guess this is how my life has been for a long time. Years. Always moving on before I can make any friends, get to know anybody real well. What kind of a life is that? No commitments, sure, but no real friends, either. Even my girlfriends, it's always ended with me leaving town, moving away. I don't know why, but that's how it is . . .

"And that's the way it will always be," the voice said in his ear. The building loomed silently, staring at him with a thousand cold glass eyes.

But that hit his stubborn streak. That's just my own paranoia talking. And hell, maybe I can change that. Right now. I'm needed here, to help Kory with whatever it is he needs me to do. Save the Faire land, save the elves. And, after that? I don't know. But maybe—maybe Beth would want me to stay here. And Kory—

He shuffled his feet. The very thought of Kory made him uncomfortable in a different sort of way.

I don't know what to think about Kory. Already, I feel like he's a close friend of mine, even though I've only known him for a few days. And, yeah, there's something else going on there, something I don't understand. It feels good, but—I don't know. I like him in a way that definitely is more than "just a friend." I don't know what's going on there, I just don't. How can I feel that way about a frizzy-haired elf?

Eric shook his head, looking out at the gathering crowd. Better not think of it now. Looks like everything's about to get started here.

Caitlin walked out from the entrance to the Llewellyn building, with a business-suited man at her elbow. She stopped at the top of the steps. "Okay, everybody, they've agreed to hear our grievances. We're going inside in an orderly fashion—not like the Noon Parade, youse guys! Go into the conference room on the right side of the lobby and sit down. Some of their executives are going to talk with us there."

Eric joined the throng of Faire people moving toward the large double glass doors.

This place looks normal enough inside. Dozens of suits, but that's to be expected. God, my imagination is working overtime. What did I expect? Sorcerers in gray-flannel robes?

Then he glanced around the busy lobby, and saw him.

An older man, tall, distinguished, talking with another businessman by the receptionist's desk. Perfectly normal, except—

Except for the tips of his ears. Pointed ears, showing through the immaculately-groomed silver hair.

A flashback of memory hit Eric like a slap in the face.

Sitting on the bus, looking out the window at the limo. And that man, that man with the green eyes—

Green eyes, emerald ice—gazing at me—and reaching—reaching—

Oh shit, it's him! That's Perenor!

Eric ducked back through the crowd, trying to put as many people and as much distance between himself and the Elflord as possible. He tried to signal to Beth, but she was already walking into the conference room with some of the other Rennies.

He looked around quickly, trying to spot anything he could use for cover. In another minute, everybody will be in the conference room. And I'll be out here in the lobby, with him standing less than twenty feet away. Shit!

God, get me out of this!

• 11 •

Are You Willing?

The boardroom was silent except for the whisper of turning pages. Ria watched as her executives leafed through the copies of the proposal before them, her face a carefully controlled mask.

This one should be a shock for them. Linette typed it up off my notes only ten minutes before we started this meeting. Right after my little lunch with William Corwin.

They don't realize it yet, but if we can muster the cash to take advantage of it, this'll be the greatest coup I've accomplished yet.

The dark-haired man seated next to her was the first to speak "This—this is a surprise, Ria. Are you sure we want to go through with this?"

She nodded. "Believe me, Jonathan, this one is worth it."

Jonathan Sterling, Ria's V.P. for Acquisitions, gazed down at the proposal in his hands, a faint frown-line between his eyebrows. "It's just—well, Ria, if we pursue this, we'll be overcommitting on capital. Negative cash flow for at least a month, and some serious interest charges from our creditors. If this doesn't pay off, and pay off big, we'll lose a lot. I just think it's too risky."

Oh, Jonathan, you're the only one who's willing to be honest with me. The rest of them are too scared. But you're not telling me anything I don't know already. Ria Llewellyn shifted in her chair and tapped the papers stacked before her with a lacquered nail. "True. It's risky. I know that. What I need you to tell me is—can we commit the cash right now? Because if we're going to do it, it's absolutely critical that we purchase the Corwin stock before the end of the week."

Jonathan gave her a curious look. "You know something we don't," he said, a flat statement.

From the far end of the table, she heard a low mutter, sotto voce. "Oh great, here we go again, another week of working till midnight."

Ria spoke quietly. "Yes, I do know something you don't. And, you're right, Harkness, it probably is going to mean another week of working late." She raised her voice slightly. "I especially appreciate all of you staying late last night to finish that purchase proposal. Believe me, there'll be a solid bonus for that. And another, when—not 'if,' gentlemen, when—we pull this one off."

Ria continued, very aware that every eye in the room was upon her. "The reason we need to invest in Corwin Systems right now is because they're about to be purchased by National Technology, as part of National's bid to take over the West Coast market share. When that happens, Corwin's stock will double, possibly triple. We, and our represented clients, stand to make a very, very healthy profit. That is, of course, highly confidential information, gentlemen." She leaned back in her chair, waiting for their reactions.

Her executives—

My little worker bees—

—just stared at her, blinking.

Jonathan was the first to recover. "Ria, how do you know that?"

She smiled. "The usual sources, Jonathan."

"That's amazing," Harkness, Director of Accounting, said in a barely audible voice, "if it's true."

"Of course it's true," she said coolly. "My sources are impeccable, and they're never wrong. As you should know by now. And we stand to make a killing on it. Harkness, do you have some good, trustworthy people who can handle the accounting end of this? I'll also need several analysts to run projections for the next couple days. Mitchell, if you don't mind, I'm pulling you and Susan off the stock futures project and onto this. Jonathan, I want you to find them some good assistants from your office."

Ten minutes later, Ria called the meeting to an end. The executives, already talking eagerly among themselves, began to trickle out of the boardroom.

They took it in stride. Good people, my execs. I think they're starting to expect the impossible from me. Which is fine . . .

She began gathering up her paperwork from the table. This should generate more than enough profit to cover that Faire land purchase. It looks like we will have to take a loss on that. The price was just too high—I still can't believe it, over ten million for seven acres that weren't even good commercial property. But Father insisted that we purchase it; just so we can bulldoze it, 400-year-old oak grove and all.

Father will be pleased—they should begin construction on the site in another few weeks. She straightened, as a thought occurred to her. If we use that purchase as a tax loss, I won't even have to take it out of his investment accounts. He'd fight me over that, just to have a fight going, and I don't have the time to waste.

She slipped her neat stack of notes on the meeting into her leather portfolio. He should be quite happy, in any case. Everything is going so well. Especially with the company. I wonder if he envisioned this, all those years back, when he suggested that I consider business school?

She glanced around the silent boardroom—her boardroom—and smiled cynically. He probably knew exactly what would happen, that sneaky old bastard. I imagine he just wanted someone to manage his investments for him, so he wouldn't have to bother. I knew he was well off, but that was something of a surprise. Quite a considerable fortune—

And every penny of it gained by business practices even I would consider questionable. I wonder if that sticks in his craw, knowing I've made more money than he ever did, and I never even had to kill anyone to do it. Just by using my wits, and a little sorcery here and there to . . . what were the lyrics to that song last night? "Throw the odds in my favor ..."

She could see the face of the young Bard without even closing her eyes, clear and precise as a photograph. Lips pursed over the mouthpiece of his flute, soft, dreaming eyes half-closed in concentration, stage lights sharply defining the delicate arch of his cheekbones—

Throwing the odds in my favor. Oh, if I had that Bard beside me, I'd do more than just that. I don't know why, just can't stop thinking about him.

She recalled the touch of his hand on hers, the dark depths of his eyes, and shivered with self-indulgent pleasure.

Father can't go beyond seeing the Bard as a pawn, someone he could use and toss away—but there's so much more there, so much potential. And there's something about him that just—I don't know what it is, but it draws me to him. Power calling to Power, perhaps. Perhaps . . .

Her thoughts drifted off for a moment, and she called them to heel sharply.

Besides, if all the legends are true, and I could convince him to join me—with my magics as a half-Blood sorceress, and his Creation magics, working together in tandem, there's nothing we couldn't do. No one could stop us. Not even Father.

She analyzed her memories, paying close attention to the way he had looked at her in that shabby club, and the way he had responded to her this morning when she had tried to pinpoint his location. He had been so immediately . . . overwhelmed.

He finds me attractive. That's no great surprise. But does he feel the same way I do? Does he realize the potential, the power that every touch of our hands creates?

Most of the men I've known are so ... callow. Especially the humans. I have to agree with Father; I can't see them as anything more than tools. But the Bard—he has such latent power. Even just thinking about him—

She put her hand against her flushed cheek, trying to calm her thoughts.

I can't stop thinking about him. I have to find him somehow. He was thinking of me, earlier. I would have been able to go to him, but something interfered, I don't know what. But he'll think of me again, I know he will. And then—then I'll be able to find him—



Ria replaced the rest of her papers in her leather briefcase, then sensed a whisper against the sigh of the air-conditioning as the door of the boardroom opened, and the presence of someone standing behind her. Jonathan. I wonder what he wants?

She turned, giving her veep a warm smile. "Well, Jonathan. You look like you have a question for me."

He glanced around the boardroom, waiting until the last briefcase-toting exec had left. His voice was very quiet. "Ria, do you know what you're doing?"

She shrugged. "Of course."

Jonathan's voice was even lower when he spoke. "Ria, you know what I mean."

"No, I don't know what you mean," she said impatiently, closing and locking her briefcase.

He rested his hand on hers, not letting her walk away. "Insider trading, Ria. That's what I'm talking about. I know you had lunch with William Corwin this afternoon."

She shook her head. "No, Jonathan. It's not what you're thinking. There were five other people at the table besides William and I. We never even talked about his company."

But he thought about it, quite a bit. Poor William, that decision to sell was on his mind all the way through the lunch meeting. I couldn't help but overhear it, feel how it weighed on him so heavily, knowing that there'll be layoffs after the sale. Overhear it, hell—he was broadcasting so loud, it was almost deafening. I do feel for him, so concerned about his employees, so conscientious. An admirable businessman, William Corwin.

"Five witnesses?" Jonathan repeated carefully, amazed, then he flashed her a smile. "Well, Ria, if you're involved in something illegal, I have to say that you do this kind of thing very well. And I'm glad I'm working for you, no matter how you find your information."

She patted his hand. "You're the best person I have, Jonathan. But I can't reveal my secrets, not even to you."

"Oh, why not?" He grinned. "If I knew your tricks, then I could start up my own company from a ten-thousand-dollar investment, and have corporate assets of fifty-five mil in less than five years."

Ria was so startled, she only stared at him for a brief moment. Then she laughed. "Oh, Jonathan, how did you ever manage to find that out? There's no one still working here who was with me in the very beginning."

"I have my secrets, too," he said, smiling. "When I'm working for a sharp cookie like the lovely Ms. Ria Llewellyn, I have to keep on my toes. Or else you'll—"

His words were lost as Ria stiffened suddenly, overwhelmed by a roar of noiseless sound, a silent inner claxon as every magical warning went off simultaneously in her mind.

There's someone near me—someone with such raw power—not Father, it's a different signature—

Gods, he's in the building, moving towards me, closer every second!

"Excuse me, Jonathan," she said breathlessly, picking up her briefcase and hurrying towards the door. "I've got to get back upstairs right away."

Yes, get upstairs to my office. I've used it for sorcery before, the shielding should protect me from whoever this is—God, he's strong! Who in the hell can this be?

She moved past Jonathan, ignoring his startled stare, through the doorway and into the carpeted hallway. Ria stopped for a moment, scanning the building with her inner sight, trying to find the intruder.

He's very close—moving closer every moment—he's only a few feet away from me right now!

She turned, and saw him.

Eric ran blindly down the first corridor he saw. I have to get out of here before he sees me. I can't let him do . . . that . . . to my mind again. I can't. And if he tried to kill me and Beth last night. God knows what he'll try if he sees me now— There's a stairway sign at the end of this hallway.

Maybe I can hide upstairs for a few minutes, wait until he leaves the lobby, then get out. Maybe—

The door at the end of the hallway opened, and a woman stepped out into the corridor, carrying a briefcase. A stunningly beautiful blonde, dressed impeccably in a black silk dress and heels. Eric thought he saw an expression of sudden fear twisting those features, but couldn't be certain.

Then he recognized her, and his breath caught.

That's her. The woman from my dream—

She looked up and saw him, and her eyes widened with surprise.

Eric stopped, right in the middle of the corridor, staring at the woman in disbelief.

:Eric? Is—is it really you?:

The voice was gentle and low, barely a whisper in his thoughts.

Eric couldn't move; just looked at her, bewildered. How can this be? I—I only dreamed about her—how can she be real?

She smiled, and held out her hand to him. :Erie, you came here to find me, didn't you? You came here for me . . .:

Eric felt his heart skip a beat, seeing the transformation that smile created in what was already an extraordinarily beautiful woman. Without thinking about it, he moved closer toward her, toward that outstretched hand, the beckoning smile.

She touched his hand, and he felt something akin to an electric shock run through him. God—what's happening to me? I can't think straight—it's so hard to think at all—

:You frightened me, Eric. I thought I would have to defend myself from some unknown menace, and it was only you.: The voice in his mind spoke lightly, teasingly. :Let's go upstairs, to my office.:

:Yes.; he answered silently, :that's ... a good idea—:

He let her lead him back into the lobby, into the elevator. Upstairs, where their feet trod noiselessly on the thick velvety chocolate carpeting, she drew him towards a closed office door; past a male secretary working at his desk, past a young executive who was staring at both of them in astonishment, and into her office.

Inside, a single lit lamp cast shadows on the dark mahogany desk and bookshelves, the elegant leather-upholstered chair and couch. She held tightly on to his hand, not letting go for an instant, looking at him with such longing in her eyes. :I never dreamed—I never thought this would happen—oh, Eric:

She moved closer—within inches of him—then kissed him. For a moment, Eric couldn't think, with the woman's silk-clad body molded against him as his arms closed around her in a tight embrace.

Then a coherent thought flickered briefly through his mind. No. That was only a dream. I don't know her, I've never seen her before, I don't know what I'm doing here. But something was speaking stronger than that last whisper of sanity. And then he couldn't think of anything at all except the woman who was in his arms, in his thoughts, everything fusing and fading into a silent song that only they could hear.

Music—two melodies, interweaving, very different but counterpointing perfectly, rising toward some unknown, impossible resolution—

She broke away from him suddenly. Eric reeled back several steps, thoroughly shaken by both the fierceness of the music and the passion of the kiss.

Wow. 220 volts, definitely. If this is a dream, I don't want to wake up, ever.

He blinked, tried to recapture his breath, his balance. Maybe—maybe that wasn't a dream. She recognizes me, knows me. What if that daydream was real—what if she really was searching for me—

The blonde sat down slowly on the leather couch. "The music," she whispered, then looked up at him, her eyes mirroring shock and some indefinable emotion. "What are you doing to me? I don't understand—why can't I let go, why can't I think of anything but you?" Her eyes darkened dangerously. "Is this a game to you? Playing with my mind? Is that why you came here today, to amuse yourself by turning my world upside down?"

He shook his head and spread his hands. "I came here because of the protest rally. For the Faire site. That's all. I. I'm one of the Faire buskers. I've never—I don't even know your name." His voice faded to an incredulous whisper. "I thought you were only a dream ..."

She was silent for a long moment. "You didn't come here to find me," she said at last. "You're here because I'm the President of Llewellyn Corporation. Not because of... me." Her voice tightened, and her face became an expressionless mask. "You don't have any understanding of this at all, do you? Of the games within games, the chess pieces moving across the board." Now she looked at him sharply. "Or do you? Did you think you could use me?"

Eric blinked again, his mouth dry. What's she talking about? A chess game Who—or what—does she think I am?

Well, you're here, Eric, in her office. The office of the President of Llewellyn Investment Corporation. Here's your chance to make a stand, try to do something meaningful for a change. Fight for the Faire site,

and Kory . . .

He cleared his throat awkwardly. "No, I didn't think—I mean, I don't want to use you, I didn't know that . . . this . . . would happen." He felt his face warming. Oh, terrific, now I'm blushing, too. I really wish I could keep from doing that. He shoved his hands down into his pockets, feeling awkward and very much out of place. "I just wanted—"

Come on, Banyon—don't let her bullshit you into talking mundanities. Hit her with the real reason why the Site has to be saved.

"Look," he said, taking his hands out of his pockets. "I know why you bought the land. You're planning to destroy the magic nexus. And that'll kill the L.A. elves. You can't do it." He crossed his arms, gazing at her defiantly.

"So you came here to plead for your elves?" She laughed, her voice brittle. "How quaint."

Eric flushed. She's only laughing at me now. She thinks I'm a fool.

The blonde woman moved to her feet instantly. She reached out, taking his hand. He let her. "No, Eric, I don't think of you as a fool. Untrained, unknowing, ignorant of your potential, perhaps, but never a fool."

She drew him toward the couch, still holding his hand. "Sit down, Eric, and I'll tell you the truth about all of this."

Hesitantly, he sat down next to her. The truth? Her truth, or the real one? I don't know if I should trust her or not—

—but how can I not trust her, when she looks at me with those eyes—blue eyes, calling to me—

He brought himself back to reality with a jolt, realizing that he had been drifting away. I can't make any sense out of this—everything is so confusing right now—God, it's hard to think straight—

The blonde woman smiled across at him, her fingers lightly touching his. "I—I don't know where to begin. Who have you been talking to, Eric? Korendil?"

He nodded dumbly.

The woman sighed. "Poor Korendil. He means well, but he really doesn't understand what's going on. But you can, I think." She traced a pattern on the back of his hand with one fingertip. "Eric, I'll tell you my secret. You're the only one who knows this, other than those of the Old Blood. I'm half-elven. My father is of the High Court, a warrior-mage. My mother was a human with magic potential, like yourself. That's why, when I first saw you in the nightclub, I knew we had to be together. I'm sure you could feel it, too. Power calling to Power—"

The woman at the Dive—the one I couldn't remember—it's her . . .

He closed his eyes for a moment, and frowned, trying to bring the memory back. Standing on the stage, and—and then—

"Listen to me, Eric. The elves, they're not like us. You can grow into your power, your potential. You can redefine your focus. They can't change."

The woman, standing across the room, holding out her hand to me—

Her voice took on an insistence, a weight, that made her words sound like they had to be true. "Through the years, they've become more and more isolated, trapped within their groves. The humans have taken their territory Eric, and molded it into a different world, one in which the elves cannot exist."

And everything—everything was so strange, so unreal-like I could reach out and touch reality, brush it aside like a curtain—

"And the nexus—well, because of the prevalence of Cold Iron in the humans' cities, and the way that the elves are only tapping into the nexus now through Dreaming, it's become—polluted. It is going to die, Eric; die—or go bad. If it dies, there'll be no magic left here at all, not for you to draw upon when you play your music, not for any of us. If it goes bad—" She shivered. "Nothing, only desolation and despair. So, my father and I devised a plan—to direct the magic through a new nexus."

"A new nexus?" he asked. If the magic dies, I'll never feel this way again, like I do now, or I did, that night in the grove—as if the world is wide open before me, all the chords and harmonies mine to change, to control—I'll never feel like that again—

But Kory said that his enemies were going to destroy the nexus. He never talked about anything like moving it.

"Korendil doesn't know anything," she said, as if hearing his thoughts. "He's been asleep for a long time, Eric. He doesn't know what's going on at all. We have to create a new nexus, or the magic will die or be lost to us forever. We have to, or watch everything worth having become corrupted."

"But if you do that—the elves will still die, won't they?" he protested, weakly.

Faint scorn colored her voice. "Think about them, Eric. You've seen them, last night, in that nightclub. They're already dead. Lost in Dreaming. Nothing can save them now. What you're seeing is only the last moment before they fade away completely. Even the High Court elves, the ones who do not need the nexus to live, they're all lost to Dreaming as well. The only reason Korendil isn't in Dreaming is because he's been spellbound for so long. They can't be saved, Eric; they're terminal patients in the last days of their illnesses. Korendil won't—can't—admit that. But I think it would be kinder to them to pull the plug, to let them go. Korendil is the only one worth saving, and Korendil is High Court. He doesn't need the nexus. When he sees it's hopeless, he can save himself."

Unbidden, the images of the green-eyed people—elves—in the club last night drifted into his mind. Lovely, yes, but ... as mindless as any brain-dead stoners. Maybe she was right—

"This—" he said faintly, "This sounds like you're doing the right thing, but you also tried to kill Kory last night. What you're trying to do doesn't justify something like that—"

Her face hardened, her eyes turning to blue ice. "You're right, it doesn't. That was my father. He hates Korendil and Terenil, for reasons that I don't really understand. And I don't agree with him, or his methods." Her eyes softened again, the vivid blue of the sky at twilight, on a perfect spring night. "But—but if you would help me, Eric, we could accomplish this without my father's interference. No more harm to anyone, just what we have to do—change the nexus."

"Change the nexus—" he whispered, caught in her eyes.

"And if you help me now, there's so much more that I can do for you, Eric. You're a brilliant musician, you should be playing on better stages than some rundown dive in the Studio City. I have friends in many places—you could have the kind of music career most people only dream of, the recognition and money you deserve. It would be so easy—"

Her blue eyes, intense and alive, held his gaze.

:So easy, Eric—all you need do is reach out your hand and take what you want.:

He couldn't seem to look away from those eyes. I—I don't know what to think. She's . . . so beautiful—and those eyes, looking right into me . . . All I want to do is say yes, say I'll never leave her again—

But—Kory and Beth—I can't abandon them. I promised I would help them. I can't go back on that, either.

I don't know what to do—what to think—

She squeezed his hand gently. "Don't make a decision now. Just think about it, okay?" She stood up and moved to the large desk, quickly writing down an address on a notepad. "This is my home address." She handed it to him. For a moment, her expression was suddenly very vulnerable. "I'll—I'll be there; tonight, if you want to come over and talk."

Eric took the piece of paper, and slipped it into his jeans pocket. He smiled shyly. "You know, I—I don't even know your name," he said.

"Ria." She moved closer to him. "Ria Llewellyn."

"I'll, uh, I'll see you later, Ria," Eric said awkwardly, distinctly uncomfortable under the intense gaze of her eyes.

"I'm certain you will," she said, walking with him to the office door.

Ria shut the door, then leaned against the wood, closing her eyes and smiling. She had to exercise every bit of control to keep from laughing aloud. Oh, what incredible luck! I can't believe it. I thought I'd never see him again, and he walked right into my office! It's almost enough to make me believe in Fate—

Young, untrained, and very malleable. Not to mention a few other perks, like those wonderful dark, dark eyes. He's really quite handsome. And, ah, definitely interesting enough to hold my attention for a long time . . .

She tingled all over; with excitement, arousal—and Power. He'll come tonight, I know he will. And when he arrives at the door . . . let's see. I'll greet him myself, doubtlessly give him a warm little hello kiss, which he'll return with interest, and— and then—oh, what the hell, we probably won't even make it all the way to the bedroom. Probably shouldn't even try. I'll introduce him to the Jacuzzi and the waterbed afterwards . . .

Then a chill of doubt froze her. But—but what if he changes his mind? What if he never shows up?

She shook her head, stubbornly. No, that's impossible. He has to be there tonight. No man has ever

walked away from me, ever. He'll show up tonight, I know it. He will.

She smiled to herself and stretched luxuriously. He is so very delicious. I've never felt such . . . anticipation . . . before. I just can't stop thinking of him—

A sharp knock at the door interrupted her thoughts. "Come in," she said brusquely, and walked back to her desk and took her place behind it.

The door opened. Ria frowned as her father prowled into the plush office. He crossed to the mahogany cabinet without even glancing at her.

"We need to talk, Ria," Pereiior said, removing a bottle of Scotch and a glass from the cabinet.

He always thinks he can just stroll in here and take charge! My own dear, sweet Father— "I just had a very important meeting. Father, and I really don't think this is a good—"

"An important meeting? With the young Bard, perhaps?" Perenor smiled, and raised the glass of Scotch to her in a toast. "You're definitely my daughter, Ria. You never let an opportunity pass by, and you're quick to take . . . advantage of a situation. I'm impressed."

Despite herself, Ria flushed. "It's none of your concern, Father." None of your damn business, either. I know what you'd do with Eric if you got your hands on him—and that's why I'll never let you near him.

"Oh, but it is my concern." He took a slow draught from his glass. "When my own daughter consorts with the enemy ... By the way, Ria," he said, giving her a cursory glance, one tinged with the faintest hint of contempt, "your clothes are in quite a state of disarray. Perhaps you ought to rebutton your blouse. You mustn't allow your employees to see you as anything less than immaculate, true?"

Ria met his gaze squarely, not even glancing down at her attire. I know what you're doing, you old snake. Trying to unnerve me, take control, as always—

"And you might want to consider, ah, shielding your activities from those of us who are sensitive to such things," Perenor continued. "It's quite distressing to be interrupted in a business conversation by the realization that my daughter is seducing a Bard several floors above me."

Damn him, he's doing this deliberately! Trying to fluster me, to get me off-balance—I won't let him! Two can play at this. Father. "It's no worse than some of your own . . . amusements," Ria said silkily, allowing no hint of emotion to sink into her words. "I've never complained about your choice of companions, even when some of them are distinctly . . . distasteful. Especially the ones who aren't even human or elven—"

Perenor's hand tightened visibly on the whiskey glass. Ah! You don't like being reminded of your own perversions, do you? But I think I know where this little game of yours is leading—and no, I won't let you get control of Eric. No matter what you say or do.

"That is not the question here," the elf-lord said coldly. "The fact is that you are playing a very dangerous game, with a young man—a young human man—of unknown potential. You're playing with fire—"

Ria shook her head. "I know exactly what I'm doing, Father Believe me, I do." She smiled, noting the way his eyes had narrowed thoughtfully. "Unlike you, I don't believe in destroying my opponents. Not when there're more . . . satisfying ways of winning."

Her father was silent for a long moment, swirling the Scotch in his glass. Then he spoke, very quietly, "He's dangerous, Ria. So is Korendil. After I find Korendil, I will deal with this Bard of yours, I assure you of that."

Her back stiffened, her head came up. Like hell you will. Father!

"Don't touch him," she said in a voice like ice. "If you do—"

Perenor smiled.

She tightened her jaw at the sight of that poisonous smile. As though he just scored a major victory, that old bastard—

"Of course, my dear," he said smoothly. "I didn't realize you were so ... concerned about this Bard of yours. I never thought you would become so attached to him so quickly."

"Attached? Hardly. It's just—he'll be very useful to me," she said, carefully choosing her words. "That much potential is far too valuable to be wasted. Father. I didn't make this company what it is by squandering profitable property on mere amusements."

She hid a smile as her own dart scored, and Perenor's back stiffened. "And he'll be safely under my control, no danger to you or anyone. I'll make sure of that."

Yes, he'll be mine, mine to control, and to use, possibly even against you. Father dear—

"How do you intend to control him?" Perenor asked idly, sipping from his drink. "I would think that controlling a Bard, someone of such unfathomable power, might even be beyond your capabilities, my dear."

She shrugged. "I lied to him."

"What did you tell him?" Perenor glanced at her over the rim of his whiskey glass.

"That we're moving the nexus. That the magic is fading, and if we don't do something, it'll die. Technically, that is true—though it won't happen for at least another thousand years. And when that does happen, it's likely that the magic will simply find another weak point in the veil between the worlds through which it can flow easily. Creating a new nexus. Or so you instructed me. Father dear."

Perenor smiled. "Not bad. But what if he learns the truth?"

"After tonight, nothing will matter to him but me."

Her father laughed, honey with gall. "You have a lot of confidence in your abilities, daughter."

"I think both of us do. And with good reason." A thought suddenly occurred to her. "What did you mean, Father, after you find Korendil? Don't you know where he is?"

Perenor cleared his throat uneasily, not meeting her eyes. "Actually, I don't. For some reason, I can't seem to locate him. It's more than possible that he didn't survive the night, of course. Very likely, in fact. He would have bled to death from those wounds in a few hours."



Oh my. Father dearest, have you, of all people, actually fumbled something? Certainly, Korendil is dead—unless he's alive, and somehow hiding himself from you. Oh, this is amusing. I never thought I'd see the day that you'd admit you were incapable of anything.

"Not that it matters," her father added, a little too hastily. "There really isn't anything Korendil can do against us. My only concern was that young Bard, though if you feel you have that situation well in hand—"

Ria smiled. "Believe me, I do." In more ways than one, Father.

Perenor drained the last of his Scotch, setting the glass on the cabinet. "Well. That sounds quite definite." He raised an eyebrow at her. "I may visit you, Ria, after tonight, just to see what you do with this young prodigy."

I'll bet you will. And I bet you'd like to get your hooks into him as well. Believe me, I intend to leave him much more intact than he would be after some time in your tender hands. I have more in mind for this Bard than simply to use him once and cast him aside. My plans are much more . . . permanent.

She realized her father was scrutinizing her with a very speculative gaze. "What if he doesn't show up?" Perenor asked bluntly.

She froze for a moment. Would he—

No. No man had ever walked away from me.

"He will. I know he will. He doesn't have any choice in this."

No choice at all, she thought, realizing at that moment that this young man was drawing her as much as she was drawing him. Which she hardly dared admit to herself, much less to her father.

No, he has no choice. Not any more than I do. There's something pulling our lives together, binding us—Power calling to Power—

Whatever happens, he's mine. And no one, not even my father, is going to stand between us.

He has to come to me tonight. I know he will. He has to—

•12•

No Irish Need Apply

Eric stared through the grimy window, as the RTD bus chugged painfully up the hill over the Sepulveda Pass to the Valley. Even though it was still early in the afternoon, the traffic was already slowing to a turtle's pace, creeping along the freeway through the smog-shrouded hills.

His mind felt just as smog-shrouded. Nothing seems to make sense anymore . . .

He leaned against the glass, gazing down at the cars creeping past the bus.

Only a few days ago, everything seemed so ... normal. I was hustling days, playing different gigs nights, Maureen and I were still together, life was fine. Now, in less than three days—

He sighed, and rubbed the back of his sweaty neck with his hand. Now there's two women in my life. And one elf.

How did my life get so complicated so fast?

Eric wedged himself closer to the glass and closed his eyes.

Ria Llewellyn. Even her name is magical. What a combination. What an incredible combination. Corporation president, a half-elf, and one helluva lady. Not to mention staggeringly beautiful. She's like something out of my dreams. It's hard to believe she's real.

But there's something about her—

He recalled the odd light, the predatory chill in her eyes when he'd left her, and shivered involuntarily.

There's a funny intensity there when she looks at me.

Like a cat, a cat that's got a mouse trapped, and is thinking about playing with it instead of eating it. It's damn scary—like I'm nothing to her, only a toy, or a tool—

A car honked right under the window, but the sound seemed to come from another world entirely. As if the world that held traffic jams and the world that held Ria Llewellyn couldn't possibly be the same. He replayed the scene with her over and over in his mind, concentrating on it, trying to sift some kind of meaning out of it, but all he got were contradictions—

—like that other way she looked at me, like she's just a child, only wanting someone to hold onto, someone who'll take the pain away. So lost, so vulnerable. It took everything I had to keep from taking her in my arms right then, trying to comfort her. It's like someone hurt her once, hurt her real bad, and she's never admitted it to anyone, maybe not even herself.

He chewed his lip with frustration. God, I can't make heads or tails out of it; one minute she's about to take a piece out of me, the next, she's like a little kid—

And yet another facet of memory focused. —Then she changes again—she looks at me with that little bedroom smile, those come-hither eyes, teasing—inviting—brushing her hand against mine—

He blushed, and pillowed his head into the crook of his arm, hoping no one in the bus was watching him. I don't understand that, either. Sure, I'm always making a fool of myself in front of women, but she—she's really something. All I want to do when she smiles like that is drag her off to a cave somewhere. That's not like me, usually. I try to be a little more . . . dignified about my sex life.

And everything about the meeting was washed in a kind of glowing fog. The more he tried to concentrate on some memory-fragment, the more the memory slipped into a haze. It's so hard to think straight when I'm around her. It's like everything is wrapped in gray fuzz, I don't know where I am, what I'm doing, what to think.

And that led him back around full circle, to last night and this morning. Those memories were as clear as crystal, everything sharp-edged and diamond-cut. That's sure not like the way it is with Beth. With

Bethie, I always know what's going on.

Or, at least, I think I do—

He pondered that, and concluded ruefully that maybe he didn't know what was going on between himself and Beth.

She's got me going too, I guess. I mean, I thought we had something special, something really nice. Maybe even something permanent. I think she understands me, better than anybody else. After all, she's kinda like me, she's a gypsy too. I make my way by playing street and gigs—she works in TV. A production manager is always between gigs, moving from studio to studio, or on hiatus, like she is now. She understands how it is.

But when he'd looked for her in the lobby, she'd been gone.

She didn't even wait for me, back there at the Corporation. Just left without me.

Maybe she thought I'd already taken off—after all, I did kinda vanish from the protest meeting. But she didn't even leave a note with the receptionist—

It had been like the time his mother had forgotten to pick him up from school. He'd stood on the curb forlornly for an hour, clutching his flute, watching for the car that never came—until one of his teachers took pity on him and took him home.

Another car—or the same one—honked again, and this time he jumped. Well, that really doesn't matter, I guess. What matters now is what I'm going to do. I just don't know who to believe, Kory or Ria. Which of them is telling the truth?

Korendil—what he'd said—the elf believed his own words, that was the truth, anyway. But how much of the truth?

Kory—I really don't know what to think about Korendil either. Everything is moving so fast, too fast to figure out. I like him—he's a friend, like no other friend I've ever had—

But there's something about him that makes me feel so . . . uncomfortable. The way he looks at me, like I'm everything he ever dreamed of, the answer to all of his prayers. It's more than a little embarrassing. And whatever it is that Ria's got—that magnetism, that . . . allure—he's got it too . . .

God, why am I thinking that? Maybe it's just that he got himself so trashed trying to keep Perenur away from me and Bethie, or the fact that we healed him, but—I feel so—

He gave himself a mental shake. Confused. That's how I feel. All of this is so confusing, Kory, Beth, the magic—Ria—He clenched his fingers in his hair. God. Magic. I can't disbelieve in it anymore. What we did this morning to heal Kory, me and Beth—it happened, it was real, as real as I am. Which means that it all is true, the elves, the magic, everything. It must be true—I am a Bard. Whatever that means. And—and if that's true, then what happened, all those years ago, it was real, too—

He shivered, huddled close against the window. The memory came back, as clearly as if the living nightmare had occurred just the night before.

He was standing on the stage, the bright lights making everything look so distant, out-of-focus—the

orchestra was beginning the first notes of "Danse Macabre."

Then he began the opening solo.

And the music—suddenly it was so strong, so powerful, better than he'd ever played before; everything coming together and clicking into place and perfect—

Then—

Caught in the spell of the music, he began to shiver. The weird melody called up his nightmares, the things of childhood; the things that lurked under the bed, behind the closet door, and waited for the light to be turned off—He felt unfriendly, hungry eyes on him—looked out of the corner of his eye at the wings—

—and saw them.

The watchers in the darkness of the theater, the creatures detaching from the shadows. Unnoticed by the audience, gliding toward him like cloaks of liquid night, hands outstretched, reaching for him—

He stood there, frozen in place, not believing what was happening—

Then flung the flute away and ran, ran—his throat so choked with fear he couldn't even scream—just whimper—

He opened his eyes, and clenched his hands on his knees to stop their trembling. I ran all right. Ran like hell. The conductor was horrified by the kid prodigy freaking out backstage; my parents were freaking out almost as bad as me. Two years of psychoanalyse, of everyone telling me that it wasn't real, it didn't happen. I just imagined it. Two damn years being told I was crazy that night. Then the kids at Juilliard found out about it—

More years of taunting, tricks with things being hidden in his closet, with "practical jokes" and attempts to scare him into another fit of hysterics in public. Notes addressed to "Loony Banyon." Getting on the mailing list of every nuthouse in the country. Good old Chuck Marquand, the second-best flautist at Juilliard, setting up phony appointments for Eric with the local shrinks.

Beginning to doubt his own sanity.

But—if all of this is real, then that was real, too—those things, staring at me with such hunger and need, they were real; creatures that shouldn't exist but did, and because of me.

Because of me—

Because I'm a Bard.

Christ.

He tried to laugh at himself. You know, I really wish somebody else could've been picked for this honor. How did I get so lucky? Anybody else would be better for this. Like Bethie; she'd be perfect. She's got it all together, knows what she wants to do; she never falters or feels like she can't cope.

He gritted his teeth to keep from shivering. I do, all the time. I'm not the right one for this, for whatever it

is I'm supposed to do. I feel like I'm being pulled in all these directions, with no idea which way I want to go. Everyone wants so much from me—

But he needed answers, and the only place he was going to get them—

—was from himself.

I'll figure this out for myself, that's what I'll do. I'll make my own decision, and stick to it That's it.

He glanced out the window, and leaped to his feet, diving for the rear exit of the bus. Shit, I missed my stop!

Eric stumbled down to the street, and looked around sourly Oh well. It's only a few blocks back to the apartment. I'll live.

He trudged across the intersection, sidestepping several kids on skateboards. With the way my luck has been lately, I'm likely to get run over by a rollerskater in Woodley Park. What else could possibly happen that would complicate my life even more than it is now?

Strike that. I don't even want to think about anything that might complicate my life!

Eric started down Sherman Way, past the sprawling Post Office building. Ahead of him, he could hear the faint roar of a cargo plane taking off from Van Nuys Airport, only a few blocks away. Probably one of those big World War II bombers. I think some of those pilots are still living through the war, the way they fly those big clunkers. Not living in reality.

Hell, who am I to talk about living in reality? Me, the Bard, with my best friends the witch and the elf. Some reality, Eric.

He coughed a bit as a junker growled past, burning more oil than gas. More had happened to him in the past week than had happened in the last year—

And it had taken some of the starch out of him, that was for sure. He was sweating by the time he reached his apartment, hot and tired, and a little gritty.

He'd never noticed quite how much of an eyesore the tacky old pink building was. He couldn't help but contrast this—and the steel and chrome sleekness of the Llewellyn Building. And Ria Llewellyn's office—no plastic couch with a lump in it for her. Nothing but the best . . .

So what could she possibly see in him? Grubby little busker, no money, no muscles, nothing a woman like that couldn't have just by snapping her fingers—

Maybe she saw the same thing that Beth and Kory did. Whatever that is

He unlocked the security door and trudged down the hall to his apartment, suddenly wanting both of them around. Needing them. Badly.

I need a sanity check. I need to find out how much of what she said is true—and why she's so hot on me—

But as he unlocked the door of his apartment, a voice spoke from the shadowy living room before he

could call out.

"They are not here, Bard."

A voice like broken music.

He opened the door, slowly, carefully.

There was an elf sitting on his living room couch.

Blond, like Kory, and long-haired, but his hair was unkempt and neglected, dulled and brittle. Tall, gaunt, with lines of pain etched around his mouth and eyes. And the eyes themselves—

If Kory's eyes were crystalline emeralds, and Perenor's clouded jade, this elf's eyes were reflections of the sea on a moonless night. Deep gray-green, and haunted, they gave Eric the feeling that something too terrible to think about moved beneath the surface. Ancient eyes, anguished eyes.

Eric tried to speak, and found he couldn't get his mouth to work until the elf looked away. "W-which one are you?" he stammered, as he shut the door behind himself "And where are they?"

"I do not know," the elf replied, again in that beautiful, ruined voice. "They had departed before I arrived." He raised a wing-like sweep of eyebrow at Eric. "I took the liberty of removing the blood from the carpet. Dangerous, to leave it there, and not just for Korendil."

Eric could feel a thousand unspoken, fear-ridden questions behind the elf's calm facade.

"Yeah, well, we weren't thinking about that—"

"No. I would imagine—from the amount—" The elf's eyes closed briefly, and the pain-lines about them deepened.

"Was the boy badly hurt?" he asked, his voice a harsh whisper.

"Yeah," Eric began. "Perenor really trashed—"

The elf opened his eyes, and sea-fire raged in them. Eric flinched away from his fury.

"Danann—if he is dead, I swear by my honor I will—"

"He's okay—" Eric stammered, interrupting him. "W-w-e healed him. Me and Beth—"

The elf stopped, frozen. "You. Mortals. You healed him? And you put no binding upon him?" A darker emotion lurked in those gray-green eyes, rolling with restrained violence.

Eric blinked. "Say what?"

"No, I see that you did not." The fire died in the elf's eyes, and he slumped a little. "No Bard would, I think. It was not all Dreaming, then, what the boy said of you. Korendil is wiser than I." He pondered that for a moment, then placed one hand on his chest and bowed, with a smile of self-mockery. "Bard Eric Banyon, you see before you all that is left of Terenil, prince of Elfhome Sun-Descending. I would ask for your help."

Eric felt his jaw slipping. "My help? But—"

The elf rose and walked a little closer, and now Eric could see that he was dressed, incongruously enough, in stained, scuffed, deep-scarlet leather. Like Robin Hood, only in red. Eric's jaw slipped a little more.

"Well . . . that is less than the truth," Terenil admitted. "I came to search out Korendil; I could not sense him nor trace him with magic, and I feared—"

Eric felt a chill; if Terenil could find his way to the apartment, how long would it take Perenor? "How did you know he was here?"

"The blood," Terenil replied. "Suddenly I could sense the blood. But when I arrived, he and the witch had already gone. I was not certain what to think; especially after I found the blood and . . . those—"

He nodded his head toward the chair next to the door. On it were the ravaged and bloodstained garments Korendil had been wearing. Eric eyed them mournfully.

My best Faire shirt—and my boots—

"It was only moments later I heard your footsteps. I still cannot sense him, therefore she must be shielding him. If he has been hurt, that is just as well—"

"Yeah," Eric said vaguely. They're not here—so they must be at Beth's place. That means he was in good enough shape to move. Jealousy cramped his throat. No wonder she didn't wait around for me. Why should she? What am I, compared to him? What have I got that he hasn't got more of? And on top of it all, he's an elf. What'd that old guy say to her? "You've finally got your wish"? She's been looking for an elf like him for years . . .

"Bard—I still need your help." The elf broke into his unhappy thoughts. "Please—help me."

"Why?" Eric spat, suddenly angry at the whole race of elves. Yeah, I can guess what Beth is doing, now that she's found her elf. They're probably—

"Because—" Terenil's shoulders sagged. "Because no one else will," he said raggedly. "Those few of my own who are not lost themselves have given me up for lost. Even Korendil. I—I failed him, last night. I failed him ..."

Eric's anger ran out of him. "Hey," he said awkwardly. "Like, it wasn't your fault. You aren't in real good shape, y'know?"

Oh shit. That's it—that's probably why she had to move Kory in a hurry. He was in lousy shape, and she didn't want to risk Perenor tracking them down. Maybe that blood . . . well, whatever. That's probably why she didn't wait.

Though I really wish she'd left me a note . . .

"And whose is the fault, then?" Terenil asked, his voice rough with self-accusation. His eyes caught Eric's for a moment, just as Kory's had—

Thoughts ran wild in his head, with an underscoring of lament, dirge to something lost past recall.

Korendil vanished; more of the Low Court falling into Dreaming by the day. Those of the High Court who had not gone north to Elfhame Misthold or under the Hill, had slipped hopelessly into Dreaming themselves. Without Korendil to rally the High Court remnants, to help him—it was useless to struggle on against the Dreaming. For he, who should have been able to protect them, who was responsible for protecting them, was helpless, helpless . . .

Only a Bard could have saved them—and Perenor had seen to it that there would be no Bards here.

So why not give up, give in, let Dreaming take him too? They were all doomed. Better that he would not be capable of witnessing or understanding the end . . .

Despair too profound even to register as pain nearly knocked Eric to his knees. Only once had he ever run across anyone who lived with anguish like that. An ex-'Nam vet named Tor, up at the law school at Stanford, who used to let Eric stay with him between Faire weekends, feed him and give him crashspace on the dorm floor when the busking got too thin—

And who used to get drunk with him when the pain was too much, and neither of them wanted to get stoned alone.

Wonder what happened to Tor? It's been years. Did he ever get out to Colorado like he always said he wanted to?

He answered Terenil's despair with Tor's own words. "Sometimes shit happens, no matter what you do. Sometimes all you can do is try and keep yourself in one piece, so you can figure out what happened, and figure out how to keep it from happening again." Yeah, you had the right idea, old friend—

He was rewarded by seeing some sanity come back into the Prince's expression.

"I have done poorly at even that," Terenil replied bitterly.

Eric cocked his head to one side, and took a really close look at him. Well, he looks pretty strung-out, but he doesn't look drugged. And hell, enough people have written me off—too many times—

I'm damn sure not gonna slam the door in his face.

"It happened," he said. "Not even one of you incredibly powerful magical type elves is going to be able to change the past. So, how can I help you out, your Highness?"

Terenil raised his eyes to meet Eric's, astonishment erasing some of the pain-lines.

"You'll help me?" he said incredulously.

Eric shrugged. "Sure. Why not? I think you deserve help. I don't know that I can help you much, but whatever I can do, I will. I told Kory I'd do what I could for the elves, and last time I heard, you hadn't turned in your union card.

The gratitude in Terenil's expression was as hard to face as his rage had been. Eric had to turn away from it—and to cover his lapse of manners, picked up the ruined clothing and looked it over, hoping to find some sign it could be salvaged.



"It is beyond repair, I fear."

The voice was right in his ear, and he jumped, dropping the shirt. "Y-yeah, it's pretty totaled," he agreed. "I mean, I don't grudge it, but—how come he had to take my clothes?"

And how the hell did he ever fit into them?

"Because, Bard, we cannot create with our magic. Alter, easily. Copy, yes—if we know the article intimately. But not create. Only a Bard or a very powerful Adept can create something from naught but power."

"Okay—but why my clothes?"

"He would have been rather conspicuous without them," the Prince said dryly. "Being as he was bespelled wearing his armor—and so woke in the same condition."

"Lots of people wear armor on the Faire Site," Eric objected.

"Armor like this?"

The Prince straightened, gaining at least two inches in the process—and began to glow . . .

Eric closed his eyes; the Prince's outline wavered in a way that was making him slightly ill—and besides, he was hearing music again—

Slow, majestic chords; a massive pipe organ, like the one in that chapel in the Santa Cruz hills—

The music faded, and he opened his eyes—and lost his jaw entirely.

The Prince looked like a Prince now; clad head-to-toe in some fantastic suit of gold and scarlet enamel, chased and filigreed and articulated so finely Eric had no doubt that Terenil could dance in the stuff. It made the armor in the movies look modest and restrained. Not to mention bulky and awkward.

Terenil favored him with an ironic half-smile.

"Yeah, I see." Eric swallowed. "I guess he would have been kind of conspicuous."

"And he was bespelled ten years ago. The only clothing he could replicate—assuming he could spare the mage-power, which I do not think he could—would have been bell-bottomed jeans and leisure suits. Bard Eric; or High Court garb. Equally conspicuous."

The idea of Kory in a polyester leisure suit made Eric splutter with laughter. When he looked up again, Terenil was back in his scarlet leather.

"I guess—I guess I don't mind so much," Eric admitted. "Not when you put it that way. But—" He surveyed the blood-stiffened boot in his hand with regret. "I'll miss my boots. Be a while before I can afford another pair."

"If you will permit?" Terenil took the boots from him, held them in front of his chest, and frowned at them.

A quick, staccato chord—

The mocassin boots were gone. What was in Terenil's hands was something else entirely. Eric had lusted after the famous "Faire boots," tooled and decorated, hand-made, custom-fitted boots, for years. These made those look like his worn-out moccasins. Brilliant scarlet, and embellished with tiny metallic gold sunbursts—

Like Terenil's armor.

"Not your colors, I do not think," the elf muttered; and as a strange little fluted melody played behind Eric's eyes, he watched the tint deepen to wine, watched the sun-bursts vanish, to be replaced by a simple vine and leaf pattern, all in silver, threading from the sole to the top.

"Here," Terenil said, with a touch of pride, holding the boots out to him. "In simple things, at least, it seems I have not lost my abilities."

Eric took them. This is it. I have gone around the bend. I am no longer operating in this reality—

Nevertheless he kicked off his sneakers and pulled the boots on. It was almost with relief that he found them to be miles too big

Thank God. Reality. Next, I find out I'm wearing Baggies on my feet, and that he hypnotized me.

"They're—"

"Indeed, I expected. They are, after all, copies of mine." The elf knelt for a moment, and ran his hands down Eric's legs—

The feeling of Terenil's hands upon him was disturbingly sensual.

Christ! First Kory—

Then the leather moved, tightening around Eric's calves and feet until the boots might have been painted on him. He'd have jumped, if Terenil hadn't been holding his ankles.

Jesus H—

The elf stood and straightened. "Now do they fit well enough. Bard Eric?"

Eric swallowed hard. "Uh—yeah, sure."

Too weird for words. Definitely.

I'm almost afraid to think what could happen next . . .

The Prince hailed a cab at the curb, directing the driver to some place in Beverly Hills. Eric was too bemused to note the address. He kept expecting his boots to turn back into Baggies, or into his old, ruined pair.

All this talking about magic—but these are real; I can touch them. And Kory being healed was real, too.

It's not talk, it's not FIX. It's happening.

The cab stopped. Terenil produced a fifty from nowhere (literally), and handed it to the driver, who opened the door for them. Eric found himself stepping out onto a driveway that looked like it went on for miles.

The cab pulled away, leaving them standing beside a wrought-iron gate with more security hookups than Eric had ever seen in his life.

Terenil idly placed his palm on one of the mysterious black boxes, and Eric heard a complicated burst of twelve-tone—

And the gate swung open.

"I have the feeling that this isn't your house," he said, nervously. "Are we going to get arrested for breaking and entering in the next five minutes?"

Terenil raised his eyebrows again. "Are you more concerned with the impropriety of appropriating someone else's property, or the possibility of being caught at it?"

"Being caught," Eric said promptly, with a grin.

"You should have been born one of us." The Prince pushed the gate completely open and beckoned to Eric to follow him. "The owner of this manse is an old friend of mine. He is currently in Eire, and will be for some months. He has left only one caretaker, who is surfing, and will not return until sundown. I have convinced the alarms that we hold the proper keys. There will be no police here."

The driveway did go on for miles, white and glaring under the afternoon sun. "So why are we here?" Eric asked, following the scarlet figure up the hot stretch of concrete. "I have the feeling you've been here before."

"I have," Terenil sighed. "Often—though not for this purpose, precisely. I came here when I ... needed a place . . . undisturbed."

Eric flashed on a glimpse of one of the elves last night, sitting in a corner stoned out of his wits. He nodded to himself. Yeah. Being an elf isn't going to keep the cops from hassling you by day if they think you're blitzed.

"So why are we here now?" Eric persisted.

Terenil moved off the white desert of concrete and onto a path of tastefully arranged stones. "We are here. Bard Eric, because we need a place undisturbed. A place of combat, and this manse has such within it."

Place of combat?

"What's wrong with the park?"

They had reached a portico of rough-hewn redwood beams. Terenil played his trick with the door, and it, too, swung open at a touch. He strode inside as if he knew exactly where he was going.

He said he did.

"This a place where we will not be conspicuous," Terenil said carefully, leading the way through the tiled entry and down a birch-paneled hallway. "My abilities are not . . . what they were. I cannot make us 'invisible,' engage in combat, and hold my memories in your mind, all at once. Two of the three, yes, but not all three. Here."

He touched another door and motioned Eric to precede him, and Eric found himself in a dojo.

Who the hell's house is this, anyway?

"Why do I need your memories?" he asked in confusion, as Terenil shut the door behind them.

"Because, Bard, I need very badly to regain my skills in fighting, both by blade and magic—and to do so, I need an opponent." He tapped Eric's chest with an outstretched finger. "You."

"Me?" Eric's voice squeaked.

"Indeed."

The elf-prince placed his hand on Eric's forehead before Eric could scramble away.

The world vanished with a shout.

• 15 •

Fatee true Loue

"In truth, Terenil, this is indeed schizoid," Eric said dubiously, taking his stance where the elf-Prince pointed. "I don't think I like it. I feel as though I am me and you, too. It is quite weird, facing myself like this."

"I would imagine," the elf agreed; he moved to about twenty feet away from Eric, and stood with his legs braced. He shook his hands to loosen them, and flexed his fingers. "But giving you my memories is the only way in which I shall face an opponent of equal strength and skill. I used to spar thus with Korendil—"

"Well, he's in no shape to do that right now anyway." Eric shook his head to try and settle all the alien thought-patterns. They kept floating around inside his skull, intruding when he least expected them to. Strange patterns, somehow delicate, yet fraught with an intensity he had never—

Oh shit, first I start talking like him—now I'm starting to think like these pointy-eared jokers, too!

"Am I going to keep this shit in my head forever, or can you get rid of it when you're done?" Eric asked plaintively.

"Without my sustaining the memories, they will fade, and quickly," Terenil assured him with a faint smile. "I am just as pleased to be facing you, in truth—Korendil is no kind of mage, and Perenor is both warrior and mage. If I am to confront him again, I shall need my skills at both."

"Well, how'm I supposed to know what to do?"

"You do not," Terenil said, with just a hint of maliciousness. "You simply react—"

He pointed his finger at Eric.

And suddenly there was a burst of trumpet-blare, and a bright glowing ball was hurtling straight for him.

Shit!

Eric yelped and dove for the floor.

"Interesting, though not particularly effective," the Prince observed. "Granted, I would not have thought of that."

"But—" Eric protested from his position on the mat.

"Dodging will not help you a second time. Bard—"

This time two of the orange balls of flame were coming at him. He threw up his hands in a pathetic attempt to ward them off—

And one of those other memories stirred. Without understanding what he was doing, he reached for ... something. And when he had it, he twisted it into a C major arpeggio, strong and resounding.

And a ball of red flame intercepted Terenil's two, consuming them.

"Excellent!" the Prince laughed. "And I would not have thought of that, either!"

"What's that supposed to mean?" Eric panted, getting to his feet.

"You have my memories of working magic—but you use your own powers. Like so—"

Roar of brass. Lightning lashed down where Eric stood—

Except that he wasn't standing there anymore. He'd dodged again, and that something inside him acted. He heard a musical run like a trombone cadenza, saw he was sending a streaming lance of fire—like a flamethrower—straight at the Prince.

Who deflected it (crash of cymbals) but not easily.

Hey, I'm not doing too bad at this! Eric Banyon, mage-warrior, just like something out of Tolkien! Hah, take that. Prince Terenil!

Then Terenil got serious.

After a few moments of being chased around the dojo, Eric began searching—frantically—for those strange memories, calling them up on purpose instead of being used by them. He began fighting back.

The Prince was grinning.

And while Eric wasn't exactly relaxing, he was beginning to see what was going on. There was a distant source of energy, of power, that he could touch, use.

The nexus—

And he could do things with this power. After several more exchanges, he began to see the patterns, the relationships between what he heard in his mind's ear, and what was actually happening.

"Couldn't you have made yourself a robot or something?" he squeaked, when a lash of fire came a little too close and he realized that Terenil was not holding back.

"A simulacrum would not have free will. Bard," Terenil replied, dodging Eric's return volley. "It would be like fighting a mirror. Not good enough. I do like your evasive maneuvers, by the way. Perenor will never expect me to drop to the ground to avoid a flamestrike."

"Hey, whatever works, y'know?" Eric yelled again, as a little tongue of lightning snuck around behind him and connected with his rump—

I'm gonna charge you for these jeans, you pointy-eared creep!

He fired off a series of things like Roman-candle balls (staccato bursts of clarinet), none of which connected. But the attempt forced Terenil to move rather briskly, which at least was some comfort.

At least I'm giving him a run for his money—

Then Terenil hit him with the Big One.

A thundering D minor chord from a double orchestra—

A whirling wall of light descended on him.

And the memories momentarily deserted him.

He had no idea what to do, how to counter the thing—and there was no place to run from it. He reached in desperation, gathering everything he could find and throwing it—

A major.

The wall stopped, not two feet away from him, held there by the glowing shield he had somehow erected between himself and it.

"Enough," said Terenil, and the light vanished. Eric stumbled backward a few steps, and when he reached the wall, collapsed against it and slid down it.

He was sweating, and exhausted, and panting hard to catch his breath. It was no compensation to see that the Prince was in the same shape.

"You did very well," Terenil said, lowering himself down to the floor beside Eric. "Very well. Better than I had anticipated. Forgive me; I forgot that you are not a trained sorcerer there at the end. I had not intended to use that bit of magery on you; it is far more powerful—even when muted—than I would ever have used in practice against anyone but an experienced magician."

"Oh," Eric replied, feeling somehow deflated. "That's why I sort of lost everything. So you stopped it?"

"Why . . . no." The Prince gave him a peculiar look "You did."

Eric had hardly enough time to get his breath back before Terenil had him done up in a copy of his own scarlet-and-gold armor, facing him with sword in hand. The armor turned out to be no more uncomfortable than a set of motorcycle leathers Eric had once tried on. The sword, however, felt very strange, and very alien in his hand.

But the actual sparring proved to be easier than the stuff Terenil had been putting him through up until then. The memories he needed here were simpler; physical memories only. He could relax, put his mind in neutral, and let his body take over. It was kind of fun, actually—

Until it got to be work.

Then hard work.

Then painfully hard work.

Finally Terenil called a halt, and made the armor go away. There was a low bench at Terenil's side of the dojo; Eric sprawled on the floor with his back braced against it, head thrown back, eyes closed, getting his wind back.

I'm sweating like a horse. I don't think I've ever worked this hard before in my life.

"Here." He felt the familiar chill of a metal can in his hand, and didn't stop to wonder where it came from. Terenil had magicked it up somehow, of course—

I'm beginning to take this magic stuff for granted, like microwaves and telephones.

"Thanks," he said; fumbled for the pop-top, and took a long pull. all without opening his eyes.

Yeah. Nothing like a Coke, sometimes.

"And here." Eric opened his eyes at the tap on his arm. Terenil had done the thing with the fifty-dollar bills again; he held out two to Eric. "I will not leave with you," the Prince said. "And you will need a cab, true? Just be very careful not to spend these in the same place."

Eric took a good look at them, and realized they had exactly the same serial numbers. He raised one eyebrow at the elf.

"As I told you," Terenil said shrugging. We cannot create, only copy."

And I bet the Treasury Department would love to talk to you about that...

"So," Eric said, after his second swallow. "What's with all this? Why did you suddenly decide you wanted to take Perenor on again?"

The bench creaked as Terenil settled beside him. Eric opened his eyes. The Prince looked as completely exhausted as he was; hair dripping sweat, the leather tunic gone, muscles trembling with a little weariness.

He was slumped over, elbows on his knees, hands wrapped around his own can of soda, looking at a point on the floor between his feet.

"Because I must," the Prince replied. "You know, you came very near to defeating me. Bard. More than once. I am not what I was."

"I'm not Perenor—"

"Precisely." The Prince sighed. "If I were to meet him as I am at the moment, the result would be the same as last night. All that saved me then was Korendil's luring him away from me. If Perenor has a weakness, it is that he prefers a moving target to a defeated one."

Eric couldn't think of anything to say. Except—"But you'll still challenge him anyway?"

"I must," the Prince said simply. "For the sake of the others."

"You've seen them, Eric. Lost in Dreaming—I think it's kinder to pull the plug."

Maybe not exactly Ria's words, but certainly the sense of them.

"What makes you think you can do anything for them?" he asked bluntly. "I mean, I've seen them—"

And I saw you. A real brain-dead stoner, last night. . .

Terenil winced, as if he had heard the thought. "I do not know that I can, I only know that I must try."

It was Eric's turn to wince away from the conviction in his words. He covered it by draining his cola—and as soon as he put it down, there was a second, water beading on its sides, on the bench beside him.

Yeah, so maybe he can't handle his drugs. But he's not so gone that he still can't think beyond himself. He wants to do something meaningful, even if he isn't actually capable of carrying it off. And what have you done with your life, Banyon?

Not much.

"What's with this thing between you and Perenor?" he asked.

The Prince tossed down the last of his soda and magicked himself up another can. "Hate," he said. "That is what is between us." He grimaced. "One of the two emotions that we are taught to avoid at all costs ..."

"Huh?"

Terenil pulled damp hair behind his ear, and turned his head a little to look at Eric. "We are virtually immortal, Bard. Our lives are measured in centuries, not decades. That can be as much curse as blessing. Firstly, we are few in number. Secondly, strong emotional ties bind for centuries, not mere decades. Your legends call us light-minded and frivolous in our affections—but think you for a moment. Suppose you have a love that turns to dislike. But you are tied to the place where that love dwells, and there are perhaps a few hundred inhabitants of that place. Try as you will, you must see that love every day. For the next thousand years. Unless one of you finds a way to leave." He shrugged. "So do we avoid both love and hate, granting either only when there is no other choice."



"So, why are you and Perenor—"

"A fundamental difference in the way in which we see you and your world. Bard. It began when we journeyed with Maddoc of Wales, knowing there was another land at the end of his sail. We left because we were being crowded by humankind. I thought, and the Queen, that if we could establish ourselves and put down deeper roots than those we had aforesaid, we could coexist with your world. Share it, despite your use of Cold Iron."

"Sounds like a good idea to me," Eric offered tentatively.

"So it has proved, most places. It was only that here, I misjudged in placing the nexus. Or perhaps—" He looked up at the wall opposite himself, frowning, then shook his head. "I cannot recall. It may be that Perenor urged the placement there. He may have been working against me even then . . . Well, our Queen took a group north to establish Elfhome Misthold; I remained here with a second, smaller group, mostly of Low Court elvenkind who must be tied to physical places. I established Elfhome Sun-Descending. Then Perenor began showing his true motives."

"This was how long ago?" Eric asked.

"Before the Spaniards." Terenil frowned again. "Perhaps . . . ten to fourteen of your centuries. Time does not hold as much meaning for our kind."

Jesus, I guess not! Eric stared at a being who looked no more than forty years old, and felt a little stunned.

"So. We had found a place for a nexus; the Queen's Bard—a human, like yourself—opened it and created the anchoring point for it, and the Queen and most of the High Court had gone on up northwards. Then Perenor began spreading his poison. Why, he said, should we be subject to the vagaries of humanity? Why should we allow their lives to rule what we did? We had magic at our disposal; our lives were infinitely longer—why should we not rule them?"

Terenil took a swig from his can, and tightened his lips, angrily. "He did not mean only to rule—he meant to enslave. I could see that—and fortunately, so could most of the rest. And that was enough to keep him in his place for many years."

"God." Eric shuddered at the notion of having Perenor as "Master."

Somebody who can read your thoughts, and touch the innermost part of you . . .

"Jesus, Terenil, how the hell did you guys see through him? And—I mean, why didn't you just go along with him?"

Terenil gave him a lopsided grin. "You humans make poor slaves. Bard. Your own history should teach you that. Soon or late, you rise beneath your chains and go for your masters' throats. We had all seen enough of history to know that. And . . . there was still another reason. Of all the wondrous things we can do, we cannot create. Our 'culture,' if you will, is made up of what we have borrowed from you humans. And a slave generally is very poor at creation. After all, why should he create anything, when it is his masters that have the benefit of it, and not himself? There are deeper reasons, too, but these will suffice."

Enlightened self-interest. It never fails. Eric chuckled to himself.

"So, there was mistrust of Perenor on my part, hatred on his. Your people moved to this valley—and then it all began to fall apart for us. You moved too quickly for us to be aware of what was happening. We learned too late that you were trapping us in mazes of Cold Iron, cutting the groves off, one from another. I and those of the Lesser Court who were mages worked to find a solution—for without an Adept, which we did not number among ourselves, we could not reestablish new ties to the nexus, or move it elsewhere. I was so preoccupied with this that I did not watch Perenor. Finally I learned that he was working forbidden magic against the humans, draining them to his own use. I caught him in the act—"

Terenil stopped, wiped the back of his hand across his eyes, and finished his soda in a single gulp.

"I caught him in the act of draining a child. A child who would have been a Bard. I realized then that he had probably been doing this evil for as long as humans had been within his reach—and that he had destroyed our chances of moving the nexus by destroying the children who could have grown to be Bards. That is when I exiled him."

"But he didn't leave—"

"Not so. He did, for a brief while. He found a human woman who could have been a great magician if she had chosen to train her powers, and fathered a child upon her—yes, Bard, that is possible, although it requires the intervention of magic. He raised that child himself, training her in sorcery and elven magic. Human magic—it is very rare, but it is powerful. Perhaps because it is buttressed by all the potential of your brief lives ..."

Terenil brooded down at the floor until Eric got tired of waiting for him to pick up the story again.

"Then what happened?"

"Oh. Then he returned to challenge my rule again." He discarded the can he was holding, and magicked up still another. "That was not all that long ago. I fought them for days, with young Korendil at my side. Korendil. He was—is—my best hope, you know. He has scarce two centuries, yet there is such wisdom and courage in him—he amazes me. Sometimes he frightens me—he is so like a human—so passionate. I have tried to warn him from passion, from caring so deeply—"

"The fight," Eric prompted.

"Oh, aye. We fought them and drove them out again, though not without cost to both worlds. I was badly exhausted. We roused things across the Barrier that were best left sleeping, and the battle itself started a fire, the one that burned out Bell Canyon." Terenil looked at him, and blinked. "Are you old enough to recall it?"

"I read about it," Eric said, half to himself.

"I thought I had banished them. I thought ... I don't quite remember. Danann, it all fades, it all blurs . . . Then Korendil vanished, and left me the only one of the High Court still aware, with all the rest of Sun-Descending lost in Dreaming. To try further seemed ... so futile. Perenor gone, the girl-child gone, Korendil gone. Nothing left—enemies, friends, all gone—"

Too late Eric heard the slurring of his words, the rambling. He had seen the familiar red-and-white cans they were both drinking from—but the meaning of those soft drinks had not occurred to him.

Caffeine. Terenil had downed at least three cans of Coke as they'd been sitting there, and was working on the fourth.

"—nothing left," the Prince murmured. He looked up as Eric got to his feet, but didn't seem to recognize him. His eyes were glazed and unfocused, his hands shaking.

"Mortals," Terenil said sadly. "Don't open your heart to mortals!—that's an old saw, and I told Korendil that, over and over. They die and they leave you. Leave you alone. Don't you. Bard? You always leave us, no matter what we do—"

The elf's head sank; his hand loosened and the empty can of Coke fell from it, to roll around on the floor. As Eric watched, Terenil slid from the bench to curl up in a drunk—or Dreaming—stupor on the floor.

The cab ride home was very depressing. Sunset was grayed-out by haze tonight; in fact, the whole world seemed grayed-out and lifeless. Eric had never felt so alone.

God. Maybe Ria's right, maybe it's better to pull the plug on them. Even the best of them can't stay straight for a single afternoon.

He rethought everything Ria had said, compared it to what Terenil had told him. He couldn't see any flaws in what she'd told him about herself, and she'd admitted that her father was doing things she didn't approve of. And yet—yet it didn't feel quite right, as if she was telling the truth, but not all of the truth.

I need Beth, I need Kory. I have got to talk to them.

The cab pulled up outside the tacky pink apartment building, and pulled off as soon as Eric paid the driver. He hadn't asked the cabby to wait, but he had been figuring he'd just duck into his apartment, change his shirt, grab his flute, and warn them he was coming.

He got the first two done inside of a couple minutes—but when he called Beth's apartment, all he got was her answering machine.

"Beth?" he said, when the recording ran out. "Bethie, it's Eric—are you there?"

There was no answering click of the phone being picked up.

He went blank for a moment, then took a deep breath and went on. "Beth, some stuff happened back at the demonstration, some pretty heavy stuff, that's why I sort of bugged out on you. Beth, I'm on my way over, I've got to talk to you and Kory real—"

Click. Dial tone.

He hung the phone up carefully, and stood there for a moment with his gig bag dangling from one hand. His mind just wasn't working; he just couldn't picture what could have happened that she wouldn't be there.

Oh God—what if they're in trouble, and I was out fooling around with Terenil. What if Beth didn't make it here? What if she got arrested back at the Llewellyn Building—

Strike that. Terenil said she was shielding Kory. So she took him from my place. They were together

then, and I'm pretty sure she wouldn't leave him alone. Which means they're still together. In her apartment. And they're not answering the phone.

Which means what, Banyon?

He thought about them, closing his eyes the way he had when Ria had tried to ... contact him—

He blushed at the memory. But he tried it anyway, reaching out with that something he'd been working with, thinking very hard about both of them. It seemed like there was a "Bethness" and a "Koryness" that were both tied into him somehow, a tiny touch, as though they were both resting a hand on his shoulders, and that he could follow that to the real people,

It worked; he started to see very vague images against the blackness of his closed eyes. But not that vague. Beth and Kory—together—

Anger flared and banished the images from his mind, and he could not recapture them. He struggled for a moment to calm himself down, but every time he tried, he could see them—

You've been played for a fool, Banyon. All that talk about "commitment," being a team, and the first thing Beth does when she gets Kory alone is jump into bed with him. Damn her!

His hurt and jealousy settled into a burning lump in his throat and the pit of his stomach. He clutched his flute against his chest and struggled to breath slowly.

I ought to—

No, violence never got him anything. Violence wasn't the answer.

I could be wrong. This could be my own lousy imagination. I have a dirty enough mind. I can't stop thinking about how Kory is such a hunk, how Beth must be attracted to him. That's probably all this is—just me and my overactive imagination.

He trembled with suppressed anger and with indecision. I ought to go over there, and see for myself. I could be wrong. But if I'm right—

The cab ride into Tarzana was accompanied by a growing rage, and an increasing sense of betrayal. He had taken long enough for a shower and a change of clothing, trying to wash some of his unhappiness and anger away. It hadn't worked, and he spent the ride in silence, his throat aching, his flute case clutched in both hands. By the time he reached Beth's apartment building, he was no longer sure of anything.

"You'd better wait," he told the cabby, as he passed him the change from the first of Terenil's fifties. "There's a good chance I'll need you right away."

The cab driver shrugged, pulled out an SF book, and kept the meter running.

He'd been tempted, back there in his own place, to throw the money in the trash and send the boots after.

But Terenil hadn't been the faithless one; the Prince had tried (*noblesse oblige*?) to make up for the damages that had been inflicted on Eric. He hadn't strung Eric along; he'd been honest with him.

"Don't open your heart to mortals."

Yeah, guess not. Don't trust them with the real truth, either.

Still, Terenil had been fair to him. So he had put the boots on and stuffed the cash in his pocket and called another cab.

He ran up the clattering wooden stairs, stairs that led up the side of the building to Beth's second-floor apartment. He was so knotted up inside it felt like he was going to have to double over any minute. He knew where to go; he'd been here before. He headed straight along the balcony until he reached the end and the last doorway. He started to pound on the door, but it swung open at his first knock.

"Eric, if that's you, I'm in the kitchen," Beth called from somewhere beyond the half-open wooden door. "If it's not, you're in trouble, whoever you are."

He froze, hand on the door handle. He really didn't want a confrontation.

I could go away now, and never know—never have to face what's been going on.

No. I have to know. He pushed the door open, shoving it a little harder where it caught on the carpeting.

Beth's voice floated down the hallway, past the living room, guiding him. "Eric, I'm sorry I didn't pick up the phone when you called, but we were bus—"

He stepped in through the door of the tiny yellow-painted kitchen and stood staring at her from within the frame of the door. She was standing beside the window in a T-shirt and a pair of cutoffs, her hair plastered wetly to her head, as if she had just washed it. He caught a whiff of shampoo-scent as she turned. She took one look at the expression on his face, and froze in mid-word.

He felt his mouth twitch, and shoved his hands angrily down into his pockets. Busy? Yeah, I'll bet you were busy.

Before he could get a single word past the hard lump choking his voice, Korendil (wearing nothing more than a towel draped negligently around his waist) strolled through the other door—

The one leading to the bedroom.

The elf's long blond hair hung in damp, dripping ringlets, and there were beads of water on his shoulders.

Looks like he's sure made a full recovery.

Kory didn't seem aware of Eric's presence at all; he moved easily, gracefully, showing no signs of any of his injuries, and no hint of lingering weakness.

"Beth—" Kory made a caress out of the word, and leaned over, embracing her, to give her a very warm, very sensuous kiss. His mane of hair hid their faces, but Eric had no doubt that she was enjoying it. She had both her arms around him, returning the embrace—oblivious to Eric still standing there.

Like I don't mean a thing to her.

He started to turn to go. The gig bag knocked against the doorframe, and Kory broke off the kiss,

pivoting quickly to face him, his hands coming up in a gesture of either attack or warding. Eric backed up a pace.

Korendil's wary stance relaxed when he saw who it was—but then he saw Eric's expression, and frowned in puzzlement.

"Yeah," Eric said slowly, ignoring the elf. "It looks like you were busy, weren't you? Too busy to even think about me."

"Eric—where were you?" Beth asked, pulling self-consciously away from Korendil. "You just vanished on me. I looked for you, I really did."

"Uh-huh." He sniffed, and swallowed, and couldn't clear the lump from his throat. "Yeah. I had to ... I saw Perenor, Beth. He was in the building. I was scared shitless, Beth—" He blinked his burning eyes to clear them. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I had to move Kory before my protections wore off ..." Her voice trailed off and she looked away from Eric.

"Sure." Eric shifted his weight uneasily, feeling as if his skin were off and all his nerves were screaming. Korendil began toweling his hair, carefully not looking at Eric.

Eric's insides knotted up. Korendil—God. A hunk by anybody's standards. Christ, why should they give a shit about me? Beth doesn't need me—not with him around. Okay, he needs this Bardic magic crap. So he's nice to me. Big deal, he's nice to me so he can use me, just like

everybody else.

"So, what happened?" Beth asked, too casually.

"A lot," he replied. "I ran into the lady that runs the corporation. Literally. Her name was Ria. Ria Llewellyn."

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Kory stiffen at this mention of that name.

"A very nice lady, a very blonde lady, a very sensible lady. She had a lot of things to tell me. Things that made a lot of sense."

More so now than they did then.

"Eric?" Korendil said very softly. Eric wouldn't look at him.

"So, all things considered, I guess I don't need to stick around. You look like you're doing fine without me. Maybe you guys had better find yourselves another Bard, huh? Maybe a girl this time." Now he looked at the elf—or tried to. His eyes burned and blurred and he couldn't really see. "Yeah, that would be kind of nice for you, Kory. I . . . it's been real."

Eric pivoted and ran down the hall, down the stairs and out to the cab. He flung himself into the back seat, and fumbled in his pocket for the piece of paper Ria had given him.

They can find another sucker. It's time I started looking out for myself.

He rubbed the back of his hand across his burning eyes, sniffing, until he could read the address. But he couldn't—the letters and numbers wavered and he couldn't make them out properly.

And he thought he could hear someone calling his name.

"Here—" He shoved the paper and the second fifty at the driver. "Can you get me there?"

"Eric! Eric, wait!"

The driver glanced at the paper. "Hey, no problem. What about your friends?"

He gestured at the apartment building. Beth was pelting down the stairs, Kory behind her, both of them waving frantically at the cab.

"They aren't my friends," Eric said, huddled into the seat cushions, holding his flute to his chest. "Let's go."

•14•

My Darling Asleep

The wind whispered through the trees, ruffling the surface of the swimming pool, rising and falling like a soft melody. Eric touched the cool metal of the flute to his lips, smiling to himself. It is like a song, a little dancing air. Very Irish, come to think of it . . .

But although he waited, fingers poised, no melody came to him; only a vague yearning and a sense of indefinable loss. He took the flute away from his lips, and moved his fingers restlessly and soundlessly over the flute keys as he looked out over the garden and the crystalline water of the pool.

He sat down on a marble bench near the water's edge, with the leafy fronds of a palm tree shading him from the bright Southern California sun. To his side was the sprawling expanse of Ria's house—No, her mansion, definitely a mansion. I've never seen a place like this before. It just proves what Ria says is true, that we can accomplish so much with our magic, working together—nothing we can't do—

But the silent flute mocked that bold statement.

So why cant I think of any new tunes? It's like there's an emptiness inside me where all the melodies used to be. I haven't been able to write a new song in days.

Eric sat up suddenly.

Days?

How long have I been here, anyhow?

He set the flute down in his lap, trying to figure it out.

I arrived here last night—no, it was two nights ago, last night we went to Maxwell's for dinner. Or was it

three nights ago? It's hard to remember.

The more he tried to remember the signposts of the passing days, the more they eluded him. I haven't really been doing much of anything, just listening to her CD collection on that fantastic stereo upstairs, exploring the library, and—and sleeping. I don't think we've gone to, uh, sleep, anytime before 5:00 A.M. for the last few nights.

He blushed, just thinking about it. Ria, she's—she's really—quite amazing that way. I wonder how she manages to get through the day without falling asleep at her office? I know I couldn't live on the amount of sleep she's getting. Two hours a night? Three? Forget it. I usually need at least seven—

An inexplicable chill crept down the back of his neck. That's funny; now that I think about it, I seem to be sleeping more than I usually do. And still feeling tired all the time. Shit, you'd think with all the napping I've been doing, I wouldn't be feeling anything but wired.

Hell, that doesn't matter. What matters is that tune I wanted to play, the one that keeps slipping away from me. Maybe if I just play something I know, rather than something of my own, it'll come to me by itself.

He brought the flute to his lips again, took a breath, and began to play the old Irish air, "Come to the Hills." He stopped after several bars, and looked down at the flute in consternation.

What in the hell is going on here? I sound awful. It's just . . . notes. Nothing special. Like there's no life to it, no magic. Dead.

I've never sounded like this before in my life . . .

Something more subtle than a recognizable sound distracted him. Eric glanced up, to see the sliding glass door open quietly. Ria stepped out into the garden, wearing a dark blue dress and carrying her high-heeled shoes in her hand.

She glided towards him. "Hi, handsome," she said, leaning down to kiss him. "I couldn't bear the thought of you here all by yourself, so I decided to come home for an hour or so. Want to do something interesting for lunch?"

"What did you have in mind?" he asked, standing up.

She gave him a wicked look. Eric laughed, and pulled her into his arms for a lingering kiss, flute and music totally forgotten.

Ria touched her fingertip to his lips. Now, now. Behave yourself, love. I have to be back at the office for a one o'clock meeting. Otherwise, I know exactly how I'd like to spend the afternoon."

"Better be careful, beautiful," he murmured against her faintly-scented blond hair, kissing her beneath her right ear. "Or you'll wear me out."

She pulled away from him suddenly. "Don't say that, Eric."

Say what? Why is she looking at me like that?

Ria took his hand in hers, her expression changing so quickly he couldn't be sure he'd seen what he



thought he'd seen. "I was thinking of something else. My father is inside the house. I wanted to know if you'll join us for lunch or not."

"Hey, why not?" He picked up the flute lying on the marble bench. "Let's do lunch with Daddy."

Bia watched her father with veiled suspicion, as Perenor speared a piece of pineapple with his fork, and slowly raised it to his lips. His eyes never left Eric, who was busily sawing the last of the meat off a chicken thigh.

"Delicious, Ria," the older man said, coolly. "I always knew you were talented—a brilliant businesswoman, a gifted Adept; it seems you make an excellent pineapple chicken as well. What more could a man ask for in a daughter?"

I'm sure you could think of something. Father dear. Like a daughter who wouldn't prefer to see her pet Bard carving out your tripes instead of a piece of chicken? "I'm glad you approve. Father. You know how much I enjoy having you visit here."

Eric glanced up, as if hearing something other than the spoken conversation, then smiled hesitantly. "I like the chicken too, Ria. I didn't know you could cook this well."

She smiled back at him, the adoring look in his dark eyes warming her even from across the table. "Thank you, love."

He bit hungrily into a piece of chicken "Though I can't figure out when you had the time to cook this. I mean, you've been at the office all day, and I know you didn't do this last night—"

"Don't worry about that, Eric." Ria refilled the wine glasses, then sipped hers thoughtfully. I still haven't spotted the reason why Father wanted to come over today. He said he was curious about Eric, but it has to be something more than that. If he wants something from me, I'm sure he'll tip his hand soon enough—

Her eyes narrowed, as she noted the intent way Perenor scrutinized Eric. I know what he's thinking. But if he so much as touches Eric, I'll Challenge him, right here on the spot. And in my home, I hold the distinct advantage, especially now.

Perenor pushed his plate away from him. "Truly excellent, Ria. I should come by here for meals more often."

"That would be nice. Father," she replied lightly. Next time, maybe I'll serve some steak with amanita mushroom sauce—or roast beef with aconite instead of horseradish.

Eric rose and began gathering several dishes in his hands. "I'll just run these into the kitchen—"

She gestured for him to sit down again. "Oh, Eric, leave it be. The servants will take care of it."

"No, it's all right, I don't mind." He balanced several glasses precariously on a plate, then carefully moved toward the kitchen.

Perenor glanced at her speculatively as Eric disappeared through the doorway. "You're doing quite well with him, Ria. I'm impressed."

She leaned back in her chair, giving him a patently false smile. "Why, thank you. Father. I'm rather

pleased with how things are going, myself."

He chuckled. "I am, too. What are your plans now?"

"Now, as in the rest of the afternoon, or the indefinite future?" She drained the last of her wine glass, watching him over the edge of the crystal.

"You know what I mean."

She shrugged. "Business as usual, I suppose. Why do you ask?"

What exactly do you want from me. Father?

"It's just—I was thinking of taking a little vacation, now that everything else is . . . taken care of. A visit to the High Court at Mithold. I was wondering if you and your . . . consort might want to join me."

Curiouser and curiouser. Just what are you planning, Father? "Sounds like it might be fun. We haven't been to Court in years. Is there any particular reason why you want to go now?"

Perenor's eyes were distant, as if looking at something only he could see. "Now that everything is under control here, I thought I might—"

So that's the game you're playing this time. Father! I should've guessed—

"No." Her voice was sharp and icy. "Absolutely not. If you want to do a power play in the High Court, you're doing it without my help, or Eric's. I'm not risking everything I have just so you can amuse yourself."

He stood up angrily. "You don't understand, Ria. It's the only thing that matters to me. You have influence and power over the mortals—that's all very well, but it's meaningless. They're nothing but pawns. It's only winning over those with power that matters."

She firmed her chin stubbornly. "I told you no. Father. I mean it. I helped you with the Faire purchase because there was something for me to gain. I have no interest in the High Court, or my full-blooded elven cousins. You can pursue this on your own, if you're determined to do it. I won't risk myself or Eric."

"It's not your help that I need," Perenor said quietly, but with implicit threat. "Just your pet Bard. I don't need your help, or your permission . . ."

Oh, really?

She called a small amount of Power, and raised a careful shield, not quite a Challenge, but something to let him know she wasn't to be trifled with. "I won't let you use Eric. Not for this, or anything. He's mine." She calmly met his furious gaze, the first hot tendrils of Power writhing around her hands, clenched beneath the table. Push me any further. Father, and we'll see what happens next—

"I found some cookies—" Eric stopped dead in the doorway, a plate of cookies forgotten in his hands, staring at Perenor and his daughter. She registered his presence, then dismissed him, ignoring the Bard for the moment, keeping her senses trained on her father.

There was a moment of tense expectation. Ria's eyes held Perenor's, unwavering, waiting. The instant I

sense him drawing Power, I'll strike. He must know that. If he does—

Perenor's lips curved slightly, a tiny smile, and he bowed ironically to his daughter. "Not now, daughter," he said lightly, then walked to Eric and took a cookie from the plate. "We'll have to continue this discussion at a later date, Ria," he added. "I need to take care of some business. May I borrow some tapes from your video library, my dear?"

"Of course. Father," she said. Her eyes never left him as he walked to the stairway. Every day, it seems, we come closer and closer to a final confrontation. But, somehow, we avoid it each time. What is going to happen when we can't avoid it any longer?

I wish I knew what was going on here. Eric set the dirty plates down on the counter and wiped his hands on a nearby dish towel. For father and daughter, those two argue a lot. Not that I blame Ria, her dad is kinda opinionated. I've never felt quite comfortable around him, either. Something just makes me feel—oh, I don't know—like I don't want to be near him any more than I have to—

Something nagged at the edge of his memory. Something . . . important. Something he couldn't quite recapture. Green eyes, like Perenor's—looking up at me with such pain—and blood on my hands, blood on silvery blond hair, on the carpeting—

He dismissed the image. That's ridiculous. Must be from one of Ria's videos. I don't know anybody with silver-blond hair.

He spent several minutes trying to figure out how to start the dishwasher, then gave it up as hopeless. The servants will take care of it, like Ria said.

Servants? That was odd. There wasn't anyone here in the kitchen. And—I've never see any of them. Not a single person in this house other than Ria and me. But the house is always immaculate, spotless; the gardens well-tended, everything in terrific shape. I wonder if they work late at night or something? Maybe when we're already in bed.

That's just one of so many things that I don't understand—

He wiped the counter clean with a sponge, then turned, hearing a sound behind him.

Perenor stood watching him from the kitchen doorway, several videocassettes held negligently in one hand. The older man smiled. "And how are you doing these days, boy?"

"Just fine," Eric said, his throat strangely dry. "Where's Ria?"

"Oh, she's already on her way back to the office," Perenor replied. "I just wanted to talk to you for a few minutes before I leave, too."

"Uh, sure," Eric nodded. What is it about this man that makes me feel like I want to run away, as fast and as far as I can?

Perenor walked several steps closer. "We've never really had a chance to talk, you and I. That's a pity—I'd like to get to know you better."

"Ria—Ria's told me a lot about you." A lot that I wouldn't repeat in polite company. She sure doesn't like you very much, even if you are her father.

"I'm sure she has," Perenor said, his voice sounding amused. His eyes met Eric's, brilliant green. "Now, let's—"

—green eyes, like ice, deep pools of emerald nothingness. Everything fading, disappearing into that void; falling in, consumed, ashes and dying flames.

He was having trouble breathing—seeing—hearing—

And music, a strange warped polyphonic sound, rising up around him. It set claws into him, dragging him in, touching, where no one should touch. He could feel it dismembering him, pulling away pieces in its claws, pieces of himself. He was losing himself, falling; feeling everything whirling away into nothingness—

No! Let me go!

Everything being wrenched out of him, everything he cared about, everything he loved—

Eric reacted instinctively, drawing upon a half-forgotten memory.

A clear burst of chord, a strident A major thrown up like a shieldwall, shoving the hungry void away from him; a flash of light and sound, illuminating the shadows.

The warped music shattered into a thousand notes, falling away into silence.

He leaned against the counter, panting, his heart pounding.

Oh God—oh God, what was that?

He blinked several times, completely disoriented; the room was blurring around him, everything hazy, things melting into each other.

When he could see again, Perenor was standing very close to him, but the elf-lord's eyes were wide with astonishment and disbelief. His hand, with its elegantly manicured fingernails, still rested intimately on Eric's shoulder.

He took a deep breath, then another. "Don't—don't touch me," Eric said unsteadily, shoving Perenor's hand away from him. "Don't touch me."

Perenor stared at him, not speaking. Then he turned, and strode away. A moment later Eric heard the front door slamming shut behind him.

Eric collapsed against the counter, trying not to shake. God, what's happening to me? I feel like everything is falling to pieces around me. Nothing to hold on to, nothing I can understand.

He staggered into the living room, and sank down onto the plush couch. I'm losing it. I'm really losing it. I'm so tired, it's all so crazy. Nothing makes sense anymore.

Eric stretched out, closing his eyes, the velvet of the couch soft against his cheek. It's easier not to try to think, not to worry about anything. Just let everything drift—just fall asleep, and it'll all be gone when I wake up—

—busking in a New York subway, trying to ignore the rancid reek of stale urine from the restroom across the tunnel, looking down at the handful of coins in his flute case. Sag of despair.

No, that's not even enough to pay for another night at the Y, much less a meal and a bunk.

Out of the echoing tunnel, that hateful, unforgettable voice, loud above the dull roar of the crowd.

"Well, if it isn't Loony Banyan—"

Looking up. That face. Those greedy eyes. Chuck Marquand, the second-best flautist at Juilliard. Looking at him, and smiling; a smug, self-satisfied smirk.

"It's been a while, Eric." A laugh; a braying, triumphant laugh. "You know, you look like hell."

Eyes that raked over his clothing: the dirty jeans, layers of plaid flannel shirts against the cold.

"Poor old Loony. Here. Let me help you out." He reaches into the pocket of his thigh-length leather jacket, fishes out a bill. Drops it in the case. "For old time's sake. Banyan."

I should take that money and stuff it down his arrogant throat.

But it's a twenty, lying there among the dimes and quarters.

He can't reach down to pick it up. He can't move. Instead, he starts playing again, a fast version of a Mozart sonata.

Chuck laughs and walks away.

The notes fly faster and faster, until the music and the subway are one blur, invisible behind the veil of tears, inaudible over the clanging noise of the trains and the laughter of the pedestrians.

Twenty dollars means a place to stay for the night. A hot dinner. A bus ticket that'll get me out of this miserable city.

I should've rammed it past his teeth.

Oh God, what have I turned into?

Choking on sobs, gasping, the flute sliding from his hands, that damned twenty burning a hole in his flute case.

Crying . . .

"Eric? Are you all right?"

He opened his eyes. Ria was standing over him, a concerned frown on her beautiful face. Eric sat up slowly, his head aching.

From clenching my teeth in my sleep, yeah.

"I'm—I'm fine."

"No, you're not. You were having a nightmare, weren't you?"

He nodded hesitantly.

She sat beside him, and touched his shoulder gently. "Talk to me, Eric. Tell me about it."

No. No, you wouldn't understand—

"Yes, I would," she said, very softly, and moved over closer on couch next to him. "Eric, I care about you, a lot. If something or someone has hurt you, I want to know."

She does. She cares, I know that. It's just—I can't talk about that, not to her, not to anybody—

:Eric. Please. Talk to me.:

Okay. Okay. I will.

"It was years ago, Ria." He buried his face in his hands. "Not long after I quit Juilliard. I was busking from city to city, barely making enough to live. I was busking the subway. It was November, and cold. I looked up, and there he was. Chuck Marquand, who was second chair back in the orchestra—standing there in his fancy suit, his leather coat, laughing at me. And hen—shit, he'd always hated me, I don't know why—he ... he gave me—" He felt the tears beginning to trickle through his clenched fingers. "He gave me money, and—God, I've never hated myself so much in all my life—I took it, I needed the money so badly—"

He rubbed his eyes fiercely with his knuckles, looked up at her, and managed a wan smile. "Hell, I can't believe a dream is affecting me like this."

She didn't answer; she only looked at him with those wide blue eyes, bright with tears.

"It was one of the most awful times of my life," he continued, after a long silence. "I was starving, but I wouldn't go back to my parents, and I couldn't get even a McDonald's job. And then Chuck, humiliating me like that—I wanted to die, I just wanted to crawl away and die—"

"I—I know how that feels," Ria said, very quietly. "All those times when I was a child, when we would go to the High Court and my father would talk about me like I wasn't even there. His half-blooded daughter, not a real elf. The little mongrel. How useful I would be, when I grew into my Power. That was all he cared about, that he'd have a half-human sorceress to use in his little games."

"Ria—"

She's crying. I've never seen her cry before.

As if hearing his thoughts, she dashed away her tears angrily with one hand. "It's all in the past, Eric. You're never going to have to busk on a streetcorner again, ever. And my father—he knows he can't use me now. I won't let him."

"It's not in the past, if it still bothers you," Eric said slowly. "Like that rat. Chuck Marquand. I can't forget him. You can't forget what your father did to you."

When Ria spoke again, her voice was remote, distant. "You know, I used to be scared, when I was a kid, that I'd grow up and be just like him. That I'd enjoy hurting people—" She glanced at him, tears trickling unnoticed down her face. "I don't. I don't like hurting people. But sometimes you don't have any choice—"

"Hey, you've never hurt me," Eric said, carefully brushing the tears from her cheeks, his own tears forgotten. "You've never been anything but wonderful to me, more than I could ever imagine. Even if you do look like a raccoon right now, with all of your makeup dripping down your face."

She hugged him tightly. "Oh Eric. I don't know how I lived before I met you." She smiled, despite the tears. "I'll never hurt you, Eric. I promise, whatever happens, I won't hurt you. I just—I just hope you'll understand someday—why I do what I do. And—and that you'll never leave me."

"I'll won't leave you Ria," he whispered. "I love you."

Eric turned the page; trying to read his novel, but unable to concentrate. It's like I've forgotten something, and it's nagging at the back of my mind. Something, can't remember what it is—

:Bard! Bard, can you hear me? Eric?:

He looked across the room to where Ria was seated at her desk, poring over a set of contracts, a pair of wire-rimmed reading glasses delicately perched on her nose.

"Ria?"

She glanced up and smiled. "Yes, love?"

Eric shook his head, slightly bewildered. "—Uh, it's nothing. Sorry I disturbed you." I could've sworn somebody was talking to me, calling my name—

He opened the book again, and took another slow sip of Scotch from his glass.

Then an image came to his mind: the moon shining clearly down on the lonely hills, the chitter of crickets, the night air cold and crisp in his lungs, with the faintest scent of the ocean. A perfect night for a walk—

A walk—yeah, that would be nice. I love walking through this neighborhood, all the huge houses, fancy cars in the driveways. That's a terrific idea. I should've thought of it earlier.

He set the book down, finishing the last of the Scotch. "Ria, would you like to go for a walk outside?"

"Not tonight. I have to finish these contracts for tomorrow. But you should go out, if you want to."

"Okay." He stood up, stretching slowly. "I'll be back in a bit."

He left the library, and detoured to the bedroom for his jacket before heading downstairs. It'll be nice to get outside. I've been spending too much time indoors, the last couple days.

Eric unlocked the front door, then stopped, just as he was about to step outside.

There's someone out there. I can't see them, but I know it—somebody hiding in the shadows.

Then a figure moved into the pool of light beneath the driveway lights. A smallish young woman with black hair cut very short and punk. She just stood there for a long moment, looking at him.

Like she knows me—

He blinked, then smiled, remembering. Oh, right, that's Beth Kentraine. We used to play gigs together, do shows at Faire, that kind of stuff. I wonder what she's doing here in BelAir?

And then he saw someone standing next to her, a haggard young man with wild blond hair that curled over his shoulders. That's funny. He looks familiar, too. That cloak he's wearing—I've seen that before, too. Kinda like my boots, in a way.

"Eric—" Beth said. Her voice cracked. "Eric, what's happened to you?"

He just looked at her, unable to understand her. "I don't know what—"

"You don't know?" She walked closer, and he could see the tear-tracks down her cheeks. "We didn't know what happened to you, whether you were alive or dead. You abandoned us, Eric. Why didn't you come back?"

Abandoned her? Say what?

"We were worried about you, Eric," the man said, stepping closer. Eric could see the tips of pointed ears showing through that mop of hair. So he's an elf, like Perenor. Jeez, that's weird—why is Beth Kentraine hanging out with an elf?

"Look," he said, trying to be patient. "Beth, I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't even seen you since that last Faire show. And I'm sorry that I missed the gig at the Dive, but I never promised you I'd show up—"

She stared at him, her hands curling into fists.

Whatever shit she's on, I hope I never get talked into trying it!

"Beth, take it easy," he said soothingly. "It's okay. I'm alive, obviously, and I'm doing fine. If that's all you came here to find out, then I think—"

"No Bard—you do not think. You are not thinking at all," the young man said quietly. "You are caught in your own kind of Dreaming, and you went into it willingly."

He glared at the interloper.

Just who in the hell do these two think they are?

"Listen, Beth, it's nice to see you and all, but I'm a busy guy, y'know?" He turned, and glared aggressively at the strange elf. "And you, mister, I don't even know who you are, where do you get off talking to me like that?"

They just stared at him. Like they're seeing a ghost. Or something that isn't real. What's going on here? Who is this guy, anyhow?



"Eric?"

He looked back to see Ria standing in the hallway directly behind him. "Yeah, Ria?"

"Who're you talking to?" She walked closer, resting her hand on his shoulder.

Then she glanced past him, and her eyes narrowed dangerously.

And he heard something—something deep inside his mind. In Ria's voice. :Well, well. Uninvited visitors. I should've guessed— Korendil and the little witch, both here to take Eric away from me. Or did he call you here? Well, that doesn't matter right now—:

Ria raised one clenched fist, her mouth set in a furious line, eyes burning with anger.

Music, a minor descant, starting from absolute silence and building to a thunderous roar in the space of a single heartbeat. . .

The blond elf reacted instantly, grabbing Beth by the wrist. Before Eric could blink, they vanished, both of them, as though they had never been there at all.

What in the—

Eric turned back to Bia, and was startled by the venomous look in her eyes. He fumbled for something to say. "Ria, I don't know what you're thinking, but ..."

Her voice was icy. "I know exactly what you were doing, Eric. Don't bother lying to me. I should never have trusted you."

"But I didn't—"

"The first time I turn my back, there you are, consorting with my enemies! I should have guessed you would do something like this, you traitorous bastard! Damn you, Eric Banyon!"

She stalked away from him. After a moment, he hurried after her. In the hallway he caught up to her, taking her by the shoulder and turning her towards him. "But Ria, I didn't do anything!"

The look in her eyes stopped him in his tracks.

:Traitor. Deceiver. Snake. I bring you into my life, give you everything you could ever want, and this is how you repay me? I want to throw you to the sharks, drop you out of an airplane at thirty thousand feet, use your guts for clothesline. Nobody plays me for a fool, Eric.:

He backed away from her, into the dining room.

You know, I think she's really mad at me—I'd better do something quick to calm her down—

Before he could speak, the porcelain vase on the table exploded into shards, right before his eyes; closely followed by the table itself, which splintered and burst into silver and red flames.

Maybe it's too late for that—

He backed towards the kitchen, unable to look away from the fury in her eyes, even as the house fire alarm began to wail shrilly.

"Now, Ria, don't do anything hasty ..."

"Oh, don't worry about that Eric." She gave him a smile that chilled his blood. "I intend to take my time with this."

Amidst the roar of flames and the noise of the fire alarm, Eric heard a faint melody, gathering strength and speed with every split second—

Oh SHIT!

He dived to the floor, just as the entire contents of the china cabinet assaulted him from above. Dozens of dishes shattered around him, jagged shards drawing blood from his face and hands. Eric rolled to his feet, sliding through the doorway onto the linoleum floor of the kitchen—

—where every appliance was whirring at high speed. Eric didn't stop to look; he continued his home-run slide toward the living room, bouncing down the three steps and landing in a heap on the ornate Persian rug.

Oh God—she's trying to kill me!

He had time for a brief thought—this can't be happening to me—before the rug attacked him.

Eric screamed hoarsely as it wrapped around him. He struggled to free himself, feeling the thick rug pressing tighter and tighter against his face, choking him; then he pulled free and kicked the rug away from him, gasping for breath.

Eric glanced back to see Ria, standing in the doorway. "Was this what you were planning all along?" she hissed. "To worm your way into my confidence, then use everything against me?"

"Ria," he gasped, "I don't—you don't—"

"I'll teach you what happens to people who double-cross me, you bastard!" She slammed her hand down, the sound barely audible above the raging cacophony in the house.

Pain hit Eric like a fist, doubling him over, making it impossible to breathe, impossible to do anything.

Music, disharmonic chords, tearing at me—have to stop it, stop her, break free, get away—

HELP ME!

He reached— and touched something. Something dark. Something deadly. It wanted to come to him—and he opened a door to it.

The pain vanished instantly, as a darkness moved into the shadows of the room, itself a shadow, gliding from nightmare into reality. He took it all in instantly: the sudden stillness, as though the entire world had stopped moving for a moment; the creature, gaining substance and strength with every moment that passed. The ghost-hands reaching toward Ria, and the look of absolute terror in her eyes.

And he realized that he had called this thing—and it wanted Ria.

It's going to—No! Not—not her! Leave her alone!

The creature turned sightless eyes toward Eric, and suddenly he could feel its not-thoughts. inside him, one with his pulse. Hunger and need, hunger and need, and aching emptiness—

No. Not her, and not me. Go away!

He pushed at it, at the thin fabric of chords that was the creature, and felt it unraveling beneath his touch, dissolving into nothingness. When it was gone, he looked up at Ria.

She was still standing in the doorway, clutching onto the door jamb, visibly trembling.

"Ria? Ria, are you okay?"

She shook her head once, not looking at him.

She—she doesn't look like she wants to kill me anymore. That's something, at least.

Eric stood up painfully. His flute case was still on the living room table; he picked it up slowly. He walked past Ria standing silently in the doorway, and out the front door. Outside, the cold air seemed to slap him in the face, a sober awakening.

What now?

I don't have money for a taxi, and I'm sure the buses don't run in this neighborhood.

Eric looked back at the house, wondering if Ria would try to stop him. Plead with him not to leave, maybe. He waited a moment, then sighed.

Not likely, Eric, not after that last bit of fireworks. I think I really scared her.

I sure know that I scared me.

Damn. Helluva way to break up with a lady.

He glanced at the lightless hills around him, and began trudging down the long driveway.

I guess I'm walking home tonight.

•15•

Tamlin's Keel

Well, maybe this wasn't the best route for getting to the Sepulveda Freeway—

Eric looked around at the shadowed hills rising around him, the darkened landscape with only a hint of

the moon peering through the clouds for illumination. I don't think I'm lost. I mean, I kinda know where I am. Somewhere between Bel Air and the San Fernando Valley—

He snorted. Yeah. That's most of Southern California. Face it, Eric, you're lost.

Eric kicked at a rock, and squinted at the sky. Might as well keep walking. Sooner or later I'll have to hit a street, or a housing tract. The Hollywood Hills don't go on forever, after all.

But I must be the only guy in the world who's stupid enough to try and hike over them at midnight—

He walked carefully down a dry stream bed, sidestepping the rocks, the wild growths of shrubbery and trees. A sprained ankle, that's just what I need to make this night the epitome of stupidity.

He followed the stream bed up the next incline, stewing at himself, and staggered as a wave of disorientation hit him, a feeling like—like everything had been wavering out of focus, and now was back in again. Yeah, I sure wasn't thinking, when I started on this little hike. Or using my brain earlier tonight, either. That—that thing that I called, when I thought Ria was going to kill me—that could've munched both Ria and me, then gone off to eat the rest of Bel Air for dessert. Real bright, Eric. I'm just glad Beth and Korendil were far away when I did that cute stunt.

He sighed, and stumbled over an unseen rock. They're probably real ticked at me, anyhow. I sure didn't give them a warm reception when they showed up.

I didn't give them much of a reception at all—

He slogged through another stretch of scrub oak, using his flute case to push the low branches out of his way. I'll call Beth when I get home, and apologize. I don't know what I was doing, treating them like that. They probably think I was stoned off my ass or something, don't know what.

Or something—

He fought off another sudden wave of dizziness. That was really strange, how I didn't recognize Kory at first. Must've been the bad light outside. It's like, I was just thinking about that whole little incident just now, and I remembered that it was Kory standing there with Beth. Too weird for words, Eric.

The scrub oak caught at him, clawed at him. He barely noticed. Hell, it's been a weird few days, since that scene at Beth's, Tuesday night. I guess it's none of my business who she sleeps with. It's just that, well, it hurt. But then again, I guess I hurt them by running off like I did. And, whatever else is happening between all of us, they're my friends, so they were worried when I didn't surface after a day or two. Good friends, those two. I wonder how they tracked me down so quickly?

He sighed, glancing up at the pale aurora glow of moon through the clouds. Must be way past midnight by now. I've been walking for ages, or at least that's how it feels. Damn it, I knew I should've just walked down through the streets, instead of trying to shorten the hike by going through the hills. Stupid, Eric.

A lone owl hooted somewhere off to the side. If he hadn't been so stupid, maybe he could be curled up next to Ria, without a care in the world. I wonder what Ria's doing right now, back at the house? Is she worrying about like Beth and Kory were worried, or is she glad that I'm out of her life?

Things had been so good with Ria until this evening. c^y\_.she's really something. But I don't know if I love her or not. There don't seem to be any real connections between us—

Connections. Ties. Commitments. Hed never wanted them before—and Ria had offered him a life without them. But somehow now that seemed an awfully empty way to live.

The way I feel about her—it's not the same way that I feel about Bethie, or—or about Kory, I guess. I do care a lot about those two, it's a little like being really good friends, but more so. Like . . . family. Like we all belong together. Even with Beth, now that we've well, spent a night together. And Kory—God, but I still don't know what to think about him! But it's not this kind of, uh, fiery emotional stuff that I felt with Ria. Like everything was intense—

Too intense. Unnaturally so. And the, the sex, too, that was something. But . . . too much, somehow. That was very strange— Ria's very strange, that way.

He shook his head, then cursed under his breath as his hair caught on a branch. Wincing, he tugged it free. I don't know what to think about that lady, or the last few days. Bizarre. I only walked out a couple hours ago, but already all of it feels so unreal. Like it wasn't really me, it happened to somebody else.

As if it all was just a dream—

The more he tried to focus on it, the more unreal it seemed. Maybe it was a dream. It sure feels that way. Like I've been completely asleep for the last couple days—

A pair of clouded jade eyes gazed at him sardonically from memory. Oh, shit. Maybe I was asleep. I know Perenor can play games with people's minds, like what he did to me on the bus—what if Ria was doing the same thing to me? She's one helluva good sorceress, I learned that for a fact. Yeah, that was almost the last fact I ever learned, that's for sure.

And maybe that's why it's so hard to remember what I've been doing for the last few days, why it was so hard to think when I was in her house.

A memory of blue eyes interposed itself over the green. Blue eyes, wet with tears. But she said she loved me—

Yeah, well, different people show love in different ways. Maybe she didn't realize what she was doing to me. Or maybe she did, but she thought she was doing the best thing for me. I don't know.

He felt as if his mind was going in circles. No wonder Kory and Beth were so pissed at me, when they saw me at her house. They probably figured it out right away: Eric following Ria around like a lapdog, tongue hanging out, without an original thought in his useless brain. Jesus. I have been acting real brainless lately, haven't I?

Stupidity runs rampant in the life of Eric Banyon . . .

He swallowed hard. It seemed like all he was doing lately was messing things up. Well, I hope Beth and Kory will forgive me. I'll definitely call them as soon as I get home.

A sudden thought made him stop dead in his tracks. Hey . . . maybe I don't have to wait till then. I'm a Bard, I'm supposed to be able to do all of this magical stuff. The only times anything magical has ever happened, it's been an accident, when I wasn't trying to do anything. Maybe I can do something deliberately, for a change. Intelligently. Use this weird Gift of mine to get in touch with Kory and Beth.

He had stopped on the edge of a small valley, a tiny ravine with a grove of stunted oak trees visible below him. Eric concentrated hard, thinking of Beth: the sound of her voice, her laughter, the way she looked at him that night on the living room couch. Trying to reach out to her—

:Hey, Beth, pick up the phone. It's me, Eric, your crazy Bardic friend, calling you on the Ma Bell cellular brainwave line—come on, Beth, talk to me—:

Someone else spoke, a low, breathy voice, a whisper in the silent recesses of his mind: Who speaks in my dreams? Who awakens me from my slumber?:

Eric looked around, bewildered. Excuse me?

Who is it who walks silently through these hills, and calls to one who is far away? Who are you, intruder into my endless night?:

He sighed. Well, this is no weirder than anything else that's happened to me lately. Eric carefully constructed a reply, sending it out blindly to the unseen speaker. :Yeah, hi My name is Eric Banyon. Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up, I'm just passing through the neighborhood.:

:What are you?:

What? Eric looked around in surprise. What am I? That's one helluva question.

He thought about it for a moment before answering. Well, I'm human, of course. And a Bard—at least, every-one keeps telling me I am. Who are you?:

The reply came not in words, but in the rustle of leathery wings, high above the valley, spreading to block out the moon and the stars. :This is what I am.:

Eric looked at the monstrous thing looming above him, tattered wings beating soundlessly against the sky, and gulped.

Oh shit—I didn't need this, not tonight, not after everything else that's happened—

The blind moon eyes, pale white, turned towards him.

:You are a Bard, human?:

Well, yeah,: Eric thought back at it, trying to keep his mouth closed as he looked up at the bulk of the creature effortlessly aloft in the air above him, its sinuous neck craning down towards him.

I've never seen anything like this guy before, not even in my worst nightmares—I don't know if I should run like hell, ask him if he likes to play canasta, or what! What do you do with somebody who's a hundred feet long, aside from anything he wants?

:Good. I am hungry..:

Eric blinked once. Shock and sudden fear coursed through him as the creature's words registered. Uh oh—I don't think he's talking about doing margaritas together at Que Pasa, here—

The creature suddenly plummeted toward the ground, toward him, falling from the sky like a stooping

hawk. Eric didn't stop to think, he just ran; right down toward the only cover in sight: the grove of twisted trees below.

A whisper of foul stench slid past him, a hiss of breath and wings passing directly overhead; then the sound of claws, tearing through the rock where he had stood, until the stones screamed in agony.

Eric dived into the scanty cover of the trees, feeling a strange tingle over his hands as he grabbed on to an aged oak and cowered behind it. This—this is an Elf Grove, like the place at Fairesite. I can feel the magic, feel the life in the trees themselves. But there's no elves here— He tried to catch his breath, looking around unsteadily.

:No, there are not,: the oily voice murmured. :Lord Perenor summoned me here to despoil this Grove, and I have long since devoured the last of the Old Blood that resided here. But I am yet fortunate, for now you have arrived, a young Bard—:

:Hey, can't we talk about this?: Eric protested, glancing up through the leafy branches at the creature, now hovering a hundred feet above him. :I mean, I'm not really much of a meal for you. Kinda lean and stringy, y'know? Wouldn't you rather munch out on a horse from the Equestrian Center or something?:

:I am not interested in simple meat. Bard. I prefer the taste of one with Power, such as the Old Blood. Such as yourself.:

Oh, terrific, Eric thought crazily. Of all the monsters I could've run into, I get the guy with the gourmet palate, a connoisseur. He tried again, a different tack. :Look, you really don't want to do this. I mean, I'm going to put up a fight. It'd be a lot easier just to call it quits, right?:

He looked up as the huge creature soared past overhead, and ducked back into the shelter of the tree as several droplets of something foul and indefinable sizzled down through the leaves beside him.

:Why should you fight me. Bard? Why should you fight at all?: The voice in his mind was icy, mocking.

:I know you, young Bard. I can see who you are, reflected in the light of your own Power. You have always drifted, letting the winds of Fate direct your life, letting others make your decisions for you. You have never cared about anything—now, you do not care enough to run from me do you? You do not care about anything at all, even your own life . . . do you?:

Eric leaned back against the gnarled trunk of the tree, breathing hard. It's—it's doing something to my mind—it's so hard to think straight—confused—

:Come out of the Grove, Bard, where I can see you, away from the shrouding wisps of dying Elf-magic. Let me control your life, let me take away the necessity of decisions, the painful choices. All you have to do is step away from the trees . . .:

Eric shook his head slowly, waves of despair and desolation washing over him. Yes—I should—I should just let everything go. It doesn't matter, I don't matter—I'm never effing to do anything meaningful, anything that's going to make a difference. I might as well just let it all go—

:Yes,: the voice whispered :Yes. Abandon all the pain that is your life, let the dark oblivion wash it away. Come to me now. Bard.:

:Yes—yes, I will—:

Eric began walking toward the edge of the grove, the moonlit hillside beyond. In his mind he could sense a dark exultation, and a dreadful, anticipating hunger.

Then an image flitted across Eric's mind, of Beth Kentraine standing on the driveway, tears wet on her cheeks. "You abandoned us, Eric ..."

He stopped, one hand resting on a low-hanging branch. "Beth—"

:Come to me. Bard, come to me now—:

Anger raced through him like an electric charge, erasing the haze that the creature's spell had cast upon him. :Yeah, that's what you want, isn't it? Eric the Bard, your little midnight snack strolling right down your throat? Well, let's try it the other way—how 'bout me having some Cajun-style blackened monster for a change?: He leaped back into the sheltering trees, just as he felt and heard the creature's roar of hatred and frustration.

Then the grove exploded into flames around him.

Holy shit!

Eric rolled to the ground, trying to beat the fire off his jacket. Oh God—I'm going to fry in here if I don't do something quick— Gasping for breath, he fumbled desperately with the clasps of his flute case.

He shoved the pieces of the flute together, then glanced up through the burning branches, just in time to see the winged form arcing down toward the grove for another pass.

But the creature landed instead, crashing through the flaming trees. The huge clawed hands, the tentacled mouth dripping slime, all blindly lashing about, searching for the Bard.

Who was sprawled in the smoldering leaves, less than twenty feet away.

Oh God—oh God—it's trashing the Grove, trying to find me. If I run, it'll zero in on me in a few seconds. There isn't anything else I can hide behind. And if I stay here . . .

Eric brought the flute to his lips, and played for all he was worth.

"Banish Misfortune." Oh, God, please, if there's any resident deity around here, get me out of this!

The first notes were inaudible against the screaming fury of the monster, the trees shattering in its wake, and the crackling of the raging flames. Then the descanting melody broke through, stilling all to silence; even the crackling fire dimmed down to mere flickers of flame.

It's—it's working, something s happening—

He clambered to his feet, still playing the Irish tune, and moved toward the crouching monster. The pale moom eyes were turned toward him, transfixed.

I'm holding it, somehow. Now what can I do with it?

If I let it go, it'll kill me, just like it killed the elves, and probably every hiker and jogger that's been



through these hills in the last few months I guess—I guess I have to kill it. Now, while I'm holding it trapped.

A memory: he and Prince Terenil in the dojo, and lightning scorching down, barely missing him.

That wouldn't have killed me, though it sure would've been worse than sticking my finger in a light socket. If I do that, but with everything I've got behind it—I'm sorry. I wish I didn't have to do this. He raised his hands, and called the lightning. Scream of tortured violins. The sizzling roar shook the ground around him, followed by a reek of stinging ozone. For a moment, Eric couldn't see, blinded by the smoke and light—

:FearTerrorPAIN . . . fading, fading . . .:

When he could see again, the winged monster was lying motionless, its eyes open and staring. Eric covered his nose and mouth with his hand, overwhelmed by the reek of burned flesh and smoke.

Is it—is it dead?

:Bard—come closer—:

Involuntarily, he moved forward, caught in the dying creature's gaze.

:Yes—if I must to die, trapped here by a hated enemy, unable to fly from this valley and slain by a mortal, then at least I will take you with me, into the shadows.:

Falling into darkness, falling, dying, every thing fading—

NO!

Eric wrenched free of the creature's dying mind with an effort, shaking. The monster shuddered once, and was still.

He stood there for a long moment, clutching his flute with fingers that were too numb to feel it. I think it's really dead, now. Christ.

Eric staggered away from the huge corpse, away from the smoldering oak trees, to the open grass. He glanced back—

—to see the monster's body changing, dissolving into something else.

The wind kicked up, sending the dead ashes swirling away from the barren trees, scattering the pile of dead leaves and ragged black plastic sheeting. The plastic crackled in the wind, like the snap of leathery wings.

It's—it's really gone. I killed it God. He managed another few steps before falling to his knees, unable to walk, retching his guts out, trembling in every limb, and covered in ice-cold sweat.

Oh God, oh God—I've never been so scared. But it's dead, it can't come after me again, it's dead, it's dead, it's gone, it's dead . . .

Eric stood on the top of the ridge, the wind running invisible fingers through his long hair. The lights of the

San Frenando valley glittered beckoningly before him, the winding road through a sedate tract of houses leading down to civilization.

I'll be home soon. Only a couple more miles to go, thank God; I've never wanted to see my apartment so much in all my life.

I'll get home, wash some of this soot and dead monster slime off of me, and then call Beth and Kory.

Using the telephone, this time.

Christ, I feel like hell . . .

He walked past the darkened houses, down to Ventura Boulevard. Even at this hour of night, there was still traffic on the street, cars passing him by, occasionally slowing down to look at him.

Yeah, I probably look terrific right now. And smell great, too. Eau de fried monster. Really lovely.

After what seemed like an eternity of trudging along the city streets, Eric finally reached his building, and started up the stairway to his apartment.

Then, on the top stair, he hesitated.

Ria—she must've known where I lived, or she could find that out, real easy. I wouldn't put it past her to know exactly where I live, my bank account number, the sock drawer where I keep my cash, everything. What if—

Eric, you're getting paranoid.

Yeah, but I want to stay alive, too.

He gazed at the locked door for a long moment.

Okay. Maybe I'm not going to open the door just yet. Maybe I should drop in on Beth first. I don't think Ria would've figured out where she lives, at least not yet Especially if Beth's got that magical shielding up around her place—

Damn it, this isn't fair! All I want to do is go inside, take a shower, and sleep! Why did my life have to turn out this complicated?

Eric reached for the door handle, then shook his head. No. I'm not going to push my luck.

Then how in the hell am I going to get to Beth's, at this hour of night?

He looked down at his aching feet, and sighed. Oh well. It can't be more than seven or eight miles away.

Here I go again . . .

Eric didn't know what time it was when he finally hiked around the last corner and saw Beth's apartment building in front of him. But it must be getting close to dawn. God, my feet hurt. If Beth isn't here, I'm just going to fall asleep on her doorstep, I don't care if her landlord calls the cops or not. I'm so tired—

He found a last burst of energy and jogged up the wooden stairs, two at a time. He hesitated before knocking on the door.

What if she doesn't let me in? We didn't exactly part on the best terms, earlier this evening.

She has to. I don't have anywhere else I can go.

He rapped sharply on the door, waited, then knocked again. She's probably asleep. I'd better keep knocking, give her a few minutes to wake up. He was about to knock a third time, when the door suddenly opened.

She stood, haloed by the hall light behind her, wearing only a long nightshirt, her dark hair tousled, her dark eyes wide with surprise. Beth, how could I have left you? God, that was stupid. I—I feel so good, just seeing you now—just being here—

She reached for the door, suddenly, and Eric knew that in another half-second she was going to slam the door in his face.

"Beth!" Eric blocked the door with his foot. She backed away from him, then whirled and—

—and ran. He shoved the door open and stepped into the apartment, seeing her stumbling away towards the living room.

"Beth, don't run away from me!"

She turned, angrily, and he saw the tears on her face "Me, run away? What in the hell do you think you did?"

God, she looks awful. Like she hasn't slept in days. And there's white hairs in that black frizz of hers that I've never seen before. A finger of cold trailed down his backbone. He ignored it, moving towards her.

"Look, I know I was acting stupid earlier," Eric began reasonably, "But I'm back, aren't I?"

"Yeah, you sure are," she said bitterly. "Hooray for you." She sat down on the sofa, reaching for a half-empty bottle of beer, refusing to look at him.

It's Kory. That's what it is, it's Kory. Oh God, I've lost her before I ever had her, and it's my own stupid fault.

"Beth, listen. I—I need to know—are you in love with Kory?" He swallowed painfully. "If you are, it's . . . it's okay, I'll just leave now. I don't have anywhere to go, but that's never mattered before. Are you?"

She stared at him, as though she didn't understand what he had just said, then laughed—only it wasn't much like a laugh; it was more like a cry of pain. "Why should you care, after what you did? And why should I tell you?" She clenched her fist, pressing it to her temple, face contorted with pain.

Then, suddenly, she sagged with defeat, and swigged from her bottle. "Not that it matters, anyhow."

She's never talked like this to me before, ever. What's happened since I left? Then something else she had just said sank in, along with a low heavy feeling in his gut "What do you mean, it doesn't matter?"

Her words were muffled behind the bottle. "Kory's gone, Eric. He—he gave up hope, these last couple months since you left us. He completely lost hope, and now he's left me." She trembled, the beer bottle loose in her hands, close to spilling. "He left me—"

"Why would Kory—" Eric began, then stopped short. "Months? Months? What are you talking about?"

She glanced up at him, her dark eyes empty and cold, with something brittle and about to shatter at the bottom of them.

"We spent two months looking for you, Eric," she said tightly. "Trying to fight Perenor's people without you, to stop them from destroying the nexus. But we couldn't do much, not by ourselves. God, we tried. Kory wore himself away to nothing, trying. We knew they had you—at least for a while. But he couldn't find any trace of you, nothing. We—we thought they'd killed you."

She choked back a dry sob. "Then one night Kory heard you playing, somehow—so we knew you were alive, and roughly where you were. That's what led us to you, your music. Otherwise we'd never have known what happened to you."

Eric sank down to the couch, his legs refusing to support him. "No. That can't be true. I've only been gone for three days—"

Think, Banyan. All those old Celtic ballads about people being trapped in the land of Faerie, spending a night dancing in an elven circle, then waltzing home to find out that ten years have gone by. That's what happened to you.

Holy shit.

That's what Ria was doing to me . . .

He took a deep breath, and another, trying to get his mind back into first gear. Not in neutral. Wheels spinning, but not going anywhere. That's where I've been for the last two months.

Two months.

"Okay," he said at last. "Okay. So I lost a bit of time. But why did Kory walk out on you?"

Beth shook her head slowly, her voice ragged with despair, every word tearing at his heart. "You still don't get it, do you?" she said dully. "It's been months, Eric. They bulldozed the Fairesite three weeks ago. It's all over."

The bottle fell, a stream of beer cascading into the carpet, as Beth buried her face in her hands, sobbing. "He gave up. We knew, the last day, we knew when it happened. He just sort of ... folded in on himself when the bulldozers hit the first tree. And he gave up. There's nothing left. No hopes, no dreams. Nothing. It's over, the elves are going to die, Kory's going to die—he knew he was going to die, so he left me, so I wouldn't have to watch him, see him die slowly, fading like all the others—"

Eric moved closer to her, gently putting his arm around her shoulders. "Oh, Beth."

She looked up at him, her face streaked with tears. "But I know he's dying, I can feel it; I can feel him dying a little at a time. It hurts, Eric, it hurts so much—" He held her tightly against him, feeling the dampness of her tears soaking through his shirt.

Every word felt like a knife in his heart, but nothing hurt as badly as the knowledge that he was the one responsible for the whole disaster.

If I hadn't walked out on them—God, Beth, how could I have done this to you, to Kory? I didn't know—oh God, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry—

She cried until she had no tears left, dry sobs shaking her body. She cried herself into absolute and utter exhaustion.

And all he could do was hold her.

He carried Beth into the bedroom an hour later, after she'd finally cried herself to sleep in his arms. Eric set her down carefully on the mattress and pulled a blanket tenderly over her. From the doorway, he glanced back at her; the gleam from the streetlight outside filtered through the bedroom curtains, casting long shadows on her tear-stained face.

Eric walked back to the living room, his thoughts in chaos. On the living room table was a bottle of Irish whiskey, half-empty; he picked it up, opened it, and took a long draught.

Time for drinking and thinking. In that order. I should probably take a shower, get some of this filth off of me, but I'm too depressed.

He sat down on the sofa, the bottle clenched in his hand. Across the room, the television was on, with the volume turned all the way down. Eric crossed over to the TV, and raised the volume just enough so he could hear and not awaken Beth.

Black and white shadows flickered across the screen. A '50s science fiction film. Terrific. Something mindless to watch while I get drunk. He sat back down on the couch, wishing the whiskey would take effect faster. I want to be really drunk, really soon—

God. How could this have happened? Why didn't I realize what was happening? I still can't believe it—two months.

Kory's gone, and maybe he's already dead. I don't even know where he is, even if I knew how to help him.

Ria and Perenor—they've won. Last game of the night, all the cards on the table, and they've won.

He drank another swallow of the whiskey, the fiery liquor burning a track down his throat.

It's over. There's nothing Beth and I can do.

A tiny voice spoke into his thoughts, an echo of his own grim thoughts, and the creature he had fought earlier this night: Yeah. You can wallow in self-pity. Get drunk, get stoned, get trapped under a Faerie hill, wipe the world away. That's what you can do. Like you've been doing for the last two months. You can go on doing absolutely nothing. You're really very good at it.

Eric stopped, the bottle of whiskey half-raised to his mouth. He hesitated, and his hand wavered, then he slowly set the bottle back down on the table.

No. No more. This time, I'm going to do things right. I don't care if it's hopeless—I'm not going to give up again. I've spent too many years running away from problems and commitments. This one I'm going to face.

There's a beautiful, wonderful lady asleep in that next room, a lady who cares a lot about me. I'm not going to fail her. And somewhere out there is a frizzy-haired elf guy, a guy both of us care about, who depended on me—

And I let him down.

But I won't do that again. We'll find him, and we'll make this work out right.

If we can find him.

If he's still alive.

Something deep inside him refused to give up, revolted at the idea of Kory being gone. He has to be alive. I won't believe he's dead. If he was, I think . . . I think I'd know, somehow. I don't think anybody, not even Ria, could keep me from knowing that.

He glanced at the television screen, where a handsome blond hero was blowing away a killer tinfoil robot with some kind of ray gun. I wish everything was that easy. If I thought it was, I'd pick up a .45 from a neighborhood pawnshop and go hunting for Perenor. But that won't accomplish anything, other than probably getting me killed. I remember real well what he did to Kory.

The hero-actor posed and gestured like a wooden puppet, somehow more artificial than the tinfoil robot. God, but that movie is awful. Really bad. Not "so bad it's cute" bad, but just pathetically bad. It's not even funny. Doesn't have any magic to it at all.

No magic . . .

Is this what all the movies, all the music, are going to be like now? So ... lifeless? Like the same old stupid plots, replaying over and over again?

That's something terrific to look forward to. If I fail at this, if I can't do something to save Kory and the elves, I'll never be able to sit through a movie, ever again.

Hell, why am I thinking about movies? If I go after Ria and Perenor and blow it, I'll be dead. Perenor would kill me with all the hesitation and moral consideration of somebody swatting a fly. I'd—I'd like to think that Ria wouldn't try to kill me, but I know better than that.

The images on the television changed from scrolling end credits to the early morning news, and a video clip of firemen and police officers clustered outside a burning building. Eric suddenly tuned his ears into what the announcer was saying, curious. ". . . and in Van Nuys, firemen are still battling a blaze that broke out roughly an hour ago ..."

Eric blinked, looking at the flames rising from the ugly pink apartment building. I really feel for whoever lives there. That place looks just about totaled.

Who'd want to live in that ugly—pink—oh my God, that's my apartment building! My home is burning down!

Holy shit!

He stared in shock at the television set, and the green flames rising from the pink apartment building. Green and pink, really lovely. I think I'm going to be sick—

Wait a second, here. Green flames? Suddenly he recalled another set of green flames. Magic flame. When he and Terenil had dueled—

But Terenil wouldn't have done anything like this—Even if he could have.

Which left— The only other two creatures in this city capable of wielding that much magic power.

Ria.

And Perenor.

He rose to his feet, so angry he was shaking. Damn you! Damn you! Haven't you done enough to me? Haven't you got it all? Do you have to turn my apartment into a bonfire? Why in hell can't you leave us alone? I'm no threat to YOU!

He didn't even realize he was screaming the words at the top of his lungs until somebody began to pound on the wall from the apartment next door.

And he didn't care.

"Damn you, Perenor! Leave us alone!"

•16•

Whirlwinds of Danger

"Damn you, Perenor, leave us ALONE!"

Someone coughed behind him. He turned to see Beth, blinking sleepily, staring at him from the bedroom doorway. "Yo, Eric," she said conversationally, in close to a normal tone of voice. "Could you scream a little quieter? I was asleep for the first time in three days."

Someone pounded on the wall.

"And I think you woke more people up than me." She glanced past him, at the television set, and her eyes widened. "Hey, isn't that—"

"Yes," he said wearily. "Perenor just torched my apartment. Excuse me, I think I'm going into the bathroom to bang my head against the wall and cry."

He started to walk past her, both hands buried in his hair. "Everything's gone to hell. Kory may be dead, the nexus is destroyed, and everything I own except these clothes and my flute just went up in smoke. That's it, I can't take it anymore."

He pivoted and slammed his hand against the wall. "Dammit, they've won! Why are they doing this to me?"

A strange expression crept across her face and Beth caught him by the arm. "No. Eric, that's not it. That doesn't make any sense. If those bastards have really won, then they wouldn't have any reason to still come after us, would they?"

He shrugged, and ground his teeth. "I don't know. Maybe they're just bored, and ruining our lives is more entertaining than watching soap operas. Maybe it's just Ria, wanting to get even with me for walking out on her. I don't know." He glanced back at the television set, expecting to see another glimpse of his life going up in smoke, and froze.

It was a different news clip, with a photograph of a pretty dark-haired girl, smiling at the camera. ". . . and in the South Bay, another victim of the 'East Side Slasher' was discovered last night. Octavia—"

Martinez. Octavia Martinez. Eric completed the thought before the announcer was two syllables into the girl's last name. Octavia, 'Tavy to her friends, a fifteen-year-old who's already a virtuoso on the cello—gifted and bright, lead cello in her school orchestra—

It was as if he'd known her all his life. The details of her short lifespan flooded into him too fast to really comprehend.

How can I know this? What's going on with my head?

But he knew her, he knew her. Even though they'd never even matched eyes in a crowd, much less met. 'Tavy, a beautiful young girl, already an incredible talent, so happy, always laughing, loving life so much, her music bringing joy to everyone who heard her—

"... and police are intensifying the search for suspects, and now believe that the killer may be using trained attack animals, such as pit bulls, for these murders." A series of photographs flashed onto the screen. "Already the Slasher has claimed seven lives since the first murder in the East Los Angeles area three weeks ago."

The words faded away beneath the images forming in Eric's mind, the still photographs changing to visions of people, alive and vibrant. Michael, yeah, he was an artist, worked in advertising, with a real gift for making his artwork come to life . . . Sandy Chelsea, solo vocalist with the Master Chorale . . . Danny, only eight years old, but already well-known as an actor, doing voiceovers for cartoons . . .

All of them people he knew as well as his closest friends—and had never encountered in the flesh. How can I know all of this? I've never heard of these people in my life, I've never even seen photographs of them before!

"Eric—Eric, are you all right?"

He opened his eyes and saw Beth watching him with concern. "Beth, all of those victims ... I know them. They were all like me, all of them able to do the things that I do . . ."

"Bards?" Beth looked at the television screen, now showing a commercial about vacation homes in the mountains.



"All of them were Bards?"

Eric moved to the couch and sat down heavily. "That is what's going on. Perenor. He's killing off everyone with the Bardic Gift." He looked up at Beth, who was staring at him, wide-eyed, her sleep-rumpled hair standing up like a cartoon character's. "You were right, there must be some way that we can hurt him still, or he wouldn't have any reason to do this."

"Yeah. If we could just figure out what—" Beth stopped in midsentence, then reacted. "Christ! This means he might try for Uncle Phil, too!"

For a moment, Eric couldn't remember who Beth was talking about, then an image flashed into his mind: the elderly man with the house full of artwork and animation reels, and how his eyes had shone when he looked at Eric—no, not his eyes, but something behind them, something that was a part of him; reaching out to Eric like an old friend, speaking to a part of himself that answered in harmony. "Yeah, Phil—Beth, he's got the Bardic Gift, too."

"Of course he does," Beth said tersely, disappearing into her bedroom. Eric could hear the sound of drawers opening and clothing being flung out. Beth's voice drifted to him through the open door. "He's an animator, after all—you just look at his work and you know that there's more going on there than just blobs of paint on transparency eels!"

She reappeared a moment later in jeans and sneakers, pulling a sweatshirt down over her torso. "Come on, we're leaving," she said, picking up his flute case from where he had set it down on the table. She gave him an impatient look. "Well?"

"Hang on a sec, Beth—"

He had to close his eyes; the vision overlaying the real world of Beth's apartment was too confusing to sort out otherwise. Images: a sleepy little street in Burbank, the pale yellow house, the first glints of sunlight reflecting off shadowy water, an old convertible parked on the street. And a feeling of cold and calculating intent, of gathering willforce, and—

"Holy shit, Beth, I think Perenor's doing something there right now!"

She didn't say anything, just grabbed him and ran.

What if I'm wrong? What if I'm completely crazy, if all of this is just delusions? What if I'm imagining that Perenor is at Phil's house, planning to do something awful to the old guy?

How do I know if what I'm feeling is real? That I'm not completely crazy?

His mind might doubt, but his gut knew. This was for real. The cold feeling in the pit of his stomach intensified, as the jeep careened around another corner. He glanced at Beth, and saw that her knuckles were clenched tight on the steering wheel. She feels it, too. Something awful is happening—

Beth floored the brakes. The Jeep skidding to a stop in front of the little yellow house, nearly ramming into the parked convertible. Before Eric even got out of his seat, she had vaulted out of the Jeep and was halfway to the front door. She pounded on it several times, calling out Phil's name, as Eric grabbed his flute and hurried across the lawn to her.

"He's not answering," she said shortly, and reached into a potted plant for a hidden key. Eric followed

her as she hurried to the side gate and into a backyard filled with assorted junk and pieces of furniture, past a swimming pool murky with fallen leaves and debris. "Beth, if someone sees us doing this, we could get arrested—" Then Eric stopped, staring at the back of the house.

Or rather, what used to be the back. After a giant had reached down and ripped off the wall and roof. Pieces of splintered wood and plaster were scattered everywhere.

I have a real bad feeling about this—

Eric tore his eyes away from the devastation, to see Beth Kentraine already vanishing through the remnants of a sliding glass door. "Beth, wait! You don't know if—"

Shit, she's already gone inside! He glanced at the carnage around him, then swallowed and followed her in.

If possible, the inside of the house was in worse shape than the outside. Eric saw the Snow White eel that he had admired, lying on the floor practically at his feet, shredded. With all of that slimy black gunk smeared all over it—slimy—like that thing that I killed last night—oh shit! Beth! Where in the hell is she?

He ran into the next room, feeling as though every nightmare he had had as a child was upon him, every screaming terror resonating down his nerves. And he saw Beth, kneeling on the filthy floor, not moving, just staring at—at—

Eric turned away and retched onto the destroyed carpet, falling to his knees, shaking helplessly. Oh God—oh my God—

When he could, he looked back at Beth, still motionless on the floor, holding the old animator's hand. He managed to stand and took several unsteady steps towards her, then sank to the filthy carpet beside her, staring down at Phil Osborn's face.

And tried hard not to look at anything other than that wrinkled, surprisingly peaceful face; not at the ruined body, opened like a butterflied shrimp, ripped flesh and exposed internal organs glistening in the dim light, blood spreading slowly into the carpet around him. Eric felt the wetness soaking into the knees of his jeans, and clutched his gut, trying not to throw up again—

—then Phil's eyes opened, looking right up at them, and he nearly lost it one more time. Christ. He's still alive. They did that to him, and he's still alive. Oh my God . . .

"Beth." The old man's voice was a whispery thread, his eyes glazed and very bright. "Beth, listen to me."

"I'm here. Uncle Phil," Beth said softly, kneeling close to him. She rubbed at her eyes with the back of one hand, and Eric saw the blood and tears and indescribable filthy smearing together across her face. "I won't leave you."

"Beth, you can stop Perenor. That's why he's—" Phil gasped, his chest heaving. "Stop him, Bethie. I know you can do it."

We can? How in the hell are we supposed to stop somebody who'll do this, turn another person into a piece of sushi?

Then the old man smiled, looking at something beyond Eric and Beth, something only he could see.

"Leila . .

The room faded from around Eric, as a slow rising chord echoed through his mind. Power, clear and strong as a river, reaching out for something—a brightness, an intensity, shining like a beacon from within—and from far away, the hint of another Power, different, yet the same, reaching toward the first.

This is what a Bard is, he realized dimly. This quiet strength and power, the force of creation held by a living being, power shining so bright, almost incandescent.

—and the distant melody, drawing closer, strengthening the faltering notes of the first. Then the two joining—

—then fading, fading . . .

And gone.

The aged, agonized eyes focused on nothing, then ceased to focus at all. Beth sobbed quietly, Phil's bloodstained hand still pressed against her cheek.

He's dead.

That—that was him. Phil. A Bard. Is that what I am, too? What I look like to Kory—and Ria?

Eric swallowed, feeling his nausea rising again. And she and her dad had me in their clutches for two months. They could've done this to me at any point, exactly what they did to Phil. Christ.

He edged closer to Beth, resting his hand on her shoulder, wanting to comfort her, but not really knowing how. What do you say to someone who's just seen an old friend murdered—hell, taken apart like a laboratory frog! What good are words now?

"Eric."

Beth's voice was low, it barely penetrated through the clamor of his thoughts. Then she spoke louder, stronger. "Eric, I don't want to leave him like this. I don't want anyone to see him. Not the cops, not anyone."

He nodded, understanding what she was saying, even though he wasn't certain what she expected him to do. "All right. Stand back a bit, Beth."

She bent low and kissed Phil's bloodless lips briefly, then stood up.

Okay. This time, I'm going to do it right. For Beth. He removed his flute from the case, fitted it together, then brought it to his lips. He closed his eyes, concentrating.

Slow notes, a quiet melody, then building in intensity, filled with aching pain . . . "O'Carolan's Farewell to Music," a fitting tribute to a murdered Bard, someone who held power in his human hands, who created life with ink and paint.

If there's a heaven, this old guy is headed straight for it. Or wherever it is that we Bards go when we die.

Through his closed eyes, Eric saw a bright spark of light, then a burst of green flame. He opened his

eyes, watching as the crackling eldritch fire consumed the old man's body. When nothing was left but a fine dusting of ashes on the floor, Eric let the fire die away.

Strange. The floor isn't even scorched. But the fire was hot, hot enough that I could feel it from here. And hear it, the snapping flames—

For a moment, Eric thought he heard something else, a faint slithery sound, like a water hose dragged along concrete. Then there was silence again, except for the sound of Beth crying softly.

He touched her shoulder gently. "Beth, we'd better get out of here. If some neighbor calls the police . .

She stood up, still gazing down at the small heap of ashes. "Thank you, Eric," she said quietly.

Eric put his arm around her as they walked to the bedroom door. In the ruined living room, Beth bent to pick up a shattered photograph frame. The picture that fell out was a black-and-white of a younger Phil and a lovely dark-haired woman. She caught it before it touched the slimed carpet, rolled it up and slipped it into her jacket pocket.

Outside, the first hints of sunlight were breaking through the clouds overhead. There were only moments left until true dawn. Eric and Beth, walking in silence, picked a careful path through the debris on the swimming pool deck.

"Beth," Eric began hesitantly, "when Phil called out to Leila, did you see—"

He stopped, feeling as if someone was standing just behind him, peering over his shoulder. Somebody very close, close enough to touch . . .

Then he screamed as something wet and oily coiled around his ankle, yanked his feet out from under him, and dragged him backwards. He thrashed, trying to free himself, and caught a glimpse of something. Something huge and dark and dripping, topped by a rearing equine head with glittering red eyes and distended fangs. Then the thing slammed him down on the concrete, knocking the breath and wits from him. His flute case went flying in one direction as he was yanked in another.

Toward the pool.

"Beth!" he shrieked, hearing her scream echoing behind him. Then the water closed over him, black and icy cold, as icy as the scaled flesh against his bare skin. He struggled against that inhuman grip, already knowing it was hopeless, trying to reach the surface to breathe, feeling the darkness closing in around him as every second ticked past.

God, please, just let Beth get away, don't let it get her, too—

Then the clawed hand thrust him up into the open air, and Eric gasped for breath gratefully. Then he saw why the creature had surfaced, and his heart stopped beating for an instant.

Beth!

She stood like some fantasy art heroine, her clothing soaking wet and clinging to her, a piece of wood splintered to a sharp point clenched in her hand. He could see where the tip was stained with blood and a foul greenish ichor as she danced closer along the slippery rim of the pool, trying for another stab.

"Beth," he yelled, "get your ass out of here!"

Then Eric screamed again as the piece of wood sailed within inches of his nose to embed itself in the creature's eye. With a shriek that rent the air, it flung Eric onto the concrete and sank beneath the pool's surface.

Eric just lay there for a long moment, choking and gasping, and concentrated on some serious breathing.

Oh God. I'm still alive—

Then he realized Beth was pulling him away from the water's edge. "I'm—I'm okay," he gasped hoarsely, trying to sit up."

She held on to him tightly. For a moment, he thought he could hear her voice, even though her face was pressed too closely against his shoulder for her to speak.

:I thought I'd lost you again, lost you—oh, Eric—;

"I love you too, Beth," he whispered.

She kissed him, then helped him to his feet. "At least you don't reek quite so much now," she said dryly.

A noise behind them made both of them turn. The opaque water of the swimming pool was roiling with darkness, seething as though something was thrashing below. They glanced at each other, then Eric scooped up his flute case and they ran for the gate. And didn't stop until they were in the Jeep. Beth sent it accelerating onto the westbound Ventura Freeway.

It must be dead. How could anything live after getting drilled through the eye like Beth did to it?

Then again, how can anything like that be alive in the first place?

Kory gone, Phil dead, the nexus destroyed—God, I wish this was a bad dream and I could wake up.

Fat chance. Banyon.

He looked across the seat at Beth, and realized that her hands were shaking on the wheel. "Maybe you should pull over for a minute."

She took a deep breath and shook her head. "No. I'm okay. It's just—how long do we have, Eric, before Perenor tracks us down and kills us? He obviously hasn't forgotten about you. What can we do against a guy who summons creatures like that swimming-pool thing to take care of his enemies?"

Or that winged monstrosity that tried to eat me last night in the hills— "I don't know. Go on the offensive, maybe?"

"Offensive against what? If we go anywhere near him, he'll swat us like flies, Eric!"

He thought about it for a moment. "What about the nexus? Maybe there's still something we can do about that."

"Okay," Beth said after a long pause, "let's go out to Fairesite."

They bulldozed the site three weeks ago. Even knowing what to expect, Beth was still shocked and horrified by what she saw.

They didn't just destroy it, they devastated it. I've never seen anything like this before, done with such . . . maliciousness. Like they didn't want to leave one single paving stone next to another.

She looked out at the desolation, seeing in her mind's eye what once had stood there . . . Over there, that was the Mainstage, where now there's only a heap of splintered wood. . . Irish Hill, they practically leveled it completely, there's nothing left except some scattered straw . . . the old Wishing Well, they just left the concrete foundation broken, didn't even bother with removing the pieces.

There's nothing left here but dirt and chips of wood. Nothing at all.

She reached down, picking up a piece of what had once been a bright green ribbon, now torn and dark with mud. She straightened and saw Eric, moving towards what had been the Wood.

The Wood Grove. That's where Kory said the nexus was, within the circle of ancient oak trees.

Oak trees, torn out of the ground, lying like mutilated corpses on the dusty ground, dead—they've destroyed it completely. There's nothing we can do here.

Uncle Phil murdered, and now Kory is going to die, too, if he isn't already dead—

Pain ripped through Beth, making her clench her eyes closed to keep from crying aloud. Pain like someone stabbing her in the heart—

—or the soul. It's over, Kory must be dead or dying, it's hopeless.

Eric's still picking over the mess, walking through the fallen trees, looking around. Doesn't he realize that there's nothing we can do, nothing at all? Why doesn't he just give up?

Eric disappeared around the edge of the ruined Wood, into the hilly area beyond. Beth followed hesitantly, not certain where Eric was going. That's what used to be the end of the Wood, there's nothing beyond there, nothing except a few more oak trees—

Beth climbed carefully over the bulldozed trees, trying to spot Eric. There's still a few oaks left standing, by the edge of the Wood. And—

She felt her heart leap with sudden hope, seeing a cloaked figure sprawled beneath one of the oaks' spreading branches. Then she ran forward to where Eric was standing, looking down at the motionless man.

It's him, it's Kory!

Now she could see him clearly, that wild blond hair spilling over his shoulders, mixed with dirt and blood and tears. His slack face streaked with tears and mud, his jeans and Faire shirt the same no-color.

And the six-pack of empty Coke cans on the ground next to him.

Beth slowed to a stop, and stared at the shiny red cans in horror. But that—that's poison to elves—

—oh my God, no!

She fell to her knees next to Kory, seized his hands and touched his face, still damp with tears. His hand was icy cold in hers. She moaned, deep in her throat, and began patting his cheeks, trying to get a response. When nothing happened, she searched frantically for a pulse. "Kory, please, no, don't be dead—"

She looked up at Eric, who was staring down at Kory in stunned silence. "God damn you, don't just stand there, do something! Use your magic! You're a Bard, this is what you're supposed to do! Help him!"

He swallowed, and stepped back a pace. "Beth, I don't think— "

"I don't give a shit what you think, Banyon—you're going to play that fuckin' flute now or I'm gonna ram it down your throat!"

"Beth, I don't know how!" he said, shouting to be heard over her rising voice. "The fire—that just came! This is complicated."

She forced herself to calm down, and took a deep breath. "Okay. Let's think this through. I think maybe we need a—a spell of some kind. Maybe what you played to wake him up would work again."

He knelt beside her and opened the flute case. "I think—I think maybe I played 'Sheebeg Sheemore.' That's a spell?"

She took a very deep breath and seized his hand, flute and all. "A spell, Eric, is a process, and not a thing. A spell makes you concentrate your energy on a goal. 'Sheebeg Sheemore' is about elves, isn't it?"

"Yeah, but—"

"It worked last time, didn't it?"

"Yeah, but—"

"If you don't start playing," she said softly, clenching her jaw to keep from screaming at him again, "that flute is going to be shoved where you won't like it."

She turned away from him as the first notes sang out into the sunlight, searching Kory's face for a flicker of life, any sign that he was being drawn back—

Nothing.

The last notes died away, and nothing had changed—except that maybe the pulse beneath her fingers was a little weaker.

She was about to round on the musician and demand that he try something else, when Eric began "Tamlin's Reel." He followed that with "Tom O'Bedlam."

One tune after another poured from the flute, the different melodies filling the stilled air, and now Beth could hear the desperation under the notes, the frantic fear that mirrored her own so exactly that she

trembled beneath the double burden. And still nothing happened, nothing changed—except the sun rose a little higher, and the wind stirred Kory's hair and dried the tears on his face.

Eric could feel Beth's desperation; it was a match for his. So he tried, poured his soul into his playing, tune after tune, note after note, everything Celtic he knew—and nothing, nothing happened. Finally he ran out of things to play, and dropped his aching arms.

He's going to die. Kory's going to die, and there's nothing I can do to stop it—

Kory's face was as slack and lifeless as before. Eric could feel the life in him; could see it if he looked just right—flickering, fading . . .

Dammit, I healed him, there has to be some way to channel this power right! There just has to be! Maybe—maybe it's me. I'm not making the right connections. If a spell is a process, it probably has to convince my subconscious. Which means it has to be simple. And something I can relate to.

Simple—well, the Celtic tunes are sometimes simple enough, but do I really relate them to what I have to do? Maybe I'd better get down to my own roots.

So what do I want to do?

I want to put Kory back together. To put him back the way he was. To come out the way he was.

None of the tunes he'd played so far addressed that need—

Which may be why they didn't work. He frowned, clenched his hands on the flute. I need something clear, something simple. I've got to make this come around right—

Then it came to him, with those words. It all came together, making such a perfect pattern that he was blinded by the clarity of it.

He closed his eyes again, made himself very still inside, and reached—

—and played.

He felt Beth go still for a moment, then felt her reaching out to him; heard her begin to sing.

"She danced on the water and the wind—"

He stopped. She sang another word, and faltered. "Eric? What's—"

"That's wrong, Beth," he said around the flute mouthpiece. "Not the pagan version—the original. The Shaker hymn. You said we needed a spell; well, that's a spell. It's about returning to balance, to what you were and what you were meant to be."

He heard her swift intake of breath, and began the tune again. She let him play it through once, then joined him on the second round.

" 'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free,

'tis a gift to come 'round where we ought to be—"



Yes. That's it. He could feel the power rising now, dancing around him, following the lead of his music—and hers—echoing the simple tune.

"—and when we find ourselves in the place just right

'twill be in the valley of love and delight."

Now he could feel the fading flicker that was Kory gaining strength, reaching for the power. He twined it once about the elf, twice, three times, verdant and living, tying him in vines of melody, anchoring him to here and now.

Beth poured her heart into the song, into the words. Eric could feel her strength, a dark fire joining his own power.

"When true simplicity is gained,

to bow and to bend we shan't be ashamed—

to turn and turn, will be our delight

till by turning, turning, we come 'round right."

But that wasn't enough. Not yet. Kory was not a simple creature, a one-dimensional cartoon elf. He had depth and breadth and heights Eric couldn't imagine—

So Eric called to the power and the music, and reached for Kory with it.

Touched.

No doubt; this was the Copland transcription from "Appalachian Spring." Building on the original melody, weaving in and around it, calling in images as weU as melody. Thunderstorms in the mountains. A quiet, secret stream. Song of a single bluebird—and the haunting cries of hundreds of skeins of geese. A towering oak. A tiny violet, hidden in fallen leaves. Oboe carrying the melody with him, a second flute making it a round, clarinets laughing a harmony—

—then the strings—

Come back, come home, come round right—

—weaving a braid that turned to a circle that turned, turned, turned—

He couldn't hear Beth anymore, but she was in there too, making the song a prayer, an outpouring of love and passion.

Now the music was returning to what it had been, each part dropping back to join the flute-line, the melody, the simple line; joining it and reinforcing it. "—till by turning, turning, we come 'round right—"

When they all were one, Eric played it through one last time, slowly, with all the emotion he could muster.

Silence. And he opened his eyes—

—and saw Kory, gazing up at him with those brilliant, leaf-green eyes—

Alive.

•17•

Rocky Road to OubKn

Eric had time for one coherent thought—He's alive!—before Kory lunged for him, his mailed hands closing tightly around Eric's throat.

He tried desperately to pry those metal-clad fingers off his neck without success Kory lifted him right off the ground by the neck and held him dangling with his toes just brushing the dirt.

"Kory—" Eric wheezed, gasping for breath.

"You human bastard," the elven warrior hissed, his green eyes incandescent behind the golden sheen of his helm. "I wasn't hurting anymore, I was beyond that, everything was so peaceful, so painless, and you brought me back! I'm going to rip you apart, mortal!"

Eric was suddenly aware of Beth pulling ineffectually at Kory's arm, trying to get him loose—

And beyond her, a circle of elven observers watching in silence.

Just . . . watching Just curious, mildly interested. Like it's vaguely entertaining, watching one of their kind strangle a human.

Then he heard the sound of clapping hands, and a few scattered comments.

"A little higher, perhaps ..."

"His technique is a little sloppy, don't you think?"

"Could be—"

"Well, Korendil is out of practice, after all."

Oh God, Eric thought as everything began to blur and fade around him. I'm going to die to a chorus of remarks from an elven peanut gallery, murdered by my best friend. This really isn't fair.

Kory's not like them, he wouldn't do this, just stand by and watch somebody get killed—

—if he wasn't the guy trying to kill me!

With a last burst of energy, Eric kicked wildly at Kory, connecting with one graves-clad leg; hitting the elf's knee just above the metal plate. Kory's hands loosened from his throat for an instant, and Eric slammed his fist into the side of the elf's helm, connecting with Kory's lower jaw and lip. As Kory

staggered back, Eric fell to the ground, choking and gasping for air.

He didn't stop to try and reason with Kory, he just rolled away in the soft dirt and grabbed his flute out of the dust where it had fallen. Somehow he ended up back on his feet, facing the furious elf.

Who still looked like he wanted to rip Eric apart limb from limb.

I could play something, use my Gift against him—but what in the hell would that accomplish? I'm trying to save his miserable life, not kill him myself!

Before either of them could move. Beth Kentraine stepped between them, her hands on her hips. "All right, guys," she said in a voice like ice. "Enough of this. Kory, what in the hell do you think you're doing?"

Kory wiped a trickle of blood away from his mouth. "Stand aside- Beth. I intend to destroy that traitor."

"Wait a second," Eric began to protest "I was just trying to keep you from killing yourself, you stupid—"

"So you brought me back," Kory finished, glaring at him. "I never should have trusted you. Bard. The first chance you had, you ran away to our greatest enemy, willingly placing yourself in her power Leaving us to die. Now, now that it's too late, you've brought all of us out of Dreaming. Why? So we can die in agony as the last magic of the nexus fades away to nothingness? Did she teach you to savor the pleasures of another's pain?"

"Kory—I didn't—I mean, there's got to be something we can do—" Eric stammered, backpedaling before the look of hatred in Kory's eyes. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. It isn't just that he was mad that I left. He's not gonna listen to any excuses. He wants to hurt me; really, seriously hurt me—

"There is something that I'm going to do, Kory said levelly. "I'm going to kill you. Bard."

Oh my God—

As Kory advanced towards Eric, Beth interposed herself between them again. "Kory, no. Whatever you do to him, you'll have to do to me first. I won't let you touch him." She glanced at the small circle of elves, also garbed in bright metal and peacock-colors. "Eric's not with Perenor. He wants to help you. And Eric's the only Bard here, the only one who can help you."

"If Korendil believes the human must die, then we will stand beside him," one of the elves said. "It is you who should not interfere, mortal woman."

"Oh, fuck off," Eric heard Beth mutter under her breath. From the edge of his vision, Eric saw two of the elves edging closer to her, trying to circle behind her.

I can see exactly where this is going now. Goddammit, Beth, why do you always have to fling yourself into these situations, trying to save my ass?

I thought I was doing the right thing. Maybe I wasn't.

Forget the excuses, Banyon. There aren't any excuses for what you did by walking out on these people. Just because one of them happened to be sleeping with a lady you love—

I guess I'd better face the music.

Eric pushed Beth gently to the side, and moved forward to stand in front of Kory. "Okay, I'll admit it. Running off to Ria was a real stupid idea. And everything that's happened since, it's really my fault, because you were counting on me to be there to help you. Well, I'm here now. And either you can kill me, or we can try to figure out a way to keep you guys alive. It's your choice, Kory." He managed a weak grin. "Though I'm sure you can guess which of the two I'd prefer that you chose."

Kory only stared at him, his hands within the gauntlets clenching and unclenching slowly. Eric realized that his own hand, the one that had hit Kory in the face, was throbbing with pain. That doesn't matter. Nothing may ever matter again, depending, on what this guy chooses to do. If he decides he'd rather kill me than let me try to save his skin—well, I'd rather be ripped apart by Perenor's pets. To go into the final darkness, like Phil, but knowing that Kory sent me there—wanted me dead. And didn't forgive me . . .

The despair in the back of Korendil's eyes hurt worse than his hand—hurt worse than anything ever had before.

He swallowed hard and tried to meet those bleak eyes, and the pure fire of hate in them. At least, if he kills me, I won't have to watch him die later, when the last of the magic fades away—

Eric winced inwardly, but did not look away. That's really a comforting thought, Eric. Sheer brilliance. No wonder Kory has no faith in you at all.

He tried to find courage in himself—somewhere. But he should have faith in me. I'm going to get them out of this mess, if—if it kills me. It's mostly my fault that this all has happened. They were counting on me. And I failed them.

He felt a despair to match Korendil's, chilling his heart. Right. I failed them. So I shouldn't be surprised if Kory decides to deep-six me after all—

Then, to Eric's immense relief, Kory nodded. "I do not think you did this out of evil intent, Eric." The elf warrior's voice was weary. "So I will not harm you. Leave us now. Let us fade away in peace." He turned and began to walk away.

"So that's it?" Beth said angrily. She ran after him, grabbing him by the shoulder and forcing him to look at her. "So long, and thanks for the memories? Like hell, Kory!" Eric could hear the pain in her voice as she continued. "I love you, you idiot elf! I won't leave you here to die!"

Eric bit his lip, feeling a different kind of pain tearing through him. She loves him. I knew that, really I did, but hearing her say it—

"And Eric may be an idiot, too, but he's a Bard, and I'm sure there's something he can do to help you, if you'll just let him. If you're willing to try something other than suicide or Bard-murder. God, why are all the men in my life such fools?"

Kory didn't answer; he only stared deeply into her eyes for far longer than Eric liked. And then he nodded again, slowly—and leaned forward and kissed her. As the kiss lengthened, Eric felt the seconds ticking by, each like a sharp stab into him with every heartbeat. Finally, Beth moved away from Kory, gasping a little.

The elves were watching with the same detached interest with which they had viewed the fight.

She loves him. That's obvious. Christ, why did I get myself involved in this? Saving his life just so Beth—

He stared down at the dirt at his feet, his throat so choked he could hardly breathe, and never realized that Kory was walking towards him until the elf stopped right beside him. He looked up, startled, and saw Kory was just standing there, looking at him soberly. Very close. He looks like he's going to say something—maybe an apology for nearly tearing my throat out? That would be kinda nice, actually. Even if I was a schmuck, it still hurts to swallow.

Or maybe something about Beth, how the best man—elf-

-won, but let's still be buddies, hey?

Oh hell, he's my friend. And if Bethie wants him—

Then Kory placed a gauntleted hand on each of Eric's shoulders—and kissed him.

Eric's startled exclamation was muffled, and his first reaction was to—

—to slide his arms around Kory's shoulders, to draw him even closer, to lean into the kiss, to hold him tightly and never, ever let him go—

—then Eric pulled free of Kory's embrace, trembling. He turned away from the puzzled and hurt look in Kory's eyes, towards where Beth was standing several feet away, her expression undecipherable.

"I'm—I'm sorry about abandoning you. Kory," Eric said, valiantly trying to gather his wits around him. "I—I was a schmuck. An idiot. I promise, I won't let you down again." He ventured a look at the elf out of the corner of his eye.

God, no one should look that good.

"I accept your apology," the elf said, faint, courtly formality accenting his tone. Then a ghost of a smile drifted across his face. "And I promise. Bard Eric, that I shall never try to throttle you again." He glanced at the other elves. "Well, if we are to live, I suppose we should start by trying to find a solution to this situation. Shall we?"

For the first time, Eric actually looked at the elves around him. And gaped in surprise.

Unimaginably bright colors, glittering armor and sheathed weaponry, thigh-height boots embroidered with fantastical designs, flowing capes over tunics, multicolored skirts and breeches. Like taking the best of the Faire costumes I've ever seen, then making them a thousand percent better.

Although some of them were dressed more like the types seen on Melrose Avenue, studded black leather and dyed mohawks forming an unlikely contrast to the ornate garb of the others.

And Kory—

Well, at least he isn't still wearing my clothes— Eric thought, gawking at his friends.

Kory—no, Korendil—was garbed like a character out of King Arthur's knights, clad head to toe in golden-hued armor, intricate with blue enamel inlay and gemstones. His blond hair cascaded down over a

cloak the color of the sky at midday. There was no mistaking the regal look in his eyes, either: the look of a lord of the High Court of Faerie.

Eric felt terribly shabby. And grubby.

Next to him I look like one of the beggars out of Monty Python. Dirty and rumped from walking all night, all slimy from fighting monsters, still damp from being dragged into a swimming pool—and he looks terrific.

No wonder Beth has the hots for him.

I could really hate these elves, given half a chance—

A lovely silver-haired elf woman, clad in flowing blue silk with a sheathed sword slung over one shoulder, stepped from the small circle of Faerie still gathered around them. She kissed Kory fondly. "Young Korendil," she said, "we, the mages and warriors of the High Court who remain here, pledge you now that we will follow your guidance and that of this human Bard, though death be the end of it."

"Val," Kory began, looking suddenly awkward and very young. "I don't know what to say—"

Another elf, a broad-shouldered figure in skin-tight black leather, his purple mohawk falling rakishly over one ear, clapped Kory on the shoulder. "Then say nothing, Kory. But you will lead us into battle."

"Eldenor, you're my teacher! You should—"

"We are all that is left of Elfhame Sun-Descending," the elf said in his low, resonant voice. "Our enemies have nearly succeeded in destroying us. You and the Prince were the only ones who saw our danger. And now we do not know if Prince Terenil is still alive. But you are here, with the Bard you brought to aid us." Eldenor grinned. "Even if you were ready to kill him a few minutes ago."

"Kory," Eric began hesitantly, "I don't know what I can do, but if you just tell me what, I'll do it."

He does look kinda overwhelmed. But I know he can lead this motley crew, if anyone can. And figure out what we can do to solve all of this. If we can.

He resolutely pushed his doubts away. No. We have to solve this. There's too much at stake here. Kory, he's my friend. Maybe—maybe he's even a little more than that, I don't know. But I do know that I won't let him die.

Kory was looking around at the devastated grove. "This is what must be remedied. Unless we do something soon, despite what you have done with your magic, Eric, we shall fall back into Dreaming, and then die. That is why we came here, to the last lingering wisps of magic."

"Wait a minute," Beth said suddenly. "Something just occurred to me ... if the magic is all dried up, then where is our minstrel boy getting his juice from? Eric?"

Eric shrugged. "I've never thought about it before, but you're right, I must be drawing it from somewhere." He closed his eyes, replaying what had just happened in his mind, how he had reached out .

. .

. . . and called the power, called it, drawn it from— "From Ria's house," he said at last, opening his eyes.

"It's coming straight from her place in Bel Air. I guess I can tap into it, just because"—he felt his face warming, and tried to quell his embarrassment before it became too obvious— "because, uh, I was so, so close to her, for so long. They must have moved the nexus there somehow."

"That makes sense," Beth said thoughtfully. "That's a terrific way to keep everything under lock and key: kill the old nexus and plant a new one in your backyard."

"She is an accomplished sorceress," Kory acknowledged. "With her father aiding her, I do not doubt that she could redirect the nexus, once its focal point had been destroyed, since of course she would not be able to create a new nexus from nothingness. This must have been Perenor's intent all along, to have all the magic of this region at his disposal."

"But there's one thing I don't understand," Eric said hesitantly. "How can you pick up a nexus and move it around L.A. like this? I mean, what is a nexus, anyhow?"

"The nexus is only a tiny gap in the veil between this world and the world of our kind. Bard," a flame-haired elf woman explained. "It must be small, or it would weaken the veil. To create such a thing is beyond the skill of all, except—"

Except—

Terenil, sitting around the dojo after that workout, drinking and talking. ". . . and the Queen's Bard, a human like yourself, created an anchoring point for the nexus ..."

A human Bard. Like me.

This is what I can do. This is how I can save Kory and his people.

His mouth suddenly felt very dry. Except that Perenor and Ria have already taken control of the nexus. Which means I'll have to fight them for it—fight Ria—

"Kory," he said, slowly, looking at his feet, "I can create a nexus. Creative magic—that's what Bards do. That's what the Queen's Bard did when you first came here—"

Only I'll have to fight Ria to do it.

He looked up to see Beth watching him. "'Bout time you figured it out, Banyon," she said quietly. "Think you can handle it?"

Eric took a deep breath, then another. Kory and the elves were watching him as he spoke. "I—I don't know. I'm really not very good at this magic stuff, at least not yet. I mean, I don't even know what I was doing, I just sort of did it off the cuff. By accident. Improvising. But this is something that, if I screw it up, we probably won't get a second chance—"

"I think you can do it, Eric," Beth said. "But we've got another problem. Even if you can do this whole schtick no sweat, do we want you to put the nexus back here? This place is going to be turned into condos in another couple months. Doesn't seem like the best place for a magic nexus, next to the hot tub and laundry rooms, y'know?"

"She is very right," Val said thoughtfully. "We need another place for the nexus, one which is not close to the humans' dwellings, so rife with Cold Iron. And one that is nearer to those of the Lesser Court,

trapped in their groves. A place that will be safe for many years to come."

Good luck, finding a place like that in L.A. This place is so overpopulated, even the mosquitoes are having a hard time finding a place to breed. Everything that's not Federal or State land is going to be developed into housing, sooner or later—

—Federal or State land—

That wide, empty valley, with the oak trees growing among the tall grass. Federal land, that no one can touch. An elven grove in the Hollywood Hills. And a dragon, starving to death because no one came near enough to eat—

—that area wouldn't be so great, it's still too close to the city. But maybe if we go a little further east—

"How 'bout Griffith Park, in the Hollywood Hills? There's a lot of land up there where nobody goes except maybe the real compulsive hikers. That might be a safe place for the nexus."

Kory glanced at Beth, who nodded. "That's a real solid idea, Eric. Griffith Park will never be turned into houses or shopping malls, not so long as the city stands. I can't think of any place that would be nearly as good." She gave Eric a wry grin. "Now you just have to do your magic stuff, bucko, and we're back in business."

Eric hesitated as that dark thought reoccurred to him. "What about Ria and Perenor? We know that the opposition isn't going to let us do this without a fight. I don't think I can do all of that, restore the nexus and hold off two sorcerers." Ria and Perenor, they need the nexus, or they wouldn't have gone to all of this trouble. They need it bad enough to kill for it, that's for certain. To kill Phil, and all those other potential Bards—

Ria. She used me, manipulated me—but there's still part of me that cares about her, that needs her.

If Ria comes at me again, throwing everything she has at me—one of us is going, to die. We can't fight like that again, and not kill each other. But could I really bring myself to kill her?

Could she kill me?

Eldenor clasped Eric's arm strongly, breaking into his thoughts. "We will guard you. Bard. We will keep any from harming you as you work the Magic. Trust me—as you will fight to save us, we will battle to protect you," The muscular elf glanced down as Eric winced in sudden pain. "Korendil, it seems that your stubborn skull is as thick as ever. Come see what the Bard did to himself, trying to knock some sense into you."

"I think it was the helmet, actually," Eric muttered, as Kory carefully took Eric's hand in his own. Beth moved in closer to look. Eric saw her eyes widen at the sight of his hand, bruised and bloody, two of the fingers already purpling and swollen. Kory tried to bend the fingers, and Eric bit back a yelp.

Damn, but that hurts!

"This is because of my foolishness, Eric," Kory said at last. "The place of magic is nearly drained, but let me see if I can mend what my stubbornness has wrought."

The elf closed his eyes, cradling Eric's broken hand in both of his; and this time, when Eric heard the first



stirrings of melody, he knew what was happening. The gentle interweaving of melody, somehow touching him; invisible fingertips tracing over his hand, through his hand, knitting together the broken bones, the torn flesh. He was not surprised to hear Beth singing distantly, silently, part of the magic as well.

As the melody faded, Eric looked down at his hand and flexed the fingers lightly, the fingering pattern for "Sheebeg Sheemore."

That's what this is—the two rival groups of elves, just like in the O'Carolan song. Except this time, we're playing for keeps. It's not a song, or a Bard's vision. It's life and death, and not just for them—for me, and for Beth, too.

God. It's so scary that it's almost beautiful.

But I still wish I could wake up, and all of this would just be a dream—

Terenil floated in the vast nothingness of Dreaming. No pain, no hunger—just oblivion.

Soon enough he would trade this oblivion for another—when the last of the magic ran out, when his whole being thinned and faded away. He had been in Dreaming longer than any of the others of the High Court; would he be the first to die? He hoped so, when he found the will to hope.

And what would it be like, this ending? A last fading into nothingness? He had only had enough will left to come here, to the place where Elfame Sun-Descending had been born, and then he had lost himself in his Dreams. No time to wonder, no chance to fear. The humans claimed elvenkind had no souls—if that were so, then there would be no knowing that the end had come. It would simply come, and Terenil would be no more.

No more pain, no more sorrow.

And Perenor would have won at last.

Something in him stirred in rebellion at that thought. Stirred, and struggled to wake, struggled to prod him into action. Spurred him to listen when the first thin strand of melody sought him in the darkness.

He listened—and it found him, fastened on him, a melody deep with meaning and rich with magic. Bardic magic, as he had never hoped to hear again.

To turn, turn, will be our delight, till by turning, we come 'round right—

It turned about him, twined about him, fed and nurtured his heart in ways he had never known were possible.

'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free, 'tis a gift to come 'round where we ought to be—

Without knowing how the magic had reached within him, he found himself recalling his first days in this brave new land, when Maddoc had led them all out to Gwynnedd. How he had stood upon the shore of this western sea and breathed in the salt air, feeling that there was nothing he could not do in this new Elfame.

The memory was vivid, more clear than it had been for years, decades, centuries.

And when we find ourselves in the place just right, 'twill be in the valley of love and delight—

This had been the valley of love and delight, rich with peace and promise. And he had been lord of it all—

And you can be again, the music whispered. Turn, turn, turn again Return to what you were—what goes around, comes around, good as well as evil.

But I can't— he protested weakly.

But you can, it replied. Turn, turn, return again—

I'm dying. This is a death-dream. There was no magic left; Korendil's Bard had deserted them, and there was no hope. This was death's final illusion before dissolution—

—but it was a sweet illusion. So be it. I die in dreams and Dreaming.

He gave himself over to the music; stopped fighting it. And it turned him, turned him—

Returned him.

Till by turning, turning, we come 'round right.

There was no transition between Dreaming and waking. One moment he was lost in the Dream and the music, the next—

Terenil blinked in the harsh sunlight. He was standing, tree-sheltered, in the shade of a gnarled old native oak on the edge of what had once been the nexus-grove.

I'm not dead. That was his first thought. His second—I'm—well. Whole. I have not felt like this in—

—in far too many years.

Then he chanced to look down at himself. And stared.

My armor—

His gold and scarlet armor glistened as if new-burnished, new-made. He had not been able to conjure it so since the last time he had defeated Perenor. And since that humiliating episode in the alley, in the rain, it had been dull, stained—as if the stains upon his honor had translated themselves into his armoring.

But that was by no means all. For there was none of that hunger that had devoured him of late, that craving for the dark poison of the humans' creation. He felt young—strong—

Movement beyond the trees and the glint of sun on burnished gold and azure warned him to hide himself behind the tree-trunk. Shame kept him there, as he overheard young Korendil's converse with the Bard. Not once was there mention of him—

Because they have learned they cannot depend upon me. I failed them once—I, who should have led them. I lost myself in drugged Dreaming; failed their trust, and the vows I made to them.

Bright Danann, what have I made of myself?

Shame kept him trapped, huddled behind the tree trunk, as the last of the High Court consulted with the humans and planned their next move. He waited, numb and paralyzed, as they separated into two parties—the humans and Korendil going for the girl's vehicle, the rest going to seek out any one of the Lesser Court of Faerie who might yet be awakened.

He watched as they vanished on their two missions.

And a slow tear etched its way down his cheek.

The distant thread of music tugged lightly at her thoughts, barely audible, but slowly gathering in strength and power—

Ria Llewellyn leafed through the thick report and idly jotted down several notes in the margins. She was seated at her desk, relaxed, a cup of fresh-ground coffee at her right hand next to the sheaf of papers. Jonathan did a good job with this. He always does. If anybody could keep this company running other than myself, it would be him. But I think his estimate on the interest rates is a little too optimistic. He'd better check on that before we meet with the investors on Friday.

Music, weaving a subtle pattern of words and melody, speaking deeply without disturbing the surface of her thoughts: "— turning, turning, we come 'round right—"

She quickly scrawled a reminder in her desktop calendar about the meeting with the stockholders next week.

I'd better make sure Linette has arranged something with the caterers for this. Lox and bagels, maybe?

Suddenly, Ria was aware of the faint melody, building into a profound harmony, drawing inexorably towards some unknown conclusion—

She stopped writing abruptly, listening intently to the distant music that only she could hear.

Flute, and a woman singing—

Realization hit her like a physical blow.

That's Eric! What in the hell is he doing?

Ria reached out, trying to touch something happening far away, a world away from the glass-windowed office building overlooking the city.

And drew back quickly, sensing more than just Eric and the human witch; the presences of other elves, slowly awakening from their Dreaming stupor.

No! It can't be!

But it was true.

He's doing it. He's awakening the High Court!

She remembered the look on his face as he had left her last night, vanishing from her house into the hills like a modern-day Thomas Rhymer. After nearly killing me. I can't forget that, either. How he summoned that soul-devourer, unleashed it upon me—

I've never been so frightened in all my life.

Ria shivered in spite of herself. Father told me about those creatures, but I never thought I'd see one. I still can't believe that he was able to control it. I was certain that. . . thing was going to kill both of us.

But he banished it, somehow. And then he left me.

Left me, and didn't come back.

She bit her lip, truly unhappy for the first time in years. Even worse, there was no remedy.

I should never have let him go. I could've stopped him, by force if need be. Letting him leave was a mistake. We could have worked it out—I know he was happy, living with me.

She twisted her pen in her hands, the cool, matte silver no comfort. I haven't been able to stop thinking about him. From the moment I saw him, back in that sleazy bar, I knew he was meant to be with me. We were ... so good together. It's my fault he ran away; I was so angry that I frightened him into summoning that creature.

Now I don't think he'll ever come back to me; at least not of his own free will.

She closed her eyes in pain. And saw, in her mind's eye, the bulldozed valley, oak trees lying like felled warriors. And Eric, his brow furrowed in concentration, playing the silver flute.

Awakening the Faerie.

Why is he doing this? He must know that Father won't let him save the elves. He's signing his own death warrant, there in the ruined Grove.

Unbidden, another image rose in her mind: Eric, sprawled in an alley, blood staining his white shirt and jeans, his dark eyes empty and lifeless.

And Perenor, walking away and wiping the traces of blood from his blade, walking away without even a backward glance—

She choked. No! No—I don't want that to happen. Even if he walked out on me, I don't want to see him dead.

Oh, Eric, how can you be doing something this foolish? I know what you must be planning—once the Faerie are awakened from Dreaming, you'll try to reestablish a nexus. But Father won't let you do that. If you were to succeed, we would lose control of the magic. Father has planned this for too many years, plotting to avenge himself upon the elves and win control of the magic of this area.

And—I can't let you do this either. Because if you succeed, I'll grow old, and die—

A secret thought whispered in the recesses of her mind:

That wouldn't be so terrible, if you have someone like Eric to grow old with, to share everything. Even dying. That's a very . . . human way to live.

But I'm not human.

She clenched her fist, crumpling the papers under her hand.

I can't let him do this. I can't let him take control of the nexus.

But if we fight again, like we did last night, one of us is going to die . . .

The silent music continued to resonate within her mind, the power flowing into Eric, then out, answering his unspoken, unconscious will. And calling an answering echo from herself.

We are still touching. Power calling to Power, even though he walked out on me. I wonder if he realizes that? Like it or not, we are bound together by more than just emotions. Killing him would be like killing part of myself.

How could I live with myself, knowing that I've murdered the only man I may ever love?

What am I going to do?

The clock on her desk ticked away the seconds as Ria buried her face in her hands.

I don't want to kill him. There has to be an alternative.

Something occurred to her suddenly, a possible solution. I can offer to send the elves across the veil, to the Faerie Lands. With the nexus at my disposal, I could do that easily. Then there would be no deaths, no need for Eric to attempt to create a new nexus, no reason why he couldn't stay with me, live with me forever—

Another voice spoke silently into her thoughts, a voice she recognized instantly. :Ria?:

She could see him in her mind, an angel of shadow, infernally handsome—and darkly angry. :I know. Father. I can hear the Bard's magic. He's probably going to make an attempt on the nexus after he brings them out of Dreaming.:

There was a brief pause before Perenor spoke, and his words were as cold as the darkness between the stars. :You know what we have to do, Ria.:

:Yes. And I'll help you, but on one condition. Father.:

She took a deep breath. :You'll let me try to deal with them in my way. Without any killing. I'll make sure that we keep control of the nexus. And—you won't harm the Bard. I want him back.:

Ria felt her father hesitate, if only for a fraction of a second, before he answered. :Agreed, daughter. The nexus is what's important; much more than anything else. I'll contact you again as soon as I know where they're going.:

The light touch of his mind faded. Ria opened her eyes slowly, looking out the window at the hills.

Does he mean that? Or was he only saying that so I would help him?

It doesn't matter. We've been building to this for a long time. Father and I. A final, decisive confrontation. If he tries to harm Eric—

I'll kill him.

I love Eric. And I won't risk losing him again.

•18•

Come Now or Stay

Beth squeezed back against the apartment door and let the other two precede her. Eric first, battered, filthy, and mangled, with bruises darkening his throat—then Kory, looking thoroughly exhausted.

Riding in the Jeep wasn't easy for him. Too much Cold-Iron; guess I should have gotten one of those little plastic Korean cars. He was in pain most of the ride. He'd never have managed if he hadn't had his armor to insulate him.

And there's too damned much unfinished business in here.

She closed the door and leaned back against it. "Well?" she said. "Talk, you guys. The tension in here is sharp enough to shave with."

Eric eyed her doubtfully. "Talk?" he faltered. "What about?"

She threw the double lock on the door—the one only she had ever been able to juggle open successfully. "You're trapped, guys. No getting out." She leered. "You're in my power."

Eric sagged down on the couch. "Oh come on, Beth—get serious."

"I am." She flopped down in her favorite papasan chair. "We've got the misunderstanding translated. Now—let's get personal things straightened out among the three of us."

Kory started to sit in the recliner—and Beth had a sudden vision of what all that metal would do to the leather upholstery. "Kory!" she yelled, and he froze; half-way between sitting and standing.

"Without the hardware. Please."

He flushed, and looked pleadingly at Eric. "Bard?" he said hesitantly.

Eric's head snapped up, his eyes wide and startled.

"Please, Bard—I—" Kory's flush deepened. "I have no magic left."

Now it was Eric's turn to blush. "Shit, Kory, I'm sorry—I—oh hell—" He fumbled his flute out of the case, and ran through a quick rendition of "Banish Misfortune." Two verses and a chorus later, Korendil eased down into the recliner clad in nothing more harmful than silk.

High Court garb, Beth was certain of it. One look at him, and half the producers in the Valley would be on their knees to him offering him contracts. She grinned to herself. And the other half of them would be offering him their—ahem. This is not the time. We've got a race of people to save, and if we can't get our act together we won't be able to.

But oh—he looked wonderful. Flowing azure silk, velvet, and gold trim, and jewelry of gold and sapphires; his golden curls tumbling into those incredible green eyes . . . and that body under all the finery . . .

Dammit, Kentraine, get your mind on business!

"Guys—"

"Kory—" Eric said, at exactly the same moment. And blushed again.

She bit back a giggle. Ye gods, he's got a low blushfactor. He looked at her uncertainly.

"Go on, Eric," she urged.

He blushed even redder and hung his head, staring at his flute. She looked over at Kory out of the corner of her eye. He was collapsed bonelessly in the recliner, eyes half-closed.

"Kory?" Eric said, very softly. "Kory? Listen. Please don't call me 'Bard.' Please?"

"But it's what you are," Kory replied, without looking up at him.

"Yeah, I know that's what I am—I mean, now I do. For a while there, I didn't seem to know much of anything. But the way you're saying it, it's like we aren't friends anymore." The sadness in his voice penetrated Kory's weariness, and made him open his eyes wide.

Beth held her breath as the elf flowed up out of the recliner and slowly took a single step toward the musician. "Are we friends, Eric?" Korendil asked. "Are you doing this now, finally helping us out of guilt or—"

"Kory," Eric said urgently, finally looking up and meeting the elf's eyes. "Kory, please. Yes, I know I've done some really stupid things, how the hell could I not feel guilty about that? I nearly killed you—"

Kory took another step toward him, and towered over Eric, his face gone utterly still.

Eric kept his eyes fixed on Kory's. "But it's not just that. I mean, that's not all. I ... like you, Kory. I thought you liked me, before I messed things up. I want you to like me again. I never had any friends like you and—Beth before. People who really give a damn about me. And if I screw this one up—" He clenched his jaw against something. Beth thought—tears?

"Kory, I'm scared. I don't know what I'm doing. I know what's going to happen when we try to fix the nexus. It's obvious they're going to try and stop us—and they aren't gonna do it halfway. Any of us could end up—I mean, I don't want to die—but it won't be so bad if—if—I know I've got friends again. If—if it isn't alone—"

Korendil reached down, took Eric's hands in his, and pulled him to his feet.

Oh gods, Kory, don't kiss him again. He doesn't know how to deal with that at all. . . hell, I barely know how to deal with that!

But the elf only put one hand on each of his shoulders, gazed into his eyes, and said, huskily, "You have friends, Eric. Friends who will die beside you, if need be. Two, at least; Beth—and myself. Is that enough?"

And it was Eric who made a strange little sound in the back of his throat and threw his arms around the elf. Kory hugged him back—but carefully, breaking off the embrace when Eric pulled away.

But Eric didn't pull completely away, not like he'd done back at the Faire site. He kept his hands on Kory's shoulders, and his gaze locked with Kory's—and Beth began to feel as if they were reaching some kind of a deep, wordless understanding.

It was a little uncomfortable. I feel like a Peeping Tom or something, she thought; she rose to her feet, and began edging toward the kitchen. Maybe if I go fix some herb tea or some—

She stopped, because Kory's hand was on her elbow. He drew her towards the two of them.

Then Eric's arm was around her waist, and she was part of a three-way embrace that was so warm and intimate that she had to close her eyes and hold her breath.

Oh gods, oh gods—don't ever let this stop—

"Beth," Eric said, slowly, as if he was thinking out every word. "I'm sorry. I screwed things up for you, too. Beth, I never meant to hurt you. I—I'm sorry. I guess I'm saying that a lot. I—I guess I've got a lot to be sorry for."

"I think," Kory replied softly, and very carefully, "that we should all agree to forgive each other and let the past bury itself. We, all three of us, delivered soul-wounds, whether we meant to or no. I am as guilty of that as you are, Eric. No matter that I did so out of ignorance—the hurt was there, I saw it, and I did not try to heal the hurt in time."

Beth saw the image in Kory's mind, the moment in the kitchen when Kory walked in and kissed her—saw through Kory's eyes the hurt, the betrayal in Eric's expression.

She blinked, and felt a stab of guilt at her own actions—that she had been so angry at Eric for vanishing at the demonstration that she had flaunted Kory in his face.

"Me too," she heard herself saying, her voice gone husky. "I didn't think you would care so much about Kory and me. And—I wanted to hurt you, Eric. It was stupid and childish, and I did it anyway."

"So—can we three find forgiveness in each other's hearts, do you think?" Kory finished.

She looked at Eric—

He was crying, and nodding. So was Kory.

So, she discovered, was she. She squeezed her eyes shut again, and hugged them as hard as she could. Within milliseconds, they had responded.



And . . . something stirred.

After years of raising the Cone of Power in Circle, Beth knew the sensation when Power began moving. And this was Power; a Power uniting the three of them, binding them, weaving them into a three-stranded braid of love and faith and strength that nothing would break short of death.

My gods. No. Yes. Jesus Frog on a pogo stick—

This isn't possible. It can't work.

Why not? she asked herself as the power continued to bind them into the whole. A tripod is the most stable configuration there is. A three-sided column bears more weight per inch of surface than a square one. An equilateral triangle is the prime geometric shape—

It's crazy, that's why.

She wondered if Eric was hearing the power-flow as music. She cracked her eyes open a little, and saw his beatific expression and figured that he was. What the hell. So it's crazy I'm crazy.

She immersed herself in the binding.

The power faded—as it was inevitable that it should do. Reality intruded itself, and with it, certain discomforts. Like Kory's damned armor digging into my— "I hate to break this up," she said, a little hoarse from the emotional overload, "but you're leaving chain-mail imprints on my chest, elf."

Kory chuckled, and let her go. She opened her eyes—and gasped.

Jesus H. Frog—

Her jeans and T-shirt had somehow been transmuted, now she was wearing something like a fabulous cross between Faire garb and her stage gear. Flowing black silk shirt and breeches, tight black leather tunic and thigh-boots and gloves, all trimmed and studded in silver.

Kory, clad again in his armor, was splendid enough—

but Eric—

He had been disheveled, filthy, his hair straggling into his eyes; bruised, and generally looking as though he'd been through the tumble cycle on a dryer. With rocks and mud and razor blades. The only thing about him that had looked worth saving had been a pair of burgundy-leather Faire boots—and those had needed cleaning badly.

That had been a few moments ago. But now—

Now he was clean, as immaculately groomed as Kory, and clad head-to-toe in a elven Court costume of silk, satin, and soft sueded leather, all in a rich wine color trimmed in silver.

But as Beth looked at him in wonder, she realized that there was something more changed than simply clothing—there was a look in his eyes. A stability. As if he'd finally found himself.

Like . . . he's finally grown up. He's what I never dared hoped he'd be. That's why the power—the binding. There was pain there, and a self-knowledge that wasn't far from pain. Maturity and depth. And not even a hint of bitterness. He looked like a Bard, every inch of him.

Is this what Kory saw in him, all this time?

Kory had switched back out of his Court gear and into his armor, as Beth's chest could attest.

They looked incredible. Beth caught her breath at the realization of how much she loved both of them.

"Jesus," she said, half in awe, half in an attempt at flippancy. "I'm locked in my apartment with the two most gorgeous hunks in the Valley."

She expected some kind of response to that out of Kory—but it was Eric who went to one knee; then kissed her hand, and replied, looking to each of them with a grin, "Nay, lass, ye've got it backwards. I'm locked in your apartment with"—he dropped the accent—"with the two most wonderful people in the universe."

Kory reached down and brushed his cheek lightly with his fingertips, then held out the hand to help him to his feet again. Eric took it.

She saw that look creep into their eyes again, and realized that it would be all too easy for them to mesmerize each other for the rest of the morning.

"Okay, you sexy things, we'd better get our rears in gear," she said. "Eric—would it help if you had musical backup that's equally used to being magical backup?"

Eric stood by the apartment window, half-listening to Beth on the phone, half-embroiled in the endless questions that refused to leave him alone.

". . . yeah, Allie, I know, you're supposed to be at work at noon ... I thought it was hopeless, too, but we've got a chance now. Eric came back last night."

In the street below, the rush-hour traffic was just starting. As Eric watched, an ivory limousine glided past, disappearing into the apartment complex's parking lot.

A white limo? Where have I seen one of those lately?

Those crazy guys from the Mad Hatter booth who showed up last weekend on Fairesite in a limo? No, theirs was a black stretch model, I remember that now.

Besides, that was months ago, remember?

He glanced back at Beth, now dialing another number. And Kory, soundly asleep in the recliner.

He looks so ... peaceful, sleeping like that. Even with that one silly curl that keeps falling over his eyes, every time he shifts a little.

Eric resisted the impulse to walk over and brush that curl back into place. He glanced back at Beth, and saw her watching him with that familiar, speculative, thoughtful gaze.

Well, at least Kory's getting some rest. I wish I could fall asleep like that. I feel like I haven't slept in days. Which isn't too far off the truth, actually.

It looks like all of this is gonna work. The band and the elves are meeting us at the donut shop, then we'll head up to the hills. And me—I'll do whatever it is that I'm supposed to do.

God, I have never been so scared in all my life.

Beth hung up the phone, and walked back towards Eric and Kory. She bent over the sleeping elf, and kissed him tenderly. "Hey, handsome. Time to go."

Kory's eyes opened instantly, and he gazed up at Beth. She smiled, and lightly pushed that errant curl, the same one that Eric had wanted to fix, away from Kory's eyes.

Then she walked over to the wall, where a guitar case was propped against a cabinet.

Beth picked up the guitar case and cradled it lovingly. "This," she said with the air of a mother showing off her firstborn child, "is my twelve-string acoustic guitar, handbuilt by John Mello, a terrific guitar luthier up in Berkeley. It cost more than I'd care to mention—but I'd been earning good money for a while, and I figured it was well-spent on this baby." She patted the case with a fond, possessive smile. "Now I'm glad I got her. We're going to need every edge we can get. The Others'll be bringing their best stuff as well. Believe me, Eric, you're going to have the finest backups you've ever imagined." She slung her purse over her shoulder, and hefted the guitar case in her other hand. "Well, gentlemen, shall we?"

I'm starting to think this might really work. That maybe we can really make this happen—

"Let's hit the road," he said, turning away from the window.

A faint burst of melody flickered across Eric's thoughts, a brief flutter of distant, discordant music, almost too low to be heard, as he walked back to pick up his flute from

the couch.

Then all he could hear was Beth's terrified scream as the living room suddenly exploded into roaring flames.

Jesus H.—

Eric stumbled backward against the wall, one hand flung over his eyes as the fire leaped up before him. Everything around him was burning, green light glowing in weird patterns.

The couch ignited before his eyes, instantly charring and crumbling into gray ash. Eric backed up along the wall, choking in the thickening smoke.

Can't—can't see the others—oh God—

His path to the door was already blocked by green flames, burning even brighter as they encircled him.

Green fire—it's Perenor! He's trying to kill us all!

Eric saw Beth trying to open the closed window through the flames, the frame already buckling from the

heat. Then she raised her guitar case and smashed the glass.

The noise was barely audible over the sound of the crackling flames.

At least Beth can get out of here, escape before we all turn into kabobs. And maybe Kory—where in the hell is he? I can't see him through the smoke—

His eyes watering too much for him to see anymore, Eric tried to feel his way along the way—and stopped, sensing the fire, only inches away from him in every direction.

And the malevolence directing the blaze, the intense hatred that fueled the flames.

The hatred, directed at Eric.

:-And so it ends. Bard—:

Then someone crashed into Eric with a tackle worthy of a professional football player, slamming him -to the floor. He felt himself being physically lifted and hurled through the air, to land in a smoldering heap next to the shattered window.

Kory shoved him through the rough glass, to where Beth was standing on the ledge outside. Beth and Kory both held on to Eric as he choked, trying to catch his breath, wiping the tears from his eyes with a sooty hand.

"I'm—I'm okay," he said at last. Without speaking, Kory and Beth helped him to the corner of the building, where they jumped down safely onto a parked pickup truck.

Eric glanced back at the upstairs apartment, as the windows burst from the heat, the green flames licking hungrily at the walls and roof.

This guy is definitely playing for keeps. That was too close.

He was suddenly aware of Beth's voice, next to his right ear.

". . . that sonuvabitch, that was my books, my records, my art, dammit, all of my costumes, my Fender guitar, that bastard just burned up everything I own! Christ, Eric, he did this to both of us! God, I am going to kill that fucker!" She raised the guitar case like a sword, ready to hack away at anything before her.

Eric glanced at Beth, ranting furiously, filthy with soot, her hair singed at the edges; and Kory, next to her, who for once genuinely looked like hell. I can't do anything about all of that stuff upstairs, but—but this—just like what Kory did earlier, only more specific—

He closed his eyes and concentrated on a thin thread of melody, "Oh, the Britches, They Have Stitches," and imagined—

All of us, looking just fine, damn Perenor's eyes.

This time, he could feel the music weaving around them, the Power taking shape beneath his hands. A moment later, he opened his eyes—

And looked across the parking lot to where a tall, silver-haired man was standing next to a white limo. Watching them.

Calmly, slowly, Perenor began to walk towards them.

Eric just grabbed both Kory and Beth by the hands and ran for Beth's Jeep parked twenty feet away. Beth vaulted into the driver's seat as Kory and Eric scrambled into the back, Beth shoving the key into the ignition and cranking the engine hard.

Perenor only continued walking towards them. Even from a distance, Eric could see the smile flickering across his lips.

Christ, he's playing with us, he knows he's going to get us, no matter if we try to run—

The Jeep's engine suddenly sputtered into life, and Beth snapped the emergency brake loose, hitting the gas hard. The vehicle virtually leaped forward, heading straight for the parking lot exit.

Maybe we can get out of here before he fries us all—

Then Eric noticed the dark fire burning in Beth's eyes.

Uh oh.

"No, dammit," Beth said from between clenched teeth. "I'm tired of running from this guy. I am tired of this guy, period."

"Beth—!" Eric yelled, but she yanked the wheel hard, simultaneously flooring the gas pedal. The Jeep's tires screamed as it accelerated.

Heading straight towards Perenor.

Eric saw Kory's wide-eyed expression of disbelief as the elf looked back at him in shock, then Perenor was directly ahead of them.

Oh God, she's going to hit him straight on—

Eric winced, expecting the impact at any second She's gonna— But this guy deserves it—what he did to Phil, and the others, he deserves to die like an animal, like roadkill—

He forced himself to look up, wanting to see the look on the elf-lord's face, to see him die. To see how you'll react to being cut down, you bastard, just like all the people you've killed—

And then he saw Perenor smile, as with a contemptuous flick of his wrist, he vanished. The Jeep careened directly over the spot where he had stood.

Beth barely slammed on the brakes in time to prevent crashing right into a parked van. The Jeep squealed to a stop, and the three of them just sat there for a moment, staring at each other.

"I knew it couldn't be that easy," Kory said at last, "We had best go to meet the others quickly. I am

certain that will not be Perenor's last attempt to thwart us."

Yeah. He's got too much riding on this to let us win. Him and Ria both.

Ria—

What am I going to do, if she tries to kill me? What if I can't bring myself to fight her?

What if I can't handle the magic, if I can't create the new nexus?

Then Kory will die.

Oh God, please, no.

Yeah, I'm scared. If I blow this, there won't be a second chance.

And what if . . .

At this hour of morning, Whoopie Donuts was virtually deserted, except for the bored man in a dirty white smock wiping the counter with a rag. Eric walked in with Beth and Kory, glancing around to see if any of the others had arrived yet.

Just us, so far.

This was a great place to meet. I wonder if sugar donuts can have a positive effect on Bardic magic? A cup of coffee will probably help, at any rate.

Eric reached out with his thoughts, touching the small bit of magic he had created while they were in the Jeep under Kory's direction. A disguise spell. To make Kory look like a normal guy, sans armor and sword. Double-Oh-Seven, eat your heart out.

They walked up to the counter, where the proprietor barely gave them a cursory look before jotting down their order.

When the man pushed two cups of coffee and an orange juice across the counter to them, Eric picked up the Styrofoam cup and sipped gratefully, feeling the strong drink heating him all the way down.

Down to that cold lump in my stomach, right next to the butterflies.

Stay cool, Eric. It's okay to be nervous. After all, I've never saved the elven race before. This is a first.

The only other patrons were two women, seated at one of the plastic tables across the room. Eric glanced idly at them, then realized they were staring at Kory.

As if they could see him as what he was, not a myopic teenager in a blue T-shirt and jeans.

Oh well. So much for the disguises. Great idea, Kory

One of the two looked as if she was going to stand up. Then amid the squealing of tires that sounded, to Eric's tired ears, vaguely like horses, the rest of the elves arrived.

Eric peered through the glass door and saw Val: a beautiful, silver-haired woman wearing a stylish blue linen dress, stepping out of a white Corvette—

No, an elf-woman, regal with years beyond counting, garbed in blue silk, standing beside a white stallion that butted playfully at her hand as she moved away from it, striding toward the glass door of the donut shop—

This is definitely too weird for words.

The man at the counter glanced up as Val and Eldenor walked into the shop, then went back to polishing the Formica. But if anything, the two women's eyes were even wider.

And Eric caught a flicker of light about them. Not silver, like Phil's had been, but a sweet hint of green. Not the green of decay, like Perenor's, but playful green, like sunlight shining through the ocean waves.

With unseen depths, living power welling up from below.

Sonuva— Hey, maybe it's not the disguises that are the problem here—

Eric took a good look at the two, trying to figure out who—or what—they were.

And why they're in here right now, with us—

The fiftyish, coffee-skinned woman, her silver hair coiled in an elegant braid, was watching them with a faint, knowing smile. Next to her was a young girl, maybe fifteen, with short brown hair and a skin-tight black leather jacket that would make any biker turn green with envy. Eric winced, seeing the safety pins visible in her ears as the kid turned her head, eyeing all of them suspiciously. Especially Eric.

That older lady—I feel almost as if I've met her before. That calm, quiet way of looking at the world, like she understands people, and knows she can handle anything.

But that kid—if I saw her on the street, I think I'd run, just so she wouldn't have enough time to stick a knife in me. What are those two doing together? They're the unlikeliest pair I've seen in a long time.

The kid leaned over and whispered something to the woman, who nodded.

"Hey, who are you guys?" the girl called from across the room

Eric, Beth, and Kory exchanged glances, then Beth smiled.

"We're in a play," Beth said, absolutely straight-faced. "It's a remake of West Side Story. Set in Tolkien's Middle Earth."

"Oh, come on, don't give me that shit," the girl said, with narrowed eyes.

"Kayla," the older woman said reprovingly.

The girl shrugged. "Hey, it's the truth. She's bullshitting us." The kid looked up at Beth with a wicked grin. "Don't get me wrong, I sure wouldn't expect you to tell the truth—like why you're wandering around Los Angeles with a group of elves. Is Sauron in town or something?"

"Much worse," Beth said, very quietly. She glanced at Eric. "Banyon, why don't you go get us some more donuts or something, while I talk to these ladies?"

"Sure," Eric said. He waited at the counter behind two of the other elves, each of whom produced a fifty-dollar bill to pay for their breakfast.

There sure are lots of those fifties floating around in this elven community. I just hope this guy doesn't look at the serial numbers—

"What's a bearclaw?" Eldenor asked another elf behind him, in a low voice.

The second shrugged. "I don't know. Does sound familiar though, doesn't it?"

Donuts in hand, Eric sat at the edge of the one of tables, where two of the High Court, as brightly colored as tropical fish, were catching up on gossip for the last ten years. They smiled at Eric as he sat down with them, but continued with their conversation.

Eric glanced down at his donut, and wondered for the thousandth time what he was doing here.

It never changes. Even now, when I'm probably about to get myself toasted for-these people, I'm not really a part of their group.

He bit into the donut, liberally dusting himself with powdered sugar. It's just like Faire, all over again; I'm on the outside, looking in.

Then Korendil sat down across from him, an éclair in his hand. "Bard—Eric, rather—have you tried one of these? The proprietor says they are quite fine, in truth—"

"No, thanks." Chocolate eclairs really aren't my scene, I'm more into powdered sugar, really . . . Hey, wait a second—ohmigod—chocolate!

Eric swatted the confection out of Kory's hand, just as he was about to bite into it. The éclair skidded across the floor, as Kory stared at him.

"That was a chocolate éclair," Eric explained quickly, hoping that Kory would wait for the explanation before swatting him. "Chocolate has some caffeine in it. I don't know if it's enough to affect you or not, but I didn't want to take the chance."

Kory just looked at him for a moment, then he reached across the table, squeezing Eric's sugar-dusted hand gently. "Again, you are guarding me from harm, Eric. I must learn more of the ways of this human world, or you will have to spend all of your time protecting this foolish, headstrong elf."

"That's okay," Eric said, past the lump in his throat. "You've saved my ass more than a few times, yourself. We'll just have to keep looking out for each other, that's all."

They both looked up as Beth, a Styrofoam cup of coffee in her hand, slid in next to them. Eric leaned past her to look at the empty table where the two women had been seated. "Is everything all right?" he asked.

Like, are those two going directly to the cops to tell them about the loons in the donut shop, or what?



"Everything's fine," Beth said, adding some extra sugar to her coffee. "Turns out those two are the same kind of people as you are, Eric. Well, sort of. They're Healers. I let them know that we're heading into some rough stuff, and Elizabeth promised to keep her ears open in case we need her help. Which, with any luck, we won't."

"That little punkette was a Healer?" Eric tried to reconcile the two images in his mind, and came up with a complete blank.

"Kayla is Elizabeth's apprentice," Beth said. "And pretty damn good at the trade, from the sound of it. She's a nice kid."

A nice kid? Are we talking about the same girl? The one with the pins in her ears?

Then again, Beth does tend towards the black studded leather herself—

What the hell. If things turn out bad, we'll need their help, in a big way.

But it is one hell of a coincidence that they just happened to be in here eating donuts this morning—

"Beth!"

The other three members of Spiral Dance entered the shop, starting towards them.

Eric felt a tight fist closing around his gut. Everybody's here. This means we're going to head over to Griffith Park and actually do this thing.

And Ria and Perenor may try to stop us. Or, if we're lucky, they won't.

Personally, I'm not betting on that kind of luck.

He glanced at Beth, talking animatedly with Allie and Jim; and at Kory, sitting so close beside her.

At this point, I don't really care if she dumps me for him. Not now. I just want all of us to live through this. That's all I care about right now.

I'll worry about the rest of that later

Afterwards.

•19•

Tiya magicians

Eric tried to relax, tried to pretend that it was just another gig. After all, the setting wasn't that different from Fairesite—

Hell, I've even played a couple of weddings out here. Not with the Dance, though, with a pickup band—

Beth was tuning that exquisite twelve she was so proud of, fussing over it as if the least little discordance would throw everything out of whack.

And how do I know it wouldn't?

Allie had a little battery-powered Casio synth; state-of-the-art, and capable of producing anything but an omelet. She was giving Beth her pitches; she'd tuned Eric just a couple of minutes ago. The girl looked sleepy and uncertain.

Like maybe wondering about our sanity?

Like maybe I'm wondering about our sanity.

Dan had his bouzouki and was noodling bass runs; he was the only one of the Dance who didn't look nervous. But then again. Uncle Dan was probably stoned to the gills. Jim kept running his finger around the rim of his bodhran, trying not to stare at the elves.

Which was pretty hard even for Eric, who was kind of used to them by now.

The little valley-meadow they'd chosen for the new nexus-point cupped the sunlight and held it, and the bright colors of the elves' costumes and armor shone with ironic festiveness in the golden light. They'd made a circle around the band, Val casting it once, Beth once, and a third elf (in brilliant purple- and copper-trimmed robes) the third and final time.

Now the elf-mages had stationed themselves on the perimeter, facing outward; the elf-warriors just outside the perimeter, swords drawn and alert. Kory was right in front of them, his back to Eric, his blue and gold armor shining with a faint, gilding aura of light, a haze that made him look a little unreal, even to Eric, who had given him the magic that made him glow—

He looks like a special effect. Even with that bit of blond fur escaping from under the edge of his helm.

As if the thought had reached him, Kory turned and looked over his shoulder at Eric. And smiled.

That smile is enough to stop anybody's heart. Eric managed a faltering grin in return, and Kory turned back to his watch; scanning, Eric was somehow certain, with more senses than just five.

He realized that Beth had finally stopped tuning, and turned to her, his flute suddenly weighing in his hands like a pipe of lead. He swallowed. "Ready?" he asked.

She nodded, and the other three members of the band gathered around her. "How about you?"

He couldn't read her dark eyes this time. "About as ready as I'll ever be, I guess ..."

He closed his eyes and brought the flute up to his lips.

Better start it fast, Banyon, before you lose whatever courage you've got left—

"Banish Misfortune"—it was the first thing that came to his fingers. Just like diving into water, he slid into the starting descant, tossing in his usual trill on the B, landing solid on the F sharp. He tried to concentrate on the melody, on feeling the power, and on finding a way for it to come to him—

Nothing.

Oh, the magic was there, he could feel it, he could even pull it to him—but the source was still Ria's. He couldn't seem to make it come to him here.

Maybe a different tune.

He tried "Tamlin's Reel," "Smash the Windows," "Kid on the Mountain," "O'Cardan's Farewell," all with the same complete lack of success. The band followed him faithfully, taking the changes with him like they'd been playing together for decades, like they could read his mind. And the magic was there—

But just out of his reach.

"Sheebeg Sheemore," "Tom O'Bedlam," "Rocky Road to Dublin"—song after song, jigs, reels, everything.

Nothing.

Eric began to feel angry and frustrated, and his anger increased, until he could scarcely hear what he was playing, scarcely sense the magic through the red haze of emotion.

But a gentle touch on his arm startled him, cooled the rage, broke him out of the downward spiral of trial and failure. He jumped, and ended on a squeak, and the band faltered to a halt behind him.

"Eric?" Kory's green eyes graced him with concern. "Eric, you are not reaching the magic."

"I know," he muttered. "I'm trying, but—"

"You try with that which is already created, already old—but you are a Bard, Eric. Master of the creative magics. Try what you Called me with." As Eric tried to figure out what the elf was getting at, Kory smiled again. "In the Grove, Bard. What you used to reach me, and break the spells of Lock and Ward."

"You mean 'Sheebeg Sheemore'? Kory, I tried that already—"

"No." The elf shook his head, his eyes bright under the shadowing helm. "No, that was what you played that awakened me. Play what you Called me with, what you used to unravel the spellbindings."

"I—"

I sort of segued into something else, something original. God, I was more than half drunk—

More like three-quarters drunk, now that I think about it—

I remember it—I think. But what if I remember wrong?

"Kory," he faltered, "I—"

The elf laid one armor-clad finger across his lips. "No, don't say it. You will succeed, Eric. I know this."

Korendil's eyes seemed to be seeing right into his mind, just as they had this afternoon. Gazing into his

heart, so open, understanding him, trusting him in a way that no one ever had before.

:—Eric, my friend—:

Kory smiled, and took his hand away. Still smiling, he backed up, one slow, careful step at a time, never taking his eyes from Eric's. Eric raised the flute to his lips as Kory reached the perimeter of the circle—

—never taking his eyes from Kory's.

He was shaking so hard that his teeth rattled against the mouthpiece; and the first three notes he produced were so aimless that he barely held back a sob of profound despair.

He saw Kory's lips move, soundlessly.

:You can, Eric. I know this, as I know you.:

And Eric's fingers found the melody.

He closed his eyes then, overwhelmed, as it began to flow without any real thought or planning on his part. In moments he was lost to it, within it, more completely than he had ever been in his life.

He could see the spell he was weaving now, just as he had seen the one that brought Kory back from the brink of death, lost to Dreaming. Saw it begin to build a lattice-work of power, an anchoring-point for the new nexus, a framework to stabilize the rift in the curtain between the Worlds, a patterning that would hold it open forever.

When that framework was complete, his music would pierce that wall, and let the magic flow through. And he knew from the fragility of the net he wove that if his concentration wavered the slightest bit, it would all collapse—and there would be no second attempt. Eric knew he'd never manage to achieve this level of concentration, of power, ever again.

But already the magic he was calling from Ria's stronghold was fading, weakening.

Terrific. I'm running out of juice—

Running out, like a stream trickling away to nothing, drying up.

He wavered—and the memory of Kory sprawled unconscious in the dust of the ruined Grove rose up in his mind. His throat closed, and he braced his shoulders, and poured forth a defiant, liquid run. No! I won't let them—him—die!

So he played with all his heart, forsook the fading stream of power, and spun the shining strands of his spell out of the fabric of his soul.

As the world faded from around him—except for the music, the spell, and his own fierce determination.

The Porsche accelerated past the open metal gate, past the park rangers standing beside their pickup truck, a pair of young men who eyed the crazy lady driver, her blond hair flying with the wind through the open window, with appreciative glances.

But Ria scarcely noticed. Her thoughts were far away, with a particularly scruffy minstrel. Eric, who even

now was standing in the knee-high grass, intent upon his music, as the first stirrings of Power swirled around him in scintillating light.

Even without trying, I can see him, touch him, feel his thoughts. Feel the bond between us, living Power calling to Power. How could Eric ever have left me, knowing that there is this between us?

A silent voice interrupted her thoughts. :Ria?:

Concentrating on the twisting road, and on the presence of the Bard, in the hills far above her, Ria bespoke a wordless reply. :I'm tracking them, Father. They're in the park, away from the main road.: She spun an image of the valley, the gathered elves surrounding the Bard, and sent it swiftly to Perenor. :If we park on the other side, their steeds will not detect our approach.:

:Good.: Perenor's mental voice was tinged with satisfaction. :I will meet you there.:

Her lips tightened as his voice faded. I still don't trust him, even if he promised not to hurt Eric. I know how much his promises are worth.

If I can just have enough time to speak, before the elves try anything stupid—

Eric will listen to me. And he'll understand. It'll be easier this way; I'll just send the Old Blood back under the hill, to the Faerie Lands. If they weren't such fools, they'd have fled as soon as they realized they'd lost, instead of lingering here to die.

Her hands were clenched tight on the steering wheel. Before now I didn't care whether they lived or died. I wouldn't have deliberately tried to harm them, even though the temptation is definitely there, especially after so many years of living with their contempt for me, the half-breed. But now it's not worth it. I'll help them, even Korendil, if only so that I'll never have to deal with them again.

So they'll never interfere in Eric's and my lives, ever again.

Ria carefully eased the Porsche off the winding road and parked on a barren, flat strip overlooking a small valley. She stood on the rough gravel, gazing down at the grassy vale, as a white limo stopped beside her.

Perenor stepped from the car and leaned back through the open passenger door to say something to his driver. He closed the door, and the limo pulled away, heading back in the direction of the city.

Ria's father was dressed in a business suit, immaculately tailored as always. As she watched, his outline shimmered briefly. A moment later, he stood in full armor; armor that shone dully, like blue glass or blued steel. He had his sword sheathed at his side.

"You won't need that. Father," Ria said slowly. "Remember your promise to me? You agreed not to harm any of them, not unless my plan doesn't work."

Perenor chuckled dryly. "You forget, my dear, how thick-headed your full-blooded cousins are. If nothing else, this may impress them a little. I expect they look rather shabby—it has been several lean months for them since the nexus was destroyed. If they see how much Power I can command at this moment, they may listen to reason. I can sense all of them, including your Bard, down there." He gestured at the valley below them. "Shall we join them?"

Ria nodded, following her father down the grassy hillside.

I don't think I can trust him. I think he's going to try something, as soon as we're close to the elves.

And he's going to expect me to help him. Because the elves will attack me, as well as him, and he probably thinks that I'll have to fight, if only to keep myself alive.

Except—I won't.

She stumbled a little and cursed her high-heeled pumps then, recklessly, changed them to flat, glove-leather boots.

It'll be a risk, because the elves won't know that I don't intend to fight them. And I might get hurt. Or killed. But if I raise Power against them, I've lost. Because Eric will never trust me again.

Yes, it's dangerous. But I can't risk losing Eric, not after everything that's happened between us, not the way I feel about him.

Her father strode along ahead of her, the heavy armor encumbering him not at all. She picked her way through the weeds carefully, and noticed how he looked neither to the right nor the left; simply trod over everything in his path.

And after I've sent the elves across the veil, back to the Faerie Lands, when there's nothing more that can stand between us, Eric will make a choice. And if he wants to walk away from me again, I won't stop him. Or coerce him. I want him to choose to stay with me of his own free will.

And he will choose me. He has to. How can he deny what is between us, the way his Power is reaching out to mine, even now?

Through the sparse trees she saw the circle of elves, the human musicians, and the young man with the flute. Even at this distance she could feel the power of his music; a melody that resonated through her, a power that made her hands tingle and her heart ache.

He's so beautiful, with the magic shining through him like a beacon. I'll never let him go again—

As Ria paused on the hillside, gazing at the Bard, Perenor strode forward impatiently. She caught up with him at the edge of the trees. The elves saw them, and moved closer together, forming a living barrier between them and the musicians.

"Eric!" Ria called, but the Bard did not move or even look at her. He seemed entranced, lost in his music, oblivious to everything around him.

One of the elves drew her sword in a swift, fluid movement. Ria set her hand over her father's sword arm as his hand reached for the sheathed blade.

:No. You promised me. Father.:

Perenor gave her an askance look. :Of course, daughter. But I doubt you'll be able to convince these fools of anything.:

:But let me try, at least.:

He nodded cursorily, and stepped back a pace. Ria took a deep breath, the narrowed eyes of the elves intent upon her.

"We don't have to fight," she said, pitching her voice loud to be heard over the music of the band. "There's no need for bloodshed. I'll help you, transport all of you back to the Faerie Lands. It won't matter anymore that we control the nexus, you'll be safe. All I want is Eric."

An elf in blue and gold armor stepped between her and the young Bard.

"Touch him, sorceress, and I'll kill you," Korendil said quietly.

Ria restrained the impulse to summon the lightnings and burn that insolent look from the elf's face. "There's no need for that. I won't hurt him. He'll be happy with me, I can assure you. And all of you will be safe, far from this place."

Another, in green and silver, raised his visor and looked at her with an expression full of irony. "What makes you believe that is what we want?" Eldenor asked calmly. "Why should we flee this land that has been our home for so many years? What right do you have to demand this of

us?"

Perenor spoke, very softly, before Ria could answer. "The right of the strong over the weak, Eldenor. Of the master over the slave." His voice grew in strength, filled with hatred and madness. "The right of the one who was unjustly banished, cast from his place among you, and has dreamed of the moment when all of you shall lie lifeless in pools of your blood—"

An invisible fist reached out and gripped Ria, ripping through all of her carefully-constructed defenses, through the layers of self, to the wellspring of her powers, her innermost being. She screamed, caught helplessly in the whirlwind, as her life and magic drained away.

She fell to her knees, controlled by forces beyond her imagination. A last thread of coherent thought battled through the waves of pain, the maelstrom of power surrounding her.

He—he planned this for years. When I was a child, too young to stop him, he set this up. Knowing that he could do this to me at any moment he chose—

And he's mad. Completely insane.

He's going to use everything against them, and kill me, to destroy the elves.

And then he'll murder Eric—

NO!

Beth focused on her fingerings like a mantra; kept her eyes squeezed shut to keep her attention on one thing.

The music.

Caught up in the melody, Beth could feel the currents of power dancing around her; tendrils of magic like

a living creature, weaving and darting in strange patterns.

This—this is almost better than sex. Witchcraft never felt anything like this.

She smiled. Her eyes were still closed, and she concentrated on the music. Her hand moved lightly upon the guitar, fingerpicking a quick-running counterpoint to complement Eric's melodic line.

Lovely work. Banyan. For a while, I wasn't certain if this was going to play, but this sounds—feels—just right. Like everything is coming together, fusing, creating something new and wonderful—something truly enchanted.

Then she heard something else, a distant noise like pieces of metal clanging together. Beth opened her eyes, looking past Allie and Jim, towards the edge of the circle.

And her heart stopped beating.

The sunlit meadow had been transformed into something from one of her nightmares: a shadowy glen surrounded by billowing black fog, from which half-glimpsed creatures appeared, attacking the elven warriors, then fading away.

Beyond the elves she could see another figure in bluish-silver armor, battling sword against sword with Eldenor; and a blonde woman, kneeling motionless on the ground.

Somehow, in a way she didn't quite understand, Beth could sense the flow of power between Perenor and Ria, as the elf-lord drew strength and will from the sorceress.

Perenor. And his bitch daughter. They've found us—

And the bodies, littering the ground: Val, the lovely silver-haired elven woman, with claw marks across her face and throat; an armored swordsman, his turquoise breastplate nearly buckled in two, as if some immense force had crushed him like an insect in its grip.

They're working their way past the defenders, trying to get at us—at Eric—

She realized that she had stopped playing, and forced her fingers to continue, even as Perenor's sword bit deeply into Eldenor's side. The purple-mohawked warrior staggered back, into the murky depths of the unnatural fog.

Something, a creature that Beth's mind refused to admit could exist, reached out and dragged Eldenor back into the darkness.

Not even the music could mask his screaming.

Oh God—please, no—this can't be happening—

Her hands were shaking so much she could barely hold on to the guitar, much less play the chords. As Eldenor's screams faded, Perenor looked across the meadow at the band.

His jade-green eyes met Beth's through the slits of his helm. He moved toward her.

Then Korendil was between them, sword raised, forcing Perenor back with a wild flurry of blows.



For a moment Beth thought that Kory had a chance, that he could defeat the elf-lord. Then Perenor recovered his balance and counterattacked.

She could barely hear the music over the clashing of blades, the combatants' harsh breathing, the distant howling of the mist-creatures and the war cries of the elves; as Perenor forced Kory back a step, then another, and another, all the time moving closer to the band.

Edged steel clattered in strike after strike as Korendil fought grimly. From his stance, and his desperation—and from the strange magic that seemed to bind her, the elf, and Eric together—Beth knew that he knew he had no chance, but he refused to give up or falter—

Perenor feinted high, then came in at Kory's side.

Kory swung low, trying to shove Perenor's blade to the side, but not fast enough, recovering a split second too slowly.

Beth saw the opening, even before Perenor pivoted and brought his sword around in a fierce, whirling arc—

Oh God—he's going to kill him!

—and the blade sliced through Kory's armor.

Kory made a strange sound, a choked gasp, as the sword cut halfway across his torso. Beth saw him slip to one knee, then fall silently to the damp grass.

No—please. God, no—

The sounds of the battle, the horrific snarling of the monsters, all were nothing compared to the noiseless screaming in Beth's mind, the convulsive pain that gripped her heart.

Oh Goddess, no—Kory—he can't be dead—he can't be.

Perenor braced his foot against Kory's chest and yanked his weapon free.

Sobs tore her chest, her throat ached from holding back a scream. No—please, no, anything but this—

Perenor looked up; looked straight at her—

And smiled, a smile that froze the scream in her throat, turned the tears on her face to ice.

He took one slow, deliberate step toward her, smile widening as she backed up a pace.

You sadistic bastard—you won't take me without a fight!

She stopped playing; reversed the guitar and took its neck in both hands, her tears now as much of anger as sorrow.

You got Kory—but you'll have to go through me to get Eric!

He licked his lips slowly, sensuously. And with a start, she heard a low, ironic voice in the back of her mind.

:That can easily be arranged, mortal child. Especially if you propose to fight me with nothing but that foolish piece of wood—:

"Indeed?"

The new voice rang out over the sound of the fighting like a trumpet-call, startling Beth so much she nearly dropped the guitar.

The fog parted—and through the rift came another armored figure. Gold armor, with touches of brilliant scarlet, so brightly polished it hurt to look at it. The stranger raised his visor—

Beth gasped. Terenil? But—

"So, High Lord Perenor has taken to slaughtering children, has he?" Terenil said contemptuously. He glided confidently through the tangled knots of fighting, around the fallen bodies, with no sign of his ever having been the wreck Beth had seen after Eric vanished—

—except for the sad and haunted look in his eyes, the look of someone who has seen himself in the mirror and found only self-condemnation for what was there.

He stopped, just for a moment, beside Beth; caught up her hand and pressed it to his lips.

:Forgive me, child.:

Before she could react to that, he gave her an odd half-smile, turned on his heel and took Kory's place between Perenor and the band, pulling his visor down as he did so.

Suddenly a golden blaze of light flared up around him as he brought his sword up to guard position.

Perenor snapped his own visor down and his blade up—and an answering glow of cold blue sprang up about him.

Beth couldn't tell which of them moved first; they seemed to spring at each other simultaneously, blades and magic clashing in an exchange of lightning-quick strokes.

Unlike Kory's fight, or Eldenor's, this one involved both sword and Power. Which, since Ria was channeling magic to her father, made it two against one.

By the gods, if I can't do anything else, I'll see if I can't fix those odds!

There didn't seem to be anything but fallen bodies off to her left. Beth edged slowly past the band, out of the circle, never taking her eyes off the sorceress. All of her attention seemed to be on her father.

Funny, if I didn't know better, I'd swear she was fighting against him. That strained expression on her face—

Whatever she was doing, Ria was not watching the puny mortal witch making her way toward her, guitar neck still in both hands.

Just a few more steps—

The fighters were evenly matched; even Beth could tell that. Neither one drove the other back for more than a step or two, and always ground lost was regained in the next exchange of blows. Terenil gave Perenor no openings at all; Terenil could find none in Perenor's defenses—

Which means if I deep-six that bastard's magic source—She was almost within reach. Then she was within reach. The sorceress stared blankly ahead, apparently oblivious to Beth's presence, or anything else happening around her.

Oh my beautiful guitar—you're all I've got left—

Gods. She raised the instrument over her head. This is for Kory, you—

Ria turned suddenly, and stared right at her.

Beth froze.

There was a flicker of something unreadable in the blonde woman's eyes before she closed them.

:Damn you, witch, DO IT!:

Beth brought the guitar squarely down on Ria's head with a splintering crash and a jangle of strings. The woman folded soundlessly.

Beth whirled, expecting that now, now she would see Terenil take the upper hand—

—only to watch in horror as Perenor snaked his blade around Terenil's guard, and ran him through.

Beth screamed.

Terenil went to one knee, Perenor's blade embedded in his chest—and looked up into his enemy's face. As Perenor stood, seemingly frozen, Terenil reached for Perenor's sword arm—

And pulled himself toward the dark elf, impaling himself still further on the blade lodged in his chest.

And while Beth watched, he grabbed Perenor's shoulder, hauled his enemy within reach of his own blade, and drove his sword into Perenor's side.

Terenil cried out something—a word Beth didn't recognize, a war-cry, perhaps—and the last of his sorcerous power surged up his blade and into the body of his enemy.

At Beth's feet, Ria began to stir, rising to her feet—

Oh shit—

Perenor's body jerked, convulsing impossibly—and the energy lashed from him in a visible arc into the body of his daughter.

Ria shrieked, clutched her head with both hands, and fell.

Terenil folded around the blade lodged in his chest, the light fading from him, as Perenor toppled to the ground beside him.

Christ!

Beth shook off her shock; ran to Terenil's side and knelt there—but as she opened his visor, she could see that the Prince had gone far beyond anyone's reach.

But—but he's smiling.

He's smiling—as if he's having a peaceful dream. Oh gods, Terenil—

Terenil—what about Eric?

She lifted dazed eyes toward the band—but her eyes fell on Kory instead.

KORY!

Before she realized she had moved, Beth was on the blood-soaked ground beside him. His skin was as cold as the metal of his armor as she cradled his face in her hands, silently begging for him to live, but knowing, knowing . . .

She heard his voice through her tears, a last dying whisper in her mind.

:Beth—my love—:

Then silence, like the emptiness within her soul.

No—God, no—it can't end like this—please, I love him, I can't live without him—

•20•

Banish Misfortune

God. Eric felt like he was about to float away. There didn't seem to be much of him left—it was mostly part of the delicate weaving of the spell, threads of luminous gold, emerald-green, sapphire-blue. What there was of him had become a wispy and transparent ghost in the heart of the structure.

Hang in there. Banyan. You're almost through. You can't let them down now, not when you're so close—

Spiral Dance's music wove around and around the outside of the spell, making it stronger, turning the threads into cables with a greater tensile strength than braided steel—but their efforts weren't what created it in the first place. And their efforts wouldn't be what created the new nexus.

He was so tired—

Don't think about being tired. It's not that much more. Just reach out—touch the veil—and call the

magic—

The melody had long since slowed; not a lament, not quite. This had too much hope and promise to be a lament. It was a longing, though, a heart-song of yearning. And it lacked only a handful of notes to complete it.

Only Eric could play those notes, the key that would complete the spell and bring the magic.

I can't. There's . . . nothing left . . .

Oh God. I . . . have . . . to—

From somewhere he found a last little drop of strength, a last breath. And played.

At the first note, the veil thinned beneath him. At the second, the spell-structure suddenly focused on him, on the thinning spot he touched.

And at the third—

He hadn't been quite sure what to expect—a fountain, a river, a waterfall? It was like none of these things. Instead, it was like opening a window to the sun into a blacked-out room. For a moment all he could do was feel the warmth and life flooding back into him, replacing everything he'd spent in the spell. Like one sun-blinded, he stood in the pressureless flood of power and gasped, unable to sense anything beyond the light,

Then, as he felt more and more solid, he began to see things, somehow, or sense them in some other fashion. He could hear, all over the city, the minds of all the Lesser Court elves; he heard them waking out of Dreaming, heard them calling to one another in incredulous joy. Voice after voice in his mind, all joining with the song-spell he'd created, elaborating on it and making it stronger.

My God, he thought in wonder. We did it—we really did it!

Then he felt the pain. Not his—but around him. Close. Very close.

God! It doubled him up. Death. There's somebody dead. Lots of somebodies. And lots of dying. I have to wake up out of here

Please—not Beth. Don't let it be Beth—

He began pulling his way up out of the spell; it was hard—and he was exhausted. Power was all around him, a glowing mist, and it would be so easy just to stay—

No!

He broke through, finally; felt the real world settle around him; forced his eyes to open.

And his heart just about stopped.

There was blood everywhere. Spattering the grass, sprayed across the clothes of the shocked musicians—

Oh shit—

Splattered on him

And bodies. Graceful, attenuated elf bodies, sprawled around the perimeter of the circle, so much dark blood soaking their slashed and singed costumes and armor that they couldn't be alive.

There were a few of them moving; one or two still standing. None in blue-and-gold armor.

Oh shit. Kory!

The strangled sob told him where to look. just on the periphery of his vision, to his right. Beth, cradling a red-streaked blond head in her lap, crying like her heart was broken.

Oh God, Kory! No!

He took one step—and inadvertently reached out with the magic that still surrounded him, even as he stretched his hand out toward them. And as his sixth sense touched them, he knew that, appearances to the contrary, Kory was still alive.

But he wouldn't be for long. Not without a miracle.

Or magic—

And if I do nothing, he'll die. My rival. I don't have to do a damn thing.

And how could I ever compete with him?

He could feel Kory slipping away; see the elf losing his fragile hold on life.

No! Dammit, NO!

It was like grabbing the trailing hem of a garment that was sliding over a cliff-edge; he caught and held the tenuous essence that was "Kory," and hung on to it with his teeth gritting at the pain it caused him. Recklessly he gathered the magic around himself, recklessly he flung it at his ... his friend. Without pausing to wonder how much this was going to cost him, Eric wrapped himself in the healing spell, with a touch of the "Simple Gifts" magic he'd worked to such good effect before. Hoping that some of this would spill over, touch and help the others—but focusing the power on Kory.

Live, you frizzy-haired sonuvabitch! Goddamn you anyway, live, you idiot elf!

He was jarred out of the spell when his knees gave, and he found himself panting on the blood-speckled grass, hands clutching his flute so hard they hurt. He looked up, I quickly, his heart in his throat, afraid he would see failure.

And Kory, lifeless on the blood-stained grass—

Beth was still sobbing, her face buried in her hands, but Kory's chest was moving, slowly rising and falling.

The elf opened his eyes just as Beth seemed to notice his movement. Their eyes met. Kory's expression

was one of confusion, Beth's of disbelief.

"Kory?" she whispered.

Then they were embracing, crying and laughing, kissing one another, and holding each other as if they'd never let go.

Eric felt like crying too, but for a far different reason.

Okay, Banyan, you knew this was going to happen. So, how much do you care for them, anyhow?

Enough to give them each other, to get out of their way and let them love each other in peace?

His hands shook, his throat knotted.

Yeah. Yeah, I guess I do. Shit, what could I give her? I haven't got anything but the clothes on my back and the flute. And Kory—maybe this'll pay him back for when I ran out on him before.

Hot tears splashed on his hands as he quickly took the flute apart and stowed it in its case. His stomach tightened as he lurched to his feet and shoved the case away in the gig bag still slung over his shoulder.

Okay. This is where the hero's best friend saddles up and rides off into the east—so the hero and his girl can ride off into the sunset.

But it hurts so much, dammit, it hurts—

No one seemed to notice as he walked to the edge of the clearing. Eric glanced back once over his shoulder, wanting a last glimpse of Beth.

They were still kissing, so lost in each other that if the big earthquake hit right then they probably wouldn't even notice.

'Bye, guys. Be good to each other, okay?

Someday, maybe, I'll . . . get in touch.

Maybe.

A delicate cough jarred Beth and Kory out of their clinch. She looked up, startled, to see two people standing over her—the Healer who had been at the donut shop—

Elizabet? Yeah—Jesus Cluny Frog, what is she doing here?

—and her young protegee (looking very green and no-where near as tough as her would-be image).

"Elizabet?" Beth faltered.

"You weren't exactly inconspicuous," the woman said serenely. "If my instincts are right, you have roughly twenty minutes before the reports of fireworks going off in this area bring in the police. I think you need a little help cleaning up—unless you don't mind doing your explaining from the inside of a jail cell. In which case, I hope you have a good lawyer. You'll need one."

"Oh Christ—" Beth got to her knees, and ran a blood-smearred hand through her hair. She looked around, bewildered.

The monsters were dissolving, exactly the same way Eric had described the "dragon" disintegrating: falling to bits, becoming heaps of dead leaves, old trash, and thin, noxious liquids. But the elves—

"Beth?"

"Yeah, Allie?" she replied, distractedly.

"Beth, I can't—I can't look at this anymore—"

"Lady, I'm blowin' this taco stand," Jim said abruptly from next to Allie. "Color me history."

Beth stared at her two band members, both of whom were wide-eyed with shellshock, and visibly shaking.

We all look like—like we've been through a war. Which, I guess, we have.

Allie moved towards Beth, as though she was going to hug her, then glanced down at her hands, wet with blood. She looked up and her eyes met Beth's, tremulous and afraid. "I've—I've got to get out of here, Beth."

Beth saw Dan across the glen, bouzouki in hand, already making tracks toward the park entrance without a single glance backward.

"Yeah, sure, you'd better get going—" Beth said slowly.

It occurred to Beth, as Allie and Jim hurried away, that the unity she'd always felt with the rest of Dance, even when they were all arguing over something, was completely gone. She felt nothing as they hurried away, not even a ghost of regret.

I think the band just died. Requiescat in pace. Maybe they saw a little more magic than they were ready for. Talking about going out there and saving the world, no problem. But watching people die for it— Big problem. Not that I blame them. I don't know how I'm able to deal with this. This place looks like a slaughterhouse. At least. . . at least, it's over.

She looked around, quickly, searching for Kory, and saw him kneeling beside a body in golden armor—armor whose scarlet trimmings matched the scarlet blood smeared over it.

Oh God—he doesn't know about Terenil—She stumbled across the grass toward him, and went to her knees in the blood-sodden weeds. Kory looked up at her, his green eyes brighter for the tears in them. "Beth?" he whispered. "Why—why is he smiling?" She took Kory's hand in hers, and told him.

Korendil concentrated for a moment, and his armor blurred and softened—and in a moment more he was clad again and in the blue treads and shirt he had "borrowed" from Eric. After a moment's consideration, he sent his sword after the armor.

Surely there will be no more fighting now. And this is far less conspicuous.



He knelt next to Elizabet, watching as the woman rested her hands against Narva's shield-arm. He could sense the bones knitting together beneath Elizabet's gentle hands. Beside her, Kayla was tracing a fingertip down a razor-thin cut along the warrior's cheek, the wound visibly closing behind her touch.

These two are truly amazing, truly gifted. If they hadn't found their way to us, I think we would have lost even more people. As it was—

He swallowed, looking at the once-peaceful meadow. As it was, too many of our people died. And I was almost among them.

If it had not been for Eric—

He was all that I dreamed he could be, and more. Even now I can feel the strength of his nexus; the limitless pool of magic welling up, like water from a mountain spring.

And he saved my life.

"I wish there was some way we could repay you," Kory said quietly, as the Healer helped Narya to her feet.

"We don't accept money," Elizabet said simply.

Kory looked up as someone rested a hand on his shoulder, and saw Beth gazing down at him.  
:Beloved?:

She answered aloud, her voice thin with weariness. "We'll need your help to ... take care of the bodies, Kory."

He nodded, rising to his feet.

It was a simple spell, one that the youngest child-mage learned: to Call fire. There were no words for this moment, as he, the surviving elves, and the three human women watched each lifeless elven body dissolve into smoke and ash.

At last he stood, gazing down at Perenor and Terenil, still locked together in death.

Perenor, I can consign to the flames, easily enough. But my Prince—

A low moan distracted him; he saw the Sorceress stirring weakly, trying to move. He began to reach for his sword with his magic, but the dusky Healer spoke first. "No. Let me see her."

It was long moments (Kory's fingers aching to clench onto the hilt of his blade, wanting to summon the weapon into existence and quickly finish off the evil creature) before the Healer spoke again. "She's no danger now. That backlash nearly killed her—as it is, her mind is like a child's." She looked up; ebon-dark eyes met his. "You want to repay me—then give me this woman's life. Kayla and I will take care of her, and I'll try to mend her shattered mind."

Kory hesitated, his hand still twitching restlessly. From behind him, he heard Beth's voice, silently pleading with him.

:There's been enough blood here for one day, Korendil. Let them take her.:

Grudgingly, he glanced down at the semi-conscious blonde woman, half-curved on the ground.

Indeed, Beth speaks truth. Perenor is dead, and the nexus is restored. There is no need for this woman's death, other than my desire for vengeance.

And that is not enough reason to kill her.

"Very well. Though Eric, who has lost more than any of us to this sorceress, may wish differently—"

Eric—

Kory suddenly realized that he had not seen Eric for the last hour.

Where is he? What has happened to the Bard?

He saw that Beth had had the same realization.

"Goddammit," she said, looking around frantically. "What could have happened to him? He was here, I know he was all right, Perenor didn't even touch him—"

"He Healed the blond hunkola here," Kayla said. "I could feel it; it was right when we were driving up the road."

"And now he's gone." Beth slammed her fist into her palm. "Dammit, Banyon never thinks before he does anything! Come on, we've got to find him!"

"And how do you know he wants to be found?"

Kory and Beth both looked at Elizabet. "What?" Beth asked obviously puzzled.

Elizabet shrugged. "From what I saw in the donut shop this morning, I'd say the young man is in love with you, Beth. But you care for Korendil. That's obvious as well. Perhaps you should just let him leave, if this is what he wants."

"But I don't want him to go! I love him too, that stupid whistler! And he knows that!"

The Healer shook her head. "I think you have to make a choice, Beth."

Kory watched Beth waver, then her mouth tightened with resolve.

Is she choosing between us? Or, is it as the Bard assumed, and the decision is already made?

My heart is caught by this mortal woman, but how can she choose one of the Faerie over another of her own kind? And when the other is a Bard? There is no comparison between us. I, a lowly warrior with some paltry skill at magery, and Eric, a human Bard whose power shines through him like sunlight through the leaves!

She will choose to love him, of that I am certain. And I will be alone again.

But I love them both, my dark-eyed human witch, and the Bard who saved my people.

I love them.

But I have done enough harm to them, embroiling them in this war. If I leave now, perhaps they can return to what their lives were before. In time, I do not doubt they will forget me—

Kory's dark thoughts were interrupted by Beth grabbing his arm and dragging him to the parked jeep on the far side of the meadow.

He could not bring himself to break her agitated silence until they were both in the vehicle and he had shielded himself against the jeep's Cold Iron shell. "Beth?" he ventured from the passenger seat, as she started the engine. "Beth, perhaps I shouldn't go with you. I'm not certain that is wise. Perhaps you should talk with Eric alone—"

She didn't answer, just floored the accelerator. Kory sat in silence, wanting to ask her that final, unspoken question, but not daring to speak.

Not until he saw the bright metal gate of the park, firmly locked against all traffic, and the peculiar black-and-white car parked beside it.

"Beth, stop!"

The brakes squealed noisily as the jeep screeched to a halt. A mortal, garbed in dark blue, walked swiftly towards them. Kory recognized the pistol in the man's hand from the many television shows he had seen through the windows of the electronics store near the Elfhame Grove.

"You, in the jeep! Neither of you move an inch."

The man's voice seemed strained, as he circled to Beth's side of the jeep, holding the tiny weapon at ready.

We must look somewhat unusual, compared to this man's bland clothing. Beth is still dressed in High Court finery, and I in Eric's garb, and both of our persons are thoroughly stained with blood.

The sight of blood does seem to unnerve many of these humans.

"You're Eliza Kentraine?"

"Yes," Beth replied carefully. "But—"

"Miss, just step out of the car, slowly. We want to ask you some questions about the disappearance of Philip Osborn and an explosion this morning in Tarzana. You there, just stay where you are, no fast moves. Miss Kentraine, you have the right to remain si—"

Kory was uncertain what was happening; but the look on Beth's face, that he understood instantly.

She is very frightened. But she will not do anything against this man, for reasons that I cannot understand.

But the power of the new nexus is still flowing strongly through me—it is scarcely an effort to reach out lightly and—

The policeman froze, one arm still raised in midair.

Beth turned and stared at Kory.

Kory shrugged. "I think we can leave now," he said, breaking the awkward silence.

"I think you're right," Beth said at last. She got out of the jeep, walked around the frozen policeman, and opened the park gate.

She climbed back into the jeep and sat there for a moment. "I guess—I guess I can't go back now. You know, it's kinda funny—I just thought that we'd save your people, stop Perenor and Ria, and then—then I'd go back home to my apartment, and in another couple weeks the show would come off hiatus and I'd be back at work again—"

"I'm sorry," Kory said softly. "I never meant to ruin your life, Beth. I never even meant to change it."

Beth sighed. "No, it's okay. It's just ... a shock, that's all." She turned the key in the ignition. "Doesn't matter. Besides, we have a Bard to find. God only knows what trouble he's in already—"

A lock of hair flopped into Eric's eyes. When he pushed it out of the way, his fingers came away sticky and wet.

He stopped, halfway down the hillside, and stared at them.

Red. Blood. Christ, I'm covered with blood.

Nausea hit him, and he rubbed his hand frantically on the burgundy-red silk of his breeches.

Funny, I don't feel tired. Just sick.

He realized in another moment why—the invisible, but omnipresent flow of magic all around him, radiating out of the new nexus. It was restoring some of what he'd put into its creation, a little more with every moment that passed. And if he closed his eyes and listened with his "inner" ear, he could hear the elves, more and more of them Waking again . . .

Well, that's one good thing you've done with your life, Banyan. He sighed. I sure's hell don't need the cops stopping me for looking like a Faire loonie who just slaughtered half his troupe.

Okay, disguise time. Then I can stop at the restroom by the gate and get—he swallowed his nausea—cleaned up.

A moment of concentration, and he was, to all outward appearances, just another skinny guy in red T-shirt and jeans. He continued his scramble down the hillside, practically stumbling down onto the hiker's path that would take him to the entrance.

For such a bright, clear day the park seemed completely deserted. He didn't see anyone until he was nearly at the entrance—but when he got within shouting distance of the cement-block restroom building, he was suddenly very glad he'd done his little disguise trick. Because there were an awful lot of cops in the park, all of a sudden.

He concentrated very hard on being inconspicuous. It must have worked, because although they were stopping anyone over the age of consent, and even a few kids, they didn't stop him.

Once inside the restroom, suddenly the most important thing in the world was to get the blood off—

He threw up a couple of times too.

He was still needlessly, neurotically sloshing icy-cold water from the sink over his head and arms when Dan staggered in the door, bounced off a stall support, and came to rest clutching the sink next to him.

"Oh God," the musician moaned. "Bummer, bummer. Not again. Not ever again. Blood. All that blood. Oh God . . ."

"Dan?" Eric whispered.

The other began to babble.

Eventually Eric made out some of what had happened, and a partial roster of the dead. Val and Eldenor.

And Terenil; Eric recognized him from Dan's description—and Dan was coherent enough at that point that Eric got a fairly good idea of just how the Prince had met his end.

That was when he began to cry.

Dan didn't seem to notice.

"Just before then one of those things got past the guy in black—just about reached us. Got my coat." He turned enough so that Eric could see the rent torn in the sleeve of his jacket. "Allie broke her Casio over its head. Man, that was too close. No more."

He finally faced Eric, and the flautist could see that Dan's eyes were white-rimmed, his pupils dilated. Dan, unflappable Dan, was half-mad with fear.

Christ. If he goes out there like that, the cops'll be on his ass and they'll throw him where the sun don't shine.

Maybe I can do something about that.

Eric concentrated, calling out of memory the soft notes of "October Winds," an old Irish lullaby. And when he thought he was ready, he reached out with the soothing notes and wrapped Dan in them.

When he opened his eyes again, Dan was standing there with a silly little smile on his face, a glazed expression like he'd just done some of his own best weed. When Eric moved a little, he seemed to snap out of it, although his expression still seemed more than a bit glazed.

"Hey, Banyon, long time, no see—you gonna—oh, that's right."

"What's right, Dan?" Eric asked quietly.

"We broke the band up." Dan shook his shaggy head.

"Allie's job, Beth's—not enough time, man. Not enough t' get us outa the Dive, anyway."

Eric shrugged, feeling his heart contract at the sound of Beth's name. "You know how it is."

"Yeah. Glad I ran into you, anyway. Well, later!" The bassist strolled out as if he hadn't a care in the world.

Yeah, Dan. Later. Couple years, maybe. Eric sighed, and slicked back his wet hair. Now if I could just self-administer some of that oblivion I just gave you—

He had just enough change in his pockets to get him to the Greyhound station on Riverside.

If I had a choice, where would I go? he asked himself, staring at the weekday crowd hustling past him in the bright sunlight. San Fran, I guess. That's about fifty bucks. Plus some eating money, some clothes, a toothbrush. Make it an even hundred. And only one way I know of to get it- Hell, why not.

He opened his case at his feet, got himself positioned right there on the street corner so that the cops couldn't hassle him for blocking traffic, and fitted the pieces of his flute together.

Okay, world. Bard Eric needs a hundred bucks. Let's see if you'll oblige him.

The magic was still there, after all—still flowing freely around him. Potent magic—

But I won't play games with their minds. I'll just give them the most beautiful music they've ever heard.

Only . . . nothing Celtic.

So he closed his eyes and started in on an Andean tune, one Simon and Garfunkel had popularized: "El Condor Pasa." The minor air suited his unhappiness, his loneliness—

From there he went to classical; Tchaikovsky, Liadov, all the melancholy Russians. He could feel a crowd gathering; sensed their appreciation. After playing for about half an hour straight, he ended the session with the "Frog Galliard."

Now, oh now, I needs must part-

Parting though I absent mourn.

Absence can no joy impart;

Love once fled can ne'er return.

His eyes filled; he held the tears back with an effort.

And although your sight I leave,

Sight wherein my joys do lie,

If that death doth sense bereave,

never shall affection die.

When he finished, and wiped his eyes, and looked down—there was fifty dollars in bills and assorted change in the flute case.

Okay. One more try.

Maybe—maybe just one Celtic tune—

He closed his eyes again, and began "O'Carolan's Farewell to Music."

The tune that old Turlough played for his patroness, Mrs. McDemwtt Roe, when he returned home to die.

When the last note had died away, he opened his eyes just in time to see a man in a dark business suit standing up after setting something in his case. The man's eyes were bright—and as he averted his face and hurried away, Eric saw tears escaping from them to trickle down his cheek.

And lying on top of the rest of the money was a fifty-dollar bill.

Eric stared at it, then stared after the man's retreating back. I wonder if I should check the serial—

No. Let it be. Thanks, friend; whoever, or whatever you are.

An hour later, and he was sitting on the bench of the station, a ticket in his pocket, backpack on his back. Now he was really dressed in khaki jeans and a clean T-shirt (thanks to the army surplus store); the fancy outfit was carefully folded away in the bottom of the pack with his change of underwear, towel and toothbrush. The only things he was still wearing were the boots. Somehow he couldn't bear to take them off.

Terenil—I'm sorry. I wish I hadn't thought so badly of you. You were a hell of a lot better man than I am.

Even if you weren't human.

The waiting room was more than half empty.

His life felt entirely empty.

So now what? he asked himself dully. Go off to San Fran and busk, I guess. Work the run of Northern Faire. I could probably busk up there until it's time for Texas Faire. After all this time they'll probably have forgotten what an idiot I made of myself . . .

He closed his eyes, shutting out the dreary, plastic waiting room, and hunched a little farther down on the bench.

Funny, the stories don't ever say what happened to the hero's best friend. The Prince and Princess were married and lived happily ever after—and Sir Joe went off to ... open an inn or something?

His eyes burned.

Probably went off to die in a ditch someplace. Of a broken heart, no doubt.

So far he'd been doing okay on the strength of feeling self-sacrificing and kind of noble—but it was beginning to wear thin.

Oh God, I miss them. If this isn't a broken heart—

—if it isn't, it's a damned good imitation.

What in hell am I supposed to do with my life now?

Something warm and wet trickled out from under his left eyelid, and he wiped it away with the back of his hand before anyone could notice.

I can keep from messing their lives up, that's what I can do. I can get far enough away so that they won't be able to find me; so they can concentrate on each other.

His other eye leaked, and he sniffed; and covered both up by rubbing at eyes and nose as if he was having a hay-fever attack.

Dammit, Banyon, act like an adult for once.

Suddenly he felt weights settle on the bench on either side of him. Which was usually a prelude to a bus-station mugging.

He gave up feeling martyred in favor of survival, and cracked his eyes open surreptitiously so he could size up his presumptive attackers. Oh shit, that's just what I—

"Eric?" Kory said softly, his eyes mirroring care and concern.

Eric went numb. All that he could think was. Shit, he's still wearing my clothes—

"Hey, Clint," said a voice behind him; he turned to his left, quickly. Sure enough, it was Beth.

"You figuring on riding off into the sunset?" she asked quietly.

"Y-yeah," he said, after a long moment of silence. "I kind of figured that maybe it was better that way, you know?"

"I thought," Kory admonished, "that you were going to think about how your actions affected others before you did anything."

"Yeah, but—"

"Didn't you ever think about how we would feel when you vanished?"

"Well, I—"

"We felt," Kory told him, "abysmal. Bereft, in truth. Dreadfully, dreadfully lost and alone."

"Y-yeah," Eric stammered. "But—"



"We felt like hell, Banyon," Beth said. "We thought we'd finally gotten everything on the right track, and we looked around, and there was this Eric-shaped hole in the air. And no Eric."

"But—"

"Great conversationalist, isn't he?" she said in an aside to Kory.

"We haven't given him much chance to really say anything, beloved—"

Right, guy, leave me the odd man out, and make sure you remind me about it! Dammit, you frizzy-haired creep, why don't you rub it in a little more!

"Damn you, why don't you just leave me alone?" he cried, as heads turned all over the bus station. "You've got what you wanted! The magic's back, the elves are safe—you've got everything I promised you! And you've . . . got . . . each—"

He couldn't bear it any more. Eric lurched up off the bench and stood with his back to them, his arms crossed tightly across his chest to hold the misery in, fighting to keep the tears from coming again. "You've got places here, things to do. Beth's got her career. Kory, you're a hero, you could probably take the Prince's place if you wanted it. You've both got everything you could ever want."

"But we don't, Eric," Kory replied from right behind him, as gentle hands rested on his shoulders. "Truly, we don't. Not without you. Eric—we love you."

For a moment, Eric couldn't speak, or think.

What? Does he mean that?

"Me?" he faltered. "W-we?"

A second set of hands joined the first, and turned him so that he had to look into their eyes. As always he was caught—and held—by Kory's emerald gaze. "Eric—"

:Eric, look into my heart. I love you no less than I do Beth. And she loves you no less than she loves me. No more, and no less.:

With a last, valiant effort, Eric tried to make his mind work again.

"What Kory's saying is that he thinks it could work with us; that we'd make a pretty tight little trio." Beth gave him half a grin. "I agree."

He clenched both his hands into fists, trying to resolve the conflict inside him into an answer. He looked from Beth, to Kory, and back again.

I love her.

And—God—I can finally admit it to myself. I love him, too.

Like he said. No more, no less.

How in hell can I deal with that?

He opened his mouth to deny it all—but what came out was a hoarsely whispered question. "Can—can it really work?" he whispered.

Kory's eyes were very bright. "We'll never know if we do not try, will we?"

"We've all learned a few things lately," Beth added. "Including one of the hardest—how to admit you're wrong and take your lumps." Her expression remained deadly serious for about three more seconds, then she grinned "Except you aren't allowed another apology for at least a month, Banyon. So—what do you say?"

He opened his mouth, closed it. Opened it again. Looked for an answer

And found it in their eyes.

"I—I love you," he whispered to both of them.

And was caught up again in one of those magical three-way embraces.

Tears came, and this time he didn't try to stop them. You don't fight tears when you're happy And God, if I'm dreaming—don't let me wake up

Beth giggled finally, breaking the mood.

"What's so funny?" he asked, sniffing a little.

"This is so much nicer without all the armor."

Kory chuckled, and finally Eric joined him, freeing an arm long enough to wipe away his tears of joy.

"So, Banyon, where are we going?" She loosened her arms enough so that they could look each other in the face without going cross-eyed

"I was heading for San Fran," he said slowly. "But—I thought—I mean you've got a job and all—"

She shook her head. "Not no more, babe. We damn near got arrested in the park. I think they want me on suspicion of being a drug-producer, or something like that. And they think I did for Phil—there's an APB out on me."

"They what?" Eric felt stunned. "Aren't you—don't you want to tell them the—oh."

"Exactly." She shrugged. "So, methinks the life of a footloose street busker may not be so bad for a while. I don't think I could deal with jail, really. I have this . . . problem with confined spaces ..." She went a little quiet for a moment, then turned a faint smile back toward Kory "So, Korendil, know anybody in San Fran?"

"A distant cousin—"

"Is he an elf or a faer—"

Kory interrupted her with a grin of his own. "Finish that sentence, Beth Kentraine, and you will surely

regret it."

She feigned shock. "Gods be praised, the pillar of sobriety has developed a sense of humor!" She raised an eye-brow at him. "I was only going to ask if he was involved with humankind. If he is, he could be useful. I've heard the busking was good up there, but there's busking and there's busking."

Eric tried the idea of the three of them living and busking together on for size, and found it felt wonderful.

Perfect, in fact.

He held the other two closer—and they responded instantly

No, I don't ever want to wake up.

"San Fran, then," he said. "If it's all right with you. Only . . . Kory?"

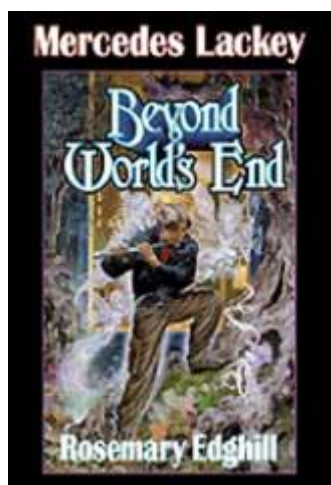
"Hm?" the elf replied contentedly.

"Could you please give me my clothes back?"

## -- Summoned to Tourney --

Do Not Have at Present

## -- Beyond World's End --



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## DEDICATION

To all the folks at the Arlington Pak-Mail, John Giardi, Amy Bombardieri, Stephanie Cole, and the divine Murphy (woof!), for last-minute copies, shipping, and cold wet noses far beyond the call of duty.

And to my esteemed co-authoress, who is as fond of elves as I am.

—Rosemary Edghill

## ONE: THE PARTING OF FRIENDS

*"By a knight of ghosts and shadows  
I summoned am to tourney  
Ten leagues beyond the wide world's end  
Methinks it is no journey."*

—Tom O' Bedlam (traditional)

"Are you sure you really want to do this?" Beth asked Eric for roughly the five hundredth time in the past month.

As a long-time stranger to big cities, it was hard for Eric to believe that there was anywhere in New York City where she could have been heard without shouting, but this strange little tree-shaded court was somehow as quiet as a desert canyon miles outside of Los Angeles—and just about as hot. It was September, but there was no hint of fall in the air, and the leaves on the slender maples growing in their squares of earth allocated in the sidewalk were still green. Today was one of the shimmering-hot days that persisted well into October here, and the stone of the buildings surrounding them seemed to hold and reflect back every degree of heat. The buildings also shut most of the traffic noise out, making a private oasis in the heart of the city. Beth and Kory—and their motorcycles-cum-elvensteeds—were the only creatures on the street besides Eric.

Eric looked up at the old apartment building that was going to be his home for the next year or so, and nodded.

"I'm sure," he replied firmly. "Things couldn't go on the way they have been—and none of us wanted them to." Then he grinned. "Besides, you aren't going to be that far away by Underhill standards. And I'm a fully functional Bard now, remember? I can come visit you any time I want to—or any time you guys are getting stir-crazy."

Beth looked as if she might want to argue that point for a moment; then, instead of saying anything, she just sighed.

"You certainly aren't the same Eric Banyon anymore," she admitted. "You not only have feck, but you know what machine to buy your clues from," she said, grinning proudly.

"And I brought my own roll of quarters to put in the machine," Eric shot back, grinning.

Earlier this morning, the three of them had packed up the last of their stuff from the friend's place they'd been crashing at between Faire weekends. The Sterling Forest RenFaire ran every year from July to September at a site about an hour north of New York City. There was even a Nexus there, Elfhome Everforest, the only one on the East Coast, tucked away in the State Park that surrounded the Fairesite.

The three of them had been working the Faire together, just like old times. Only this time it was a farewell performance, and they'd all known it. It had added a certain sweetness to the music. But all good things must come to an end.

He put down his two bags to hug her. "No worries, pretty lady. I'll be fine. The kids at Juilliard are already calling me 'old man,' and taking bets on who's going to win the confrontations between me and the administration. Odds are in my favor, by the way." Classes started on Monday, but he'd already been up to the school several times, for Registration and Orientation. It hadn't changed much in all the years he'd been away—schools had a lot in common with Underhill in that respect.

Beth traded places with Kory, who was not at all ashamed to bestow as hearty a hug on Eric as Beth had. "You do know the way Underhill, if you need to come," Korendil appealed. There was an unspoken plea in the elf's emerald-green eyes. "Do not allow pride to keep you from seeking your friends if you need help."

Eric shook his shaggy head; haircuts had not been a priority either Underhill or at the Faire, and he didn't want to do anything about the length of his mane just yet. "Believe me, Elfhome Everforest is the first

place I'll head for if I get into trouble," he promised. "Now, you two—*go!* If you don't make some tracks, you won't reach Sterling Forest before sunset, elvensteeds or no elvensteeds, and this is going to be your last Renfaire gig before the baby comes. I think I can manage to move my last two bags into an apartment without help—and take care of myself once I've settled in."

They'd been staying with Bonnie and Kit up in Inwood—a comic book writer and a Witch that Beth knew from years ago—while Eric and Beth made the many purchases necessary to turn a rented apartment into a home—and waited the several weeks for delivery of the furniture! Eric wasn't displeased to have the transition time: living Underhill for an extended period made returning to the World Above a distinct shock. And no place else, in Underhill or the World Above, was quite like New York City. It made even the Chaos Lands seem quiet.

Beth paused to hug him once more. "You know, I think you can," she admitted, looking just a little tearful. "And maybe that's the scariest part of all. You don't need us anymore."

There wasn't any reply he could make to that statement—there was enough truth in it to sting—so Eric didn't bother to try. Instead, he picked up his bags and moved away from the curb, walking backwards, as Kory and Beth mounted their sleek, exotic motorcycles.

A third bike already resided in the tiny parking lot behind the building, and Eric had no fear that anyone was going to steal it. For one thing, they wouldn't be able to find a starter or a place to hotwire it. For another, *she* wouldn't let them. Lady Day was an elvensteed, and could take any form she chose. Eric didn't really ride her, she carried him; he could go to sleep while riding her and she would get him safely to his destination no matter what the conditions were. She could take any shape he wanted her to—he'd heard that there were even elves in other Elfhomes that had elvensteeds the shape of racing cars, though frankly Eric would believe *that* when he saw it.

His mind was already running ahead, into his future here. He preferred her as a motorcycle, and Lady Day preferred to take that form, but as soon as the weather turned, she was going to have to take on the form of a little econobox car, unless he intended to take the subway across town to Juilliard. She wasn't looking forward to that, and frankly, neither was he, but that was the price he paid for returning to Juilliard—East Coast winters.

Maybe I can have her clone a Kia, a Neon or a sporty little Isuzu 4x4 instead. That wouldn't be too out-of-keeping with my cover story, Eric thought hopefully. It had been so long since he'd had to worry about money at all that he wasn't too sure he remembered the gory details. I can always say I put the bike in storage for the winter. Nobody at Juilliard is likely to know enough about cars to wonder how I can keep a maintenance hog fuelled and running!

Eric paused at the front door of the building for a last look back. Beth and Kory had donned their helmets, and "started" the bikes, thus making further conversation a moot point. The elvensteeds not only knew enough to counterfeit the roar of powerful motorcycle engines, they seemed to enjoy doing so. The two riders, anonymous now in their matching helmets and leathers, pulled neat little reversal moves that got them going in the right direction on the street with an appropriate amount of tire spin and smoke. They waved, and Eric tucked one bag under his arm and freed up a hand to wave back. He kept waving as they roared out of sight.

That didn't take long in the city; they were out of sight as soon as they turned the corner. He evened his load again, and walked soberly up to the door of the building.

*Home. Sweet home? Well, home is what you make it, I guess. This is as good as any. And a lot*

*better than some. Good thing I'm not on a starving student's budget.*

He could have had any apartment in any building in the city, of course: as an adult student, Eric didn't have the same residence restrictions that the minors and first-year students did at Juilliard, and a fellow with a safety-deposit box full of gold Krugerrands could pretty much afford whatever he wanted. But he'd gone out walking one day when he and Beth and Kory first arrived here, and found the old building as if he'd been drawn to it. It'd had a name once—most old New York apartment buildings were named—but time had eroded the carving above the door, until all that remained was a florid "G" and a barely legible "ouse." Something-house. Maybe Gargoyle House, for when Eric had looked up—he was enough of an out-of-towner to do that frequently—he had been surprised to see the hunched winged forms of classic medieval gargoyles perched on the building's four corners. New York was rich in such hidden sculpture, he knew. Art for birds, someone had once called it.

There'd been a discreet sign in the building manager's window—the only "For Rent" sign he could remember seeing anywhere, actually—and the building itself had attracted him. There were three apartments available. One was a corner apartment on the top floor, and when he saw that there was a gargoyle perched right outside the living-room window, he'd been sold.

That had been the good part. The bad part was the age of the building. Old buildings had old building problems. Still, it had a lot more heart to it than some of those high-rise condos that were going up everywhere. And a place like this would be a lot easier to explain if anyone ever asked.

For a wonder, the building manager—her name was Toni Hernandez, a middle-aged Latina woman—had been ready to show him around right then. The building was of about the same vintage as the Gunfight at the OK Corral, which meant that the ceilings were high and the bathrooms were ancient—which meant very cool lion-footed bathtubs, but teeny sinks and plumbing he wasn't altogether sure about. The kitchen cabinets and counters looked like originals from when the building was new, and forget central air—if he wanted to be cool during the summer and early fall, he'd have to buy a window AC, and hope the wiring could stand it. He was going to have to swelter for the rest of this year, though—by the time he could get a window unit delivered and installed at this time of year, snow would already be falling.

As for the heating, it was all by ancient steam pipes, and those didn't function until the super decided it was cold enough—and Eric knew all about the way steam pipes sang and banged at night. He'd probably need to supplement the radiators with space heaters, given how far away his apartment was from the basement boilers, anyway.

He'd been assured that the wiring was modern, though—and looking the apartment over, seeing all new cover plates and plenty of grounded outlets, Eric had felt fairly sure he wasn't being lied to. If the wiring was modern enough to accept the load of a computer, a microwave, and an air conditioner, he felt he could put up with steam heat and ancient plumbing. He'd accepted the top-floor apartment on the spot, and the rest had been mere formality.

The building might be old, but it had some nifty modern amenities where it really counted, and considering its West Side location, Eric was surprised that the building hadn't gone condo a long time ago. A security system mounted discreetly in an etched brass plate beside the door had a code for every tenant—and with ten digits, it would take a long time for someone to hit a correct one at random.

He punched it in now—a little slow, but he'd taken care to pick a string of numbers fairly easy to remember—and walked in through the front door. The coolness of the lobby was welcome after the heat outside, and as he usually did, he paused to admire the foyer—very Art Nouveau, and all of it original.

Even the opulent brass faces of the mailboxes were vintage. Of course, that meant that the elevator was pretty vintage too—hydraulic, and in mint condition, but very slow. Ms. Hernandez told him that when the building had been built, people had been afraid of fast elevators. So it rose gently and serenely at a less-than-walking pace, but hey, if he was in a hurry, he could always use the stairs.

The elevator took its time in arriving on the top floor, but that wasn't bad either. He wasn't as frisky as he'd been when he first came to school at Juilliard, himself. He liked the folding bronze safety-gate; it reminded him of an old hotel he'd once stayed in that actually had an elevator attendant, little red uniform and all. Fortunately the building didn't come with a doorman, like some of the posh places along Park Avenue did. He didn't think he could quite handle that.

The long elevator ride up to the 10th floor gave Eric time to think and to probe his feelings as if they were a newly filled tooth. Did it hurt, Beth and Kory going off like that and leaving him behind? Should he reconsider?

*Nope. It doesn't really hurt, it just feels different. It stopped hurting a long time ago. And the decision isn't really new. It's old.*

He remembered the day Beth had first told him she was pregnant. She and Kory had looked so happy—Beth wanted a large family, and elves were crazy about children anyway—but all Eric had felt was fear, as though he'd made a disastrous mistake in fathering this child. It had been Beth who'd gently broken it to him that she already knew what Eric had only that moment discovered: that while he'd been growing into his magic, she and Kory had been growing into a couple. Without him.

*Only not really. After what we've been through together, we'll be friends forever. Only it's a different kind of friendship now. In some ways it's better.*

Better, because it lacked the element of sexual anxiety that had flavored the earliest days of his relationship with Beth . . . and Kory. This was something strong and deep that didn't need sex to fuel it, something that would last as long as the pillars of Underhill.

The elevator creaked to a halt on the top floor, jarring him out of his reverie, and Eric opened the safety gate and the door. His apartment was a corner apartment, which had been another selling point. Its location meant that there would be less noise from fellow tenants, and no noise from the elevator itself, as well as a cooling cross-breeze on most days. He still wasn't used to how *noisy* this city was—even in the middle of Central Park you could hear the sirens and the traffic noises.

*New York, New York, it's a wonderful town. The Bronx is up and the Battery's down. And the city never sleeps.*

Like the lobby, the hallway decor had somehow survived being "modernized"; it was original, and for a wonder, no one had ripped off the vintage *paté verine* light-fixtures. Then again, maybe that was why the owners had put in the security system in the first place. Architecture thieves were only one of the problems of life in the Big City.

The only concession to the modern world was in the carpet running the length of the hall; it was standard grey-beige industrial stuff, but it didn't clash with the Art Nouveau wallpaper and frosted-glass fixtures, not all of which were lights. There were cameras in some of those wall fixtures, and smoke and heat detectors too, and sprinklers in the ceiling—everything the heart could desire from a safety and security standpoint. Another selling point, not that a fully trained Bard had much to fear from human thugs. Magical attacks were another matter, but frankly, Eric wasn't expecting many of those.



At the end of the hall was his door. No hollow-core flimsy barricade or scary metal portal this, but a solid slab of oakwood, polished deep brown with the passing of years, with brass lockplates and doorknob that gleamed brightly against the old wood. Here was the building's second concession to the modern age—there were two key-operated deadbolts plus the door key, and a final key pad on which once more to enter his ten-digit code. If he didn't enter it, or keyed it wrong and didn't correct himself when it beeped at him, the system would alert Ms. Hernandez—she'd check the cameras and maybe call the cops.

*I wonder why this place has got so much security? Or maybe this is normal for New York? After all, I have been away for a while. . . .*

Like about 20—no, closer to 30—years. Though he'd spent a lot of that time Underhill, where time flowed more slowly than it did in the World Above. That was one of the reasons he'd been willing to risk coming back so openly. Anybody who was still looking after this long would be looking for a guy in his forties—not a sassy young dude still in his twenties.

He negotiated the three key-locks—here was a moment of fumbling with the ring of unfamiliar keys (Eric hadn't carried keys in years, and had kept losing them for the first few weeks)—punched in his code, and watched while the light went from red to green. Then he was inside and locking the door of his new home behind him. Beth's friends said it would soon become second nature, but for now it was an effort to remember the actions involved.

At last he turned away from the door and looked around with a sudden feeling of hesitancy. Even with as much work as Beth and Kory had already done while he'd been getting squared away with Juilliard, there was a lot still to unpack and arrange, and most of it was brand-new untouched-by-human-hands stuff. This was the first time in his life he'd had this many*things*.

Immediately before him was the living room, a huge space (so Bonnie had said) by New York standards. A new leather couch and matching recliner in the sort of oxblood brown that reminded him of Old English clubs sat cozily in front of the fireplace—this place was retro enough to have fireplaces, (with terrific white-marble mantels, though he didn't think the fireplace still worked). To the right of the sofa and behind it were the tall sash windows, and if he looked up, Eric could just see the back of the gargoyle on the corner of the roof. Against the blank wall was his new rack system and a television and laser-disk player. In the corner farthest from the windows was his desk—light cherry, from Levinger's—which mostly held a brand-new computer with a music keyboard and speakers as well as the usual techie stuff.

Sheepskins covered the worn wooden parquet floor, and the glazed-chintz curtains in an archival William Morris pattern—mostly deep greens, with a hint of orange—that Beth had picked out were pulled open to display the view. There were flowers in a blue glass vase on the mantelpiece—moonlilies, so that was Kory's touch; they didn't grow anywhere but Underhill, and a daily little touch of magic would keep them alive forever. The heat made the apartment seem stuffy, and Eric moved around opening windows. Though there was a six week wait for delivery of an air conditioner, he'd been able to pick up a couple of wall fans. He lifted them into the kitchen and bedroom windows now and switched them on. A cooling breeze began to waft through the apartment, and Eric sighed with relief. He could manage to be pretty comfortable, so long as he didn't get into any heavy lifting.

Eric still had a faint feeling of trespassing when he moved around the place. It looked like an apartment belonging to a moderately (okay, let's admit it: more than moderately) prosperous classical flautist—at least, until you got to the CD collection, which was currently still in boxes waiting to be unpacked. He'd

had one heck of a time putting that together, and the look on the clerk's face at Plastic Meltdown over in the East Village when he kept coming up to the counter with another stack of disks had been worth every penny. Thanks to a little help, both magical and non, Eric Banyon had an A-1 credit rating and an AmEx Platinum card to prove it. Thanks to the Krugerrands in his safe deposit box, he even had a way to pay the humongous bill that was going to arrive!

Beside the empty bookshelves—more light cherry from Levinger's—were boxes of books, also waiting to be shelved. He'd had almost as much fun in the Strand as he had in the record store. More, in a way, because he kept straying over to the children's sections, picking up volumes he'd read as a kid and wanted to get reacquainted with. This place was as unlike his L.A. apartment as possible—and just as unlike the house he'd shared with Beth and Kory in San Francisco. That had been due to calculated effort on all their parts. He was starting over, in a sense, and he should start fresh.

Beth had stocked the kitchen, so he wasn't going to starve, and she hadn't loaded it down with equipment he didn't know how to use and food he didn't know how to cook. Mostly microwave stuff, he suspected, to go with the mother-of-all-microwaves sitting in silent splendor on the white-marble kitchen counter.

It was too quiet, suddenly, and he walked over to the rack and turned on WQXR, the local classical station. Stravinsky's *Pulcinella Suite* filled the room; not his first choice, but not bad, and more to the point, not reeking of Omens and Portents. He'd had about enough of those for a while.

He took his bags into the bedroom and once again was confronted by newness. The bedroom was small, only 14x14, with just enough room for a double bed with a bookcase headboard. The bed, covered with a thick, red, silk-covered goosedown comforter—another of Kory's touches, Eric suspected, because elves liked color and weren't shy about using it—was a classier version of one of those adjustable beds you saw on late-night TV commercials. He hadn't wanted a waterbed; that would have come with too many memories of Beth and Kory attached. The headboard had built-in lamps and his new alarm clock (retro-Deco to match the building) nestled cozily in a nook that would be difficult to reach if he wasn't awake. On top of the matching bureau was a smaller television, and one of those nifty-keen Bose Wave radio/CD players. The curtains were the same glowing red silk as the comforter. There was another sheepskin rug—dark brown this time—on the floor in front of the bed; it reminded Eric slightly of a large flat dog.

He carried his bags over to the walk-in closet and opened it. It was the old-fashioned kind with drawers in the back and several tiers of shelves reaching all the way up to the ceiling, and it was full of bags of brand new clothing that he hadn't yet opened. Eric slowly unpacked his bags and hung the only things he owned that had any wear on them on polished cedar hangers at the back. The clothing was nothing if not flamboyant; Faire garb, all of it, and all of it made by magic. That was Kory's *forté*: he could produce clothing at the drop of a pointed ear. It wasn't likely that Eric would need any of this at any time soon, but he wanted to have it around. A link to his past—to the Faires and Underhill—to the only part of his life that Eric thought of as real.

Everything else in the apartment had come by way of the efforts of Eric's mentor, who was as skillful at producing gold as Kory was at producing clothing—and as Beth was at knowing where to shop. Thanks to Master Mage Dharinel's work, Eric was not going to have to worry about where his money was coming from for a very long time, if ever. The rest of his tenure at Juilliard was already paid for in advance. His rent was paid up for the next year in advance. Utilities, phone, cable, ditto—all handled out of an escrow account administered by a "friend of the family" down in Wall Street somewhere, just so Eric wouldn't have to worry about them. And in addition to everything else, Eric had a bank account again, besides that excellent credit rating and the emergency stash of Krugerrands.

As for the inevitable IRS agents (if nothing worse)—well, he'd found a way to handle them. They'd stopped in DC before coming up here; Eric had set up shop outside the agency, put out his hat, and played his flute until he found one agent that was susceptible. A little Bardic magic, a sob story about being out of work in Mexico for the last couple of years, a tale of winning an unspecified lottery outside the States, and an expressed eagerness to pay his rightful share of taxes (and a check for the amount the nice agent deemed appropriate), and his record with the IRS was as clean and shiny as Lady Day. He could use his own social security number without being afraid it would red-flag every Federal computer from here to Ultima Thule . . . in fact, his entire record was so clean and shiny that anyone checking on him might suspect he was in the Federal Witness Protection Program. Eric's name, his real name, was on the mailbox, the apartment lease, the utilities, in the phone book, and on the driver's license and bank and credit cards in his wallet. He wasn't hiding, he wasn't Underhill, and he didn't have to start thinking of ways to escape whenever he saw a cop or someone in a too-perfect suit. *I'm a person again*, he thought with wonder. *I'm real. Whatever I do will go with me; I can't shed my past like a snake with an old skin.*

He went back into the living room and sat in his new chair, the glossy leather chilly through the back of his damp shirt. He listened to the Moonlight Sonata wafting in courtesy of the radio station. It all felt—odd. Very odd. Not luxurious, no—strangely enough, although this was luxury by all common standards, it did not match the level of sumptuousness Underhill, or even the standards of comfort Kory had established in their old San Francisco townhouse. But it was all Eric's, chosen to please only his taste and no one else's, and it was real and solid, not something conjured up out of energy and thin air like goods of elvish making.

It might have felt restrictive after the bootless freedom of the past few years, but somehow it didn't. It felt solid and comfortable and good. And when the Krugerrands ran out, and the account that covered his rent and utilities expired, he'd have to have a job to pay for all of this.

Not that he had any doubt that he'd be able to do that when the time came. He was probably one of the few people, if not the only person, who ever quit Juilliard and then returned to finish what he'd started.

Returned to finish . . . that had been a recurring theme lately. It wasn't the first time the thought had crossed his mind over time—but the first time, it hadn't been his thought at all.

*"You have unfinished business."*

When he closed his eyes he could hear that stern voice saying those words even over the strains of Beethoven in the here-and-now. He didn't have to think about it; the scene played out behind his eyes without effort, as clearly as if it had happened yesterday.

\* \* \*

Underhill. He'd been Underhill, at Elfhome Misthold, and he hadn't known what day, week, or even month it was. Time moved strangely Underhill; light came and went, but there was no telling if it was the end of a day or if the Queen of the Hill had decided she was tired of light and wanted some darkness for a change. Beth—Beth needed not to be Above, in the mortal world, where there were law-enforcement people who thought she was responsible for some very unfortunate occurrences. And she was—but not in the way that they thought.

Besides, as the elves with the ability to See into the future had said at the time, at some point Real Soon Bethie was going to show up preggers, even more reason not to go back into the World Above. So he

and Kory were living Underhill with her, and in that strange timeless land Eric had thrown himself into his music—which meant his magic—fully and completely for the first time in his life.

After the Loma Prieta almost-disaster, the Nightflyers, and the absolute proof to everybody involved of the madness of allowing a half-trained Bard to run around leaking magic and going off unexpectedly, he'd had little choice. It hadn't been ambition that had driven him, it had been desperation. Beth was slipping away from him more every day, and he knew it. Things were changing in his life, even in the timeless world of Underhill, and he didn't like it. Maybe he'd thought that being a real Bard, one with full control of his powers like the old Druidic Bards,—Merlin, Taliesen, Gwion—would lure Beth back and put him on an even footing with Korendil, Elven Knight of Elfhome Sun-Descending. Heck, Kory didn't have all that much magic by elven standards, surely Eric could catch up!

But before long, the music and magic stopped being a crutch, or a means to an end, and became the end itself.

\* \* \*

One day—a day much like any other, here—he had finished playing and put his flute down, waiting for Dharinel to give him the usual critique. Dharinel was a Magus Major and one of the most powerful of Elven Bards in any Elfhome, anywhere, and there was always a critique. Either Eric's control over the magic energy was not firm enough, or it was too grasping, and he didn't let it flow. He went too slowly, or too fast. There was always something wrong, and Dharinel was always correct when he pointed those things out.

It had all felt right when he played, completely and utterly right, but it had felt right in the past, too. But this time when he stopped, Dharinel said nothing for a very long time. The perfumed mists of Underhill drifted past them both, and the birds that had stilled out of politeness while Eric played resumed their song. There was no sunshine, of course: there was no sun Underhill, only a perpetual twilight, except when the Prince or the Queen deemed it appropriate to deepen the twilight to something like true night, so that the fireflies, Fae Lights, and Faerie Illuminations could enliven the darkness. Eric held his breath and wondered what he had done wrong this time. Was it that horrible?

Finally Dharinel had let out his breath and opened his jewel-toned eyes. "I have nothing more to teach you," he said in his controlled, utterly perfect voice.

Eric had shaken his head. "What?" he blurted. "Was I that bad?"

"You were that good," Dharinel corrected. "I have nothing more to teach you. The rest will come with maturity and practice, and it is a pity that you are not of the Blood, for you would be a force to reckon with in a hundred years or so." He had actually smiled then; a thin smile, but the expression so seldom crossed Dharinel's sardonic lips that Eric had nearly fallen off his bench. "As it is, in a mere handful of mortal years, you will be a force to reckon with in the mortal world. And that is where you must go now. You have unfinished business there."

The moment Dharinel said those words, all of the vague discontent that had been in Eric's heart attained an object. Once music had become his All again, he had been able to come to terms with the fact that Beth and Kory were an Item and he had been slowly eased out of that side of their relationship. They would always be friends, the three of them, but—Kory and Beth were a pair, and he wasn't part of that structure anymore. He'd allowed it to happen without trying to fight. And once those last pieces of the puzzle had fallen into place, like the tumblers in a lock, he'd known what he should do.

Besides, Beth had a lot of Things she needed to deal with. She and Kory wanted kids, and while Eric liked kids in the abstract, he wasn't ready to play daddy right now, even though he'd fathered the child she was carrying. It had seemed like a good solution at the time—call it a kind of parting gift. Kory and his cousins were very pleased with the idea of raising a baby-Bard from scratch in Underhill where she could be properly taught. Though Eric knew that Beth wanted more children—and with Kory—an elf couldn't father a child on a mortal woman without a lot of high-powered—and very dangerous—magical intervention. Halfling births could be arranged in a number of ways, but most of them involved stealing life-energy from another source to allow the woman to conceive—and that meant wholesale slaughter of the innocents who donated that energy. There were rumors that there were gentler ways, but no one in Misthold was really certain what was involved, actually, though Kory had the elven librarians searching the most ancient records and sending to the other hames for hints of the ancient Seleighe quickening magics.

But unlike Eric, Beth really didn't have much choice about staying in Underhill. Those very unpleasant people from the "alphabet agencies" were still looking for Beth. This was bad. It meant that Beth Kentraine could never live in the real world again, unless she concocted a whole new identity or moved to another country where no one would ask her about her past. She could visit—with care and constant vigilance—but she couldn't live in the States anymore. And babies and the Faire circuit didn't coexist well, at the best of times. . . .

*And if the two of them didn't have enough problems, there's the fact that if Beth spends long enough in Underhill, she CAN'T come out, ever. She'll die. And before that happens, even if she does find some way to live Outside, she gets older. And Kory . . . doesn't. Or not fast enough, anyway. He's young by Sidhe standards. He has centuries ahead of him. Bethie has less than a century. There are spells that can slow her aging, but they'd tie her and Kory together for the rest of their lives—and shorten his. And even if she were willing to take that kind of responsibility, she won't even let Dharinel try anything like that while she feels responsible for me!*

It all had come together in that moment. Eric wanted his life back—his life in the World Above. There were things he needed to finish, like his degree, if only to prove to himself that he could. And he just didn't like Underhill all that much, to tell the truth. He had at first. He'd enjoyed the timelessness, the tranquility. But after a while, what was sweet had become cloying, what was tranquil seemed stale, and a growing restlessness brought it home to him that nothing ever changed here.

"You're right," he'd told his mentor. "I have unfinished business. And I don't belong here." He'd looked around, for a moment. "Maybe no mortal belongs here—"

"Unless they're sorely wounded in heart or soul, lad," Dharinel said softly, so softly Eric had to strain to hear him. "Only then, when mortal sunlight brings pain, not gladness, can they bide happily with us. Or if they're so heart-bound to one of the Blood that losing the sun of the mortal lands seems no kind of sacrifice to make."

\* \* \*

Eric opened his eyes in the here-and-now and sighed. Well, if anyone qualified as "wounded in the heart or soul," it was Beth. Hell, she still couldn't even sleep at night unless someone had her sandwiched between him and the wall—except when she was Underhill. Living at Kit and Bonnie's during the week, doing the Sterling Forest RenFaire on weekends, was one of the rare situations when she relaxed outside of Underhill—it would be next to impossible for a government goon to insert himself into the organization of Rennies. Rennies all knew each other, or knew people who knew each other, and the habits and mannerisms of a Rennie were something it would take a long time for a government agent to master. Not

to mention the esoteric skill-sets it took to get hired on at the Faires in the first place! Beth could feel safe there, and at night, surrounded by other campers (and guarded by her and Kory's elvensteeds) it would be pretty hard for anyone to get at them. Impossible to do it quietly.

*Unless you're a ninja, and I don't think they take government contracts. At least I hope they don't.*

The three of them had already planned the trip to the Sterling Forest Faire before Eric had made his decision—he'd just expanded the trip to include his reentry into the human race. It hadn't been easy, but the biggest hurdle had actually been getting an audition to reapply at Juilliard in the first place. Convincing Beth that this was something he had to do had been child's play. Kory hadn't objected at all, largely because Dharinel, who was his superior as well as his Elder, had made it quite clear in his quiet but implacable way that this was something he felt Eric had to do.

After that it was just a matter of lining up the ducks, and shooting them down. And here he was.

He shook his head, levering himself up out of the chair with a sigh. He had a lot to unpack, so he might as well get to it. He could always brood later. There'd be a lot of time for it. And it wouldn't get much cooler even if he waited: the stone and concrete of the city held heat for hours after the sun set, unlike both L.A. and San Francisco, where temperatures tended to drop sharply once the sun went down. Since his apartment was near the Hudson River he could expect a drop of at least a few degrees tonight, but not really enough to count on. Still, there were only three or four more weeks of this hot weather at the very most, and he could always conjure up some cool if he really needed it.

*Say . . . there's an idea.* He rubbed his sweaty forehead, and then went into the bedroom for his flute.

Music was a handy tool for focusing his Bardic magic, but in most situations it wasn't absolutely necessary. Still, Eric enjoyed the game of fitting the music to the spell. And here in the World Above, where magic didn't fill the ambient air as it did in Underhill, it was nice to have a bit of a framework to work within.

He fitted the pieces of the flute together and blew an exploratory trill before segueing into "Troika," one of the five pieces that made up Moussorsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. A troika was a three-horse Russian sleigh, and you could almost hear the sleigh-bells and the cadence of the horses' pacing feet in the bounce of the main theme. Eric closed his eyes, imagining the crunch of hooves on snow, the clear cold bite of the wintery air—

*But not too much. We just want to make it a little cooler in here, not turn the place into an icebox. . . .*

As a pleasant chill rolled through the apartment, Eric opened his eyes. He could see a faint shimmer of magic over the windows, where the parameters of the spell he had set turned the air from hot to cold as it passed through the window. In a few moments, the muggy cloyingness of the air was gone. The spell would fade away naturally after a few hours in order to avoid being too disruptive; after all, he could set it again any time he needed to. Eric walked back out into the living room, flute in hand.

*Now for a little urban renewal.*

He started with the CD collection, although the first things he unpacked didn't go into the storage cabinets, they went on the machine, and when he was done, he had a stack of thirty empty jewel boxes piled beside it.

He set the changer on "shuffle," and let it rip, sinking back down in his chair and thinking amusedly that this was one mix no radio station on the planet would ever match. *Hey, it's K-Banyon radio, all Celtic, all the time!*

Then again, maybe there was one station that could match his CD-shuffle. WYRD, a little station somewhere in the middle of nowhere in North Carolina or Georgia or someplace like that, was allegedly programmed by elves. All he knew was the one or two times he'd accidentally picked it up, it had played things he was only thinking about, as if the DJ were reading his mind. And supposedly, you could count on it to give you omens of what was going to happen to you.

*No thank you. And I certainly hope and pray my CD player doesn't start doing so.*

Well, he had some pretty esoteric platters in his Celtica-mix today; stuff he hadn't known was back in production, stuff he hadn't known was in production in the first place. Strange little labels he'd never heard of, and some that were clearly self-produced.

\* \* \*

"We don't get a lot of call for this—" The clerk had said that over and over, in a bewildered voice, as Eric brought out disk after disk that wasn't in his computer. Finally one of the assistant managers had taken pity on the poor kid and sent him off to help a Gen-Xer find the latest Smashing Pumpkins CD.

"Our owner has a hobby," the assistant manager explained, as he patiently entered the prices and stock numbers manually. "He's independently wealthy; as long as the store breaks even, he doesn't care. His hobby is to make sure that no matter what someone's musical taste is, he'll always find fabulous surprises here. You should see the mail he gets—catalogues from individual artists, even. So—a lot of stuff may sit around for a year or more before anyone buys it. He doesn't care; he knows that someday someone is going to want it, be amazed and thrilled that it's here, and keep coming back to see what else shows up. That's why the store's called 'Plastic Meltdown.' He expects credit cards to go into overload when the right people walk through the door."

Eric just grinned. "Well, I know I'm going to put my plastic through a workout here on a regular basis. Does this happen often?"

"Often enough," the middle-aged fellow said, with a wink. "Yesterday it was someone who collects movie scores—she was funny, kept saying, 'My God! My God!' until I thought the Big Guy was going to show up to find out why she was calling on Him. Today it's you. Tomorrow, probably no one unusual, but next week, maybe an opera buff. The heavy hitters are usually from out of town; the rest of us know we don't have to blow all our savings at once."

If that was a subtle inquiry, Eric didn't answer it quite as the fellow expected. "I just took the plunge on a CD player—I resisted for a long, long time; now that I'm a convert, I put the vinyl in storage and gave away the tapes, and I'm replacing everything with CDs. And picking up stuff I didn't know was around."

The clerk coughed, but didn't comment; it was a Centurion AmEx card on the register.

*He probably sees a lot of heavy rollers in here.*

"Win the lottery?" the clerk asked instead, as the total on the register continued to mount.

Eric grinned, since that was his original cover story. "Actually," he said, "yes, I did. Low enough it paid out all at once, high enough to let me do what I've wanted to for a long time."

The clerk stared at him for a moment as if to see if he was joking, then said, almost reverently, "Does any of that luck rub off?"

Eric chuckled. "Not that I've ever heard of. You know luck—you always get it when you don't need it. I was pretty happy where I was—playing for tourists down in Mexico. Climate was good, cheap to live down there, and the tourists were pretty pleased to discover people who spoke English, so they always tipped well. But—when I didn't need luck, there it was. And if things don't work out here like I hope, I'll probably go back."

"Why would anyone leave Mexico for New York?" the clerk shook his head wonderingly as he passed the AmEx through the reader and waited for the approval to come through.

"Because the coast of Mexico doesn't have Juilliard, and I want to find out if I'm a musician or only a busker," Eric told him as the approval came across the wire and the receipt scrolled out. The clerk nodded, and might have said something more, except at that moment four more customers appeared behind Eric, and all of them looked in a hurry to check out and leave. So Eric took his bulging bags and got out of their way before they started giving the clerk a hard time.

\* \* \*

He opened his eyes and sank a little deeper into the chair, acutely aware of the silence beneath the music coming from the speakers. For the first time in a long time—a very long time, going back to even before his last girl dumped him, just before he met Kory and got really involved with Beth—there were no other sounds of occupation around him. The walls and floors of the building were very thick—which would be a blessing on the whole, but right now it prevented him from hearing the sounds other tenants made, noises that might have let him feel less alone and isolated. The only sounds within this apartment came from him. There would be no quiet clatter of Beth pattering about, or of Kory experimenting with modern human foods in the kitchen—

*On the other hand, that isn't altogether bad. The kitchen won't have to be hosed down at least once a week. I'll never forget the day he discovered microwave popcorn. . . .*

But the place felt like a museum—a stage set, with no life in it. He sighed. *Maybe I ought to get a cat. Or a couple of finches. Anything to sound as if there's something home besides me.* He couldn't remember what the lease said about pets; he'd have to look it up.

But a cat would mean more responsibilities, and having to remember to feed it and change the litter and be here to play with it. How much time would he have to give a pet, anyway? Even if the lease said he could have one (he hadn't read it that closely), he'd better be careful about what kind of companion he chose. He'd be in classes and rehearsals all the time, and studying when he wasn't at the school. It would be cruel to have a pet that needed a lot of attention.

A dog would be out of the question. So would a parrot or any other bird bigger than a pair of budgies. With enough toys and each other, a couple of budgies would be all right left alone all day, and so would the right temperament of cat. *If I got an adult cat from the pound, or even rescued one off the street.*

. . .

Maybe a tabletop waterfall and some environmental disks might be the better answer. Or canaries? Eric



sighed, remembering the birds of Underhill. Now *that* was one thing he would miss about the place.

*I wonder if Dharinel would let me sneak a couple of those Underhill larks out here? I could leave the cage open so if they got bored or hungry they could go back home. . . .*

He watched the clouds pass outside the window, and let his thoughts drift with the music. And at some point he must have actually fallen asleep, because he suddenly woke with a start, to find that the sky outside his window had gone from silvery to indigo, there was a crick in his neck, the environmental spell had faded, and his mouth was dry. *Sunset! I didn't think I was that tired; I must have been working harder than I thought.* By now the Faire was over for the day, and Beth and Kory were—what? Probably gathering with old friends and new around someone's fire, passing around bowls of stew, trading gossip. The Faire circuit really was a world unto itself, upon which the real world seldom intruded until Monday rolled around again.

He got up, stiffly, and wandered into the kitchen to get something to drink.

Beth had loved the apartment's kitchen, which meant, he supposed, that it was laid out well. There were too many cupboards for his few pots and dishes, though Beth had seen to it that the pantry was filled with things that were easy to cook, even for someone of his limited skills. The cabinets were newer than the building, but not by much: cream-colored metal with black Bakelite Deco motifs, and the floor was those tidy octagonal tiles that no building outside of New York seemed to have. But the stove was modern enough, and so was the refrigerator, and at some time in the past one of the cabinets next to the sink had been sacrificed to permit the installation of a dishwasher, which was a good thing, since Eric never liked to wash dishes. The countertop and splashboards were of white marble that matched the cabinets, and it all looked very unused and perfect, like an illustration in *House Beautiful* from 1920.

*Yeah, well, I'll try making an omelet tomorrow, and fix that in a hurry. If I don't slash my hand open chopping onions, I'll drop at least two eggs on the floor and leave bits of potato all over the top of the stove.*

He opened the fridge and was confronted with a vast array of crystalline water bottles of various shapes and labels, with a few lone bottles of juices, root beer, cherry, and cream soda providing a little color among the colorless army. There'd be no one to drink it all but him, and suddenly Eric was struck with a sense of loss that brought a lump to his throat.

Kory had obviously, personally—lovingly—stocked the fridge.

Elves couldn't handle caffeine. It was as destructively addictive for them as cocaine was for humans, and worse: it acted on them like horse tranquilizers, sending them into a euphoric, oblivious state they called "Dreaming." Kory would no more have put cola or tea into a fridge than Eric would have stocked one with heroin and crank.

Bless Kory! Nothing wrong with yuppie-water. And until I get a filter on it, I'm not sure I want to trust what comes out of the kitchen tap. Kory's "allergy" had done Eric a favor. The pipes in old buildings frequently added a liberal helping of rust—if not lead from the pipe solder—to the drinking water. I've killed enough brain cells on my own, I don't need to lose any more! Eric snagged the first bottle that came to hand, twisted off the top, and took a long swig of water as he wandered back to the living room.

As he settled back into his chair, Eric suddenly had enough of the CD player. He shut it off with the remote control, and silence rushed in so abruptly it felt as if his ears had popped.

He waited, straining to hear what, if anything, the building contained. By now people should be coming home from work or school; they should be taking baths, fixing dinner, turning on TVs for the evening news. And there were some sounds, faint and far-off, as if from another building, but they certainly weren't intrusive. In fact, he had to really concentrate to hear them at all.

He shivered, stood up and started to pace, then stopped himself and sat down quickly on the sofa, putting the water down on the floor and reaching for the flute case that lay on a small table in front of the sofa. Suddenly he wanted the silence filled again—but not by someone else's music.

For a while he simply played whatever was most familiar, a mix of the tunes he'd used to play when he busked alone. One thing he knew he didn't want to do, and that was to play the things he and Beth and Kory performed together.

But as his fingers warmed up and the notes came as easily as breathing, an idea came to him.

He didn't necessarily have to stay alone. He was a magician, and although he had to be very careful not to meddle, there were things he could do for himself without casting *ageas*. Why not use Bardic magic to hunt out a friend here in this building?

There was no good reason why he shouldn't do just that—now. He had the control; he knew what not to do as well as what to do. Instead of the old sledge-hammer process of using brute force to get something done, his touch these days was the equivalent of a neurosurgeon with a hair-thin laser beam. All he had to do was to send out a call for someone who also needed a friend like him—simply speeding up the inevitable, because sooner or later he'd run into people in the building who had similar interests anyway.

If he did this right, whoever came would hear his music despite the excellent sound-deadening qualities of the building. He—or she—would recognize it for live music, become curious, and follow it to the source. He shouldn't get too specific, though. And he should keep the need on the lighter side of friendship. *Otherwise I could end up with a case of Fatal Attraction. Oh, no; no thank you! We'll keep this casual and innocent. Just the same kind of good times and good fun I had with some of my Faire buddies.* He knew what that felt like; friends you could count on, but who gave you the space you needed. He'd taken it for granted: first, on the Faire circuit, and then Underhill, but now that he'd shut himself out of both worlds, he realized how much he'd unconsciously depended on them.

He set his thoughts in the right pattern, breathed softly into the flute, and set the magic free on the wings of the song.

Three times to repeat the song; that was what Dharinel had taught him. Once to make the pattern, twice to set the pattern, three times to bind the pattern. For really heavy work, he'd repeat his melody nine times—or, more rarely, five—but this wasn't heavy work. There was nothing riding on whether or not anyone "heard" his call, there would be no grave consequences if no one answered. He had been careful in being so completely species-nonspecific that it was even remotely possible that something from Underhill might answer the call. He didn't think any of the Sidhe lived in New York City—they lived in Los Angeles and San Francisco, but so much more of New York was man-made than either of the other cities, layers and layers of infrastructure descending as far below the surface as the skyscrapers stretched above, that he doubted they could stand it. He hadn't even specified "in the building," only "nearby"—and for Sidhe or other Underhill creatures, "nearby" could be quite some distance away.

Not that he wasn't being cautious; the other half of his "call" was very specific. Nothing would "hear" him that didn't have what Dharinel called "good intentions." These were not the kind of "good intentions" that

the road to Hell was allegedly paved with—more like a healthy set of ethics and morals. Nothing would hear or respond to Eric's music that would harm him, willingly or accidentally.

It was no longer a difficult proposition to hold all those components of his magic in his mind—but it was rather like being a skillful juggler. It required intense concentration, and he kept his eyes closed to maintain that concentration right up to and through the final note.

And as the last breath of that note faded, Eric heard a quiet tapping, just loud enough to catch his attention.

But not from the door. From the window.

Surprised, he opened his eyes, wondering if the wind had blown some bit of debris up against the frame of the open window that was making the tapping sound. But he knew there were no trees that close to his windows. Maybe a pigeon? That was possible. If the last tenant had been feeding them. . . .

*What they hey, there's bread in the kitchen.*

He walked over to the window to see, still thinking of pigeons, so it was with a profound shock that his eyes met another pair of eyes on the other side of the frame—dark, wide, and set in a fanged grey face beneath a pair of waving, batlike wings. And just to confirm that it was no accident, beside the face was a claw-like hand with a single talon extended, tapping once again on the frame.

## **TWO: A CALLING-ON SONG**

If this had happened a couple of years ago, before Eric had the unique experience of having an Elven Knight appear in his apartment and scare the crap out of him, been worshipped by Nightflyers, chased by Unseleighe Elves and become a Bard, he probably would have put an Eric-shaped hole in the door on his way out. By now though, he had seen so many arcane and outré critters that having a monster staring at him from his fire escape, wanting to come into his apartment, was not going to frighten him. It was a surprise, even something of a shock, but it didn't frighten him.

If it had happened the last time he was in the World Above he might still have come at it with either a baseball bat or a sword. He hadn't known how to protect himself, not really, and his grasp of magic had been rudimentary at best. He had tended to assume that anything he didn't already recognize—or which hadn't been properly introduced by someone or something he already knew—was dangerous. And that wasn't an unreasonable way to operate, given all he'd been through. Paranoia was not a bad thing, in the appropriate degree.

But that was then. Now he had the responsibility that magical ability brought. He didn't act without thinking. He observed and thought before he did something. He had enough power and the control over it to protect himself for a limited time against almost anything. And he had the ability to call reinforcements quickly, which was even more important. All these factors gave him a level of calm he wouldn't have had before, but his time Underhill had made some deep-laid changes in Eric's psyche, had made him realize that his mind could work faster than his body, and that there generally was time to take in and process information before doing something, because acting without thought usually led to doing something that

might prove to be very stupid.

So he had taken in a lot of information with his first glance at the visitor outside his window. It wasn't as large as shock had first made it appear; only half the size of a human, though that didn't mean it couldn't be dangerous. Still, there were other considerations as well.

First of all, he had noted the eyes; there was no anger or aggression in them. Granted, a professional killer would probably look just as calm before he killed you, but at the moment, Eric couldn't think of any enemy he'd made Underhill that would have the motivation to send an assassin after him.

Second, the creature was just sitting there tapping on the window frame. And even if the window had been closed, from the look of it, if it wanted to get in to attack him, a sheet of glass wasn't going to stop it.

Third, it appeared to want to be invited in, rather than just walking in through the open window. Now, all vampire mythology to the contrary, most nasty critters could cross a mortal's threshold without any problem; he hadn't had time to set up the heavy-duty wards that would stop it. So there was a very high probability that this thing—whatever it was—was friendly. That it had, in fact, answered his call. So what if it wasn't necessarily the kind of drinking-buddy he'd assumed he would get? After all, he hadn't specified species—just someone he'd like to know, and who'd like to know him.

So, after the first jolt of atavistic fear, Eric carefully put down his flute and walked slowly over to the window. The thing grinned at him as it saw that he was going to let it in, and he noticed a few more things about it.

One, except for its big dark eyes, the creature was a uniform, textured grey, all over, just like granite. Right down to the soot smudges and patches of lichen.

Two, the gargoyle that perched on his corner of the building just outside his window was gone. Or to be perfectly accurate, it wasn't where it had been. It was on the fire escape outside his window, bat-wings, fangs, ape-like arms, and all.

"Hi," he said, extending his hand cautiously (the creature did have some formidable talons, after all). "My name's Eric Banyon—"

"Sieur Eric, Knight and Bard to the court of the Queen of Elfhame Misthold, don't you mean?" the creature asked, in a thick accent that was part Bronx, part Irish, and all cheerful, raising what would have been an eyebrow if it had any hair on its uniformly granite-colored exterior. It took his hand in its for a firm but not overly aggressive handshake, and stepped through the window. Its hand was surprisingly warm and dry, though rough and hard as granite.

"Or is it that you aren't much of a one for titles and all?" It didn't wait for an answer. "I ain't, so that'd be all right with me. Greystone, at your service. Glad you whistled, Eric me fine laddybuck. I was trying to figure out how I could do my job without you noticing that I was moving. Or gone; sometimes, y'see, I got to leave, and I figured you'd catch on that I wasn't there pretty quick."

The gargoyle released his hand, and Eric blinked. "Job?" he said carefully, then woke to his duties as a host. "Please, would you like to sit down? Can I get you anything? A drink? It's pretty hot out there." *So what do I offer a gargoyle to drink? I'd think they'd get kind of tired of water.*

"Yes and yes, and me thanks t'you." Greystone plopped himself down on the floor and stretched his

wings luxuriously. "Water—more of yon yuppie-water, if you please. Take the acid taste of the smog-wash out of me mouth."

*Just goes to show I shouldn't jump to conclusions.* Eric fetched two more bottles of a different (and more expensive) variety of water. The best he could offer would be nothing compared to the waters of Underhill, after all, and any gargoyle he met would be more than familiar with Underhill, after all. At least it ought to be.

Greystone accepted his offering with a grin and an appreciative smack of the lips as he drank about a third of the bottle in a single gulp.

"Ah!" he said with enthusiasm, while Eric took a seat on the couch. "Now that's more like it! Clean, clear—you wouldn't believe what city rainwater tastes like these days."

He drank again and put his bottle down on the floor beside him. "Well, Eric Banyon, and did you think you'd come to live in this grand building all by accident? Not hardly. Yon cold-spell was an amusing little conceit, but I'll admit I didn't think you'd have the balls to make a calling-on song; that took some brains and some moxie, I'm here to tell you."

Eric took a careful sip from his own bottle before replying. He had the feeling that he needed to phrase his questions carefully. "You say I didn't get this apartment by accident?"

The gargoyle nodded.

"So why did I end up here?"

"The building chose you, lad, what do you think?" Greystone nodded wisely. "That's the long and the short of it. No one comes here that Guardian House doesn't want; that's the way it was built. It felt you enter the city, and it made its own calling-on song to bring you here. That's why you went for a walk, and that's why you found the building and saw the sign. The building manager just serves the building's needs. When it has a vacancy, Ms. Hernandez waits until someone shows up who can see the *For Rent* sign—not everyone can, but you've probably guessed that by now. That's why it's called Guardian House. One of the reasons."

*A building that picks its own tenants? Boy, that's a new one!* "Why choose me?" Eric persisted. He wasn't alarmed; he was quite certain that if there had been anything ill-omened about this place, Kory would have sensed it. And the name—Guardian House—sounded as if it were a force for Good, at least. "Is it because of the magic?"

Dharinel had warned him it would make him visible to all kinds of creatures that didn't have the time of day for an ordinary mortal, but Eric had already had a taste of what that was like.

"A bit." Now Greystone seemed to be picking his words carefully. "Most people who live here aren't witches, sorcerers, or even mages—not the way you are, me lad—they're just people with a very singular talent for living, and certain gifts to be nurtured. Most of 'em are artists, but not necessarily the way most people think of artists. Oh, there is a fair crop of painters, writers, musicians and dancers, but there are others who do things like—like putting exactly the right people together. Or who can make computers do things that'd bug your eyes out. Or who've got the gift of healing the mind and body together. The city needs people like that, and this building—this House—needs them too. They make things and people around them happy, and the House lives on that happiness. It's a living thing, not just a bunch of plaster and stone, and happiness is food and drink to it. So it shelters the special people it finds

and protects them in exchange for their happiness—it's like that arrangement with the little fish and the seaflower."

"The clownfish and the anemone?" Eric hazarded, out of his memories of some half-forgotten *National Geographic* special, and Greystone nodded.

"What about the people who live here who are mages. Do they know about the House? About you?"

"Only four of them do. Ms. Hernandez's one, of course. And, no disrespect intended, boyo, but each one of the four of 'em could blow you into powder and not have to think about it."

Greystone waited to see what Eric's reaction was, but Eric just shrugged. It was hardly news to him that there were other magicians out there who were much more powerful than he was. What surprised him was that four of them lived in the same building, as mages tended to be as touchy and egotistical as . . . well, as professional musicians.

The gargoyle seemed satisfied with Eric's response, for he continued. "As for the other four, they know about me, of course, since I—well, we, me an' the lads—are their security system." The gargoyle smiled smugly. "And sometimes guard dogs. Stuff they need to worry about won't even show up on a camera, like as not, but we'll sniff it out before it ever gets within a block of here."

"Why?" Eric asked. "I mean—why do they need you?"

He realized as soon as he asked the question that he really didn't have any right to know the answer, but Greystone didn't act upset. He laid one finger along his nose and leveled his gaze at Eric.

"I'm telling you all this for your protection, lad. Maybe those four can blow you into powder, but you're streets ahead of the rest in the House. The four—well, they take care of things Out There, in the city. One's a real cop, the rest, well, you wouldn't know they were special. But when bad things happen out there, bad magical things, sometimes they need to get taken care of, and the four of them do that. That's the real reason the House was built, grown, whatever you like—to shelter the Guardians. There've been as few as one and as many as nine here at once. And that's why we're here, me and the lads, to watch while they're sleeping. But the four of us can't stop everything, and sometimes when bad things come looking for a fight, they don't much care who's in the way, or take the time to sort out the Guardians from the bystanders."

*Ain't that the living truth.* Eric thought over the possible implications. "So something coming after one of them might mistake me for the right target?" he hazarded. There had to be a reason Greystone was telling him all this.

"Might. Not likely, but might. So you get to know about the House, and about me." Greystone grinned. "You did a calling-on for a friend, you know. I hadn't figured on letting you know about all this so soon, but I couldn't pass up such an open invitation."

Eric grinned back; he liked the feisty little fellow! In fact, he couldn't think of a better answer to his call. "Do the four mages you mentioned know about me yet?"

"Ms. Hernandez, of course. The other three will figure it out in the next couple of days if she doesn't tell them first," Greystone said complacently. "Now don't you go get cocky now that you know about them, mind! They're not here to babysit you—you're expected to defend yourself against anything you get yourself into. That's only fair—they've got a deal more to worry about than you, any day of the week."

"Oh, believe me, I've learned my lesson!" Eric assured the gargoyle hastily, with a shudder as he thought of some of the things he'd done out of ignorance in the not-so-distant past. *And if I never see another Nightflyer again, it will be just fine with me!*" At least, I hope I have."

"You did all right with your calling-on song," Greystone assured him kindly. "Just keep thinking cautious and conservative, and you'll be all right." He grinned again. "Anything else you want to know?"

He wanted to know who the other three mages were, but he had the feeling that Greystone wouldn't tell him. "You're a sort of magical security system—how do I know if there's trouble around?" Eric finally asked.

"I'll tell you," the gargoyle informed him. "You'll hear me in your head. I'll tell you what the danger is, and give you my best guess on what to do to avoid it. After that, you're on your own. If you don't do what I tell you to, that's your problem, and you handle it."

"Fair enough," Eric acknowledged. They both finished their drinks in friendly silence, then Eric slam-dunked the empties into the trash basket near the kitchen door. "Can you be a security system and hang out with me at the same time?"

"Sure," Greystone replied firmly. "I have to be able to do that—multi-tasking, you mortals call it. Sometimes I sit out there and read a book, if it isn't raining. Ms. Hernandez lets me borrow hers. And P— One of the others gave me one of those little FM ear radios. I used to use a set of headphones until some smart-ass photographer took a picture of me wearing them and it got into the paper, but that little one hardly shows."

*Just what I was hoping to hear!*" "In that case," Eric said, as the gargoyle watched him with a look of expectant anticipation. "How about popcorn and a movie?"

\* \* \*

Greystone had good—and sophisticated—taste for someone who sat on the edge of a roof all day every day. After a quick scan of the movies Eric had bought to go with the new DVD player, he chose *Bullets Over Broadway*. "I have to tell you, laddybuck, sometimes it's downright frustrating sitting out there, listening to a line or two from this or that, and not able to even catch all the dialogue." Greystone shook his head sadly as Eric unwrapped the DVD and loaded it. "I can't tell you the number of times I've sat up there and thought about flying down to a window and taking my chances on being spotted."

"Well, if you get bored at night, even if I'm asleep, just come in the window and channel-surf or load a tape or something; I'll leave the window unlocked," Eric promised him. "I guess you'll take care of any burglars that happen by."

Greystone sighed happily. "Somehow we're never bothered with that sort of thing," he said innocently. "Blessed if I know why. But you're sure it won't wake you?" he asked, anxiously. "I've got good hearing, I won't play it above a whisper, I promise."

"It won't wake me," Eric assured him. "Honest. My last roommate never slept to speak of, and he used to run the tube or the stereo all night long. He was pretty considerate about volume, but some of his friends weren't, and they'd drop by any time they felt like it. I learned to sleep through entire parties."

"Ah, the Sidhe are not always thoughtful guests, now, are they," Greystone observed shrewdly, then

turned his attention to the screen.

When the movie was over, Eric's sides hurt from laughing. Since it was his choice next, he put in a copy of *Riverdance*, which had Greystone tapping his talons in time to the music almost immediately.

"You could do that," Greystone said when it was over. "You could play with that group, right this moment. You're good enough. Why don't you? Why are you wasting another couple of years going to school when you don't need to?"

Eric was no longer surprised that Greystone knew so much about him. A telepathic gargoyle would be an entire intelligence network all by himself.

"Because I have a couple of things to prove to myself," Eric told him, as he sat on the floor beside the DVD player and ejected the disk. He cocked his head to one side as he watched to see Greystone's reaction.

"One of them is the laying of old ghosts. Another is that I have to prove to myself that I have the discipline to make it through to a degree; that I have the patience to put up with teachers who are going to put me through the wringer just because they can. I have to know that I can do something alone, without help from anyone else. And there are things I can learn in classes that I'll never learn on my own. The piece of paper I'll get doesn't mean a damn insofar as my passing auditions; it's what it will mean to me that matters."

He hadn't explained any of this to Beth or Kory; Kory wouldn't have understood, and probably Beth wouldn't have, either. Kory would point out that he could study with the finest of Underhill Bards if what he wanted was to learn about music and discipline—hadn't he survived Dharinel's teaching? Beth, who never had graduated from college, had the contempt for the sheepskin that many who drop out or never make it through often have. In Beth's case, Eric was fairly certain it was because she had seen so many overeducated idiots pass through the television studios she worked at. She had a point, but every time Eric had tried to argue the counter-point, he'd had to give it up before he lost his temper with her. Or she with him—Beth had a temper that could strip wallpaper at 600 yards, and the temper that went with it. *And her not even a redhead. . . .*

"In a way, you need to prove you're a man, eh?" the gargoyle observed shrewdly, and Eric had to laugh. Going back to Juilliard was a far cry from John Wayne heroics.

"Yeah, you could say that. This is kind of my manhood ordeal." He made a face. "And part of it is going to be an ordeal, all right. I'm going to have to keep slapping myself down to keep from using magic to deal with some of those bastards in there that call themselves teachers. Why is it that the teaching profession attracts so many insecure sadists? But I won't do it. That would be cheating—and hundreds of people who don't have magic manage, after all. I just have to remember that my way won't count in there, figure out what they want, and give it to them."

"I don't know. Sounds like knuckling under to me." Greystone examined his talons carefully, not looking at Eric.

"Sometimes you have to knuckle under," Eric replied without heat, though such an implied slur would have had him in a rage as recently as a couple of years ago. "That's life in the mortal world; it's a food chain, and you can't always be top predator." And, a part of him acknowledged, he wouldn't *want* to be top predator. You gave up as much as you got if you became King of the Hill—Above or Below—and there were some things Eric wouldn't give up, no matter what price he was offered for them.



"I suppose." The gargoyle sighed. "Makes me glad I have a simple job, one with no compromises involved."

"And there are plenty who'd envy you," Eric told him honestly, and yawned. "Well, I'm for bed. Knock yourself out: watch or listen to whatever you like, just shut the window behind you when you leave, okay?" He got up, and offered his hand to Greystone, saying in his best Humphrey Bogart voice, "Louis, I have the feeling this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

Greystone shook his hand and, to Eric's delight, then saluted with his bottle of water and responded (in a better imitation), "Here's lookin' at you, kid."

Eric went off to his bed and fell easily and quickly asleep, with the reassuring sounds of British comedy and the gargoyle's low chuckle murmuring through the apartment to keep him company.

\* \* \*

In the morning, it all could have been a dream. The disks Greystone had used had been put neatly away, and the gargoyle was back in place, looking like an ordinary stone gargoyle. But as Eric entered the living room, the gargoyle moved just enough to look over his shoulder and wink.

Eric laughed, and waved back. Greystone returned his gaze to the street below.

With that reassurance, Eric sauntered into his warm, pleasant kitchen, and sat down at his own tiny kitchen table. Memories of other kitchens, other wakings, filled his thoughts. *I never used to get up this early*, he thought, noting that the time was only nine a.m. *But then again, I used to drink or smoke myself into oblivion most every night, too. That tends to make for late risings.*

He poured and devoured a bowl of cereal absentmindedly, and considered what he was going to do for the day. It was Sunday, his last day of complete freedom. Tomorrow he'd begin classes and all the rest. While he didn't expect to have a great deal of trouble with actual playing, there would be things like music theory and composition, orchestration, and other technical subjects where his natural gifts wouldn't carry him. *Homework! My god, I'm going to have to deal with homework again!*

At least this time around the drudgery of homework would be lessened by the computer set up on the desk in the living room. Pointing and clicking, and even typing, were all things he could manage on his own, and there were classes at Juilliard in using the same composition software and MIDI interfaces he'd had installed on his box. Then again, the tech he'd hired to install his rig had sworn to him that the MIDI software wasn't all that hard to learn, so maybe he could play around with it himself. That would take up a bit of his time.

And then there was the not-unattractive possibility that he might find some female company somewhere along the way, which would also take up some more of his time. . . .

I guess I've gotten over Beth pretty painlessly, he realized with a pang of surprise.

Then again, he'd have to be careful about letting new people into his life. There were holes in his carefully-patched-together cover story that would be pretty hard to maintain against someone who was getting close to him.

*Complications, complications. Oh, well. I guess the first thing I'd better do is go down and 'fess*

*up to the building manager that I've penetrated her little disguise.*

Though if he was going to do that, he'd better fix himself up to look more like a responsible, respectably cautious mage and less like a Gen-X slacker who couldn't be bothered to shave.

An hour later, shaved, chestnut hair thoroughly brushed and pulled back with an elastic tie ornamented with a silver plaque inscribed with Celtic knotwork, and wearing a perfectly proper outfit of jeans, a good collarless shirt, and a moleskin vest, Eric Banyon presented himself at Apartment 1-A on the first floor. There was a small hand-lettered label that said "Hernandez-Manager" over the bell. After a brief interval, she answered his ring.

Ms. Hernandez didn't look like a mage. She was a Latina woman with skin the color of buckwheat honey; an older woman who wore a harried lifestyle and a score of responsibilities like an invisible cloak. She was dressed in jeans and a pink Henley, and her blue-black hair was pulled back in a tail.

Her eyes showed a flash of annoyance—quickly hidden—when she saw who was at her door, and Eric knew what was going through her mind. She probably figured that he was going to complain about one of the many features of the apartment that she couldn't do anything about, because you simply had to accept a few problems when you lived in a building that was this old.

He held up his hand in the universal gesture of peace. "I'm not here to hassle you about anything, Ms. Hernandez," he said quickly. "I just wanted you to know that I've met my neighbor, Mr. Greystone. He was kind enough to spend some time watching movies with me last night, and he told me that you sometimes loan him books. He told me to say hello to you."

For a moment she stared at him without comprehension, as if his words had taken her by such complete surprise that her mind had gone blank. Then her eyes widened, and she opened the door further. "Please, Mr. Banyon, come in," she said formally, gesturing to him to move past her. "I'd like to talk to you about that, and see how you're settling in here."

He took the invitation, and she shut the door behind him. Her hallway was the mirror image of his, and so was the living room, though the apartment looked as if it had a dining room as well, and probably three bedrooms instead of one. By New York City standards, it was palatial, and any place else it would cost a fortune to get this much space. Most of the people Eric had known from student days here lived in about two hundred square feet of room, and considered themselves lucky if they didn't have to share it with a roommate. Her living room was pleasantly furnished in the usual mishmash of furniture that most people who didn't buy "suites" out of department stores owned. Her color scheme was a mix of golden yellows and browns, and she had a couple of bright rugs on the polished wooden floors. He wondered soberly just what Ms. Hernandez did to earn this place. *If the House rewards these Guardians commensurately with risk—yikes!* Guarding a city the size of New York? He wasn't certain he'd have what it took. *I wouldn't want to get her mad at me!*

"The kids're out at a movie, so we'll have some privacy. I'll put on the kettle and make us up a nice pot of peppermint tea. I don't do coffee in the morning any more. Makes me jittery. I hope you don't mind."

"Not a bit," Eric said, following her into the apartment with a smile. He'd met Toni's two boys—Raoul and Paquito—briefly when he'd signed the lease. They were eight and ten, and seemed—from Eric's limited experience with that age group—to be perfectly normal kids, if a bit more polite than the average run.

She gestured, and Eric seated himself at the table tucked into one corner of the kitchen. Evidence of

Toni's boys was everywhere, from the action-figures tucked onto the shelves along with the dishes, to the promotional glasses for the latest Star Wars movie in the drainer.

"Please, sit down, Mr. Banyon," Toni Hernandez told him, moving over to the sink to fill the teakettle.

"Call me Eric; I'd rather," he replied. "Mr. Banyon is still my father to me, and I don't think I've turned into him yet."

"Fair enough. And I'm Toni. Well then, Eric," Toni Hernandez said, looking into his eyes intently. "Either you have managed to get hold of a name and a fact and put them together with extraordinary skill, or you must have been a bit startled last night. Which is it?"

"Startled," Eric smiled. "It isn't every day that a gargoyle comes to call—but it was my fault, if fault there be. I did invite anyone who might be a friend to come over and say hello."

"Interesting—so that was you, playing?" She smiled. "I don't think we need to play word games, then, or beat around the bush. You're obviously a mage, and a better one than most of the people in the House who dabble in the Art. You got Greystone to reveal his nature to you by cooperation rather than coercion, so he may know more about you than he's told me. I heard you playing, recognized what you were doing, and admired the careful crafting—and if I hadn't been busy at the time, I would probably have followed the invitation. I knew that it couldn't be a trap or a trick, but it didn't occur to me that it might be the new tenant who was setting the spell."

Eric spread his hands, grinning despite himself at her praise of his magic. "Consider the invitation still open—on weekends, anyway. During the week I have to be a conscientious student."

She made a face. "I wish you could talk my kids into that attitude. All right then—I knew the House wanted you the moment you came in, but it wants a lot of people that aren't the kind to get visits from Greystone. So what are you, besides a music student at Juilliard? You aren't Wiccan, I know that much."

Eric considered his words carefully. "Are you aware of the powers once attributed to Bards?"

"Like that Welsh guy, Taliesen?" she asked. "Magic through music? That what you do? How the heck did you find someone to teach you that? Not at Juilliard, I'll bet."

He smiled crookedly, answering her questions with others—a habit he'd picked up from the elves. "Wouldn't True Bards confine themselves to a single student at a time? And wouldn't any of the old True Bards tell you that no bard can ever afford to stop learning?"

"Touché. Perhaps I ought to be asking, then, why a True Bard is incarcerating himself in Gotham." She raised an eyebrow. "Except that the answer is obvious; Juilliard is here. So I'll try a different angle—is that the only reason you're here? Is there something going on I should know about?"

Eric recalled what Greystone had told him about the four Guardians "fixing" things that needed to be fixed around the city. She was probably thinking that Bard Eric represented someone with a problem that could easily get out of hand, given what some of the ancient legends said about bardic mischievousness.

"Juilliard is the only reason I'm here," he promised. "Or at least, it's the only reason I know about. I am not aware that there's about to be a War of the Trees played out in Central Park, or that the Fair Folk are about to start Wild Hunts through the East Village, if that will set your mind at rest."

She heaved a sigh of relief. "In that case, the interrogation is over, Eric. Here in the House we respect peoples' pasts, so whatever you choose to tell me you can do so socially. And in return for your forthrightness, I'll tell you that the fallout shelter in the basement is proof against magical fallout as well; if Greystone sounds a warning, you aren't certain of your own protections, and you haven't time to get out of the free-fire zone, head for the basement. Punch three, six, and nine all at the same time on the elevator and it becomes an express to the basement."

She held up a warning finger, and he noticed that there was no polish on the well-kept nail. "Be careful not to try it outside of an emergency, though, and keep your knees flexed. It's a jury-rigged override on a very old system, and although it does work, the stop is abrupt enough to drop you to the floor. Fred rigged it—he's the fellow who had the building manager's job before me, and he's the one who installed the regular security system. I know the override works, I've used it and the shelter."

*Which means that she lived here before she was a Guardian. Interesting. I wonder if her kids know what she is? I'd think she'd have to tell them, but maybe somehow she's managing to keep it secret from them.*

Then again—these were kids. Even if she thought she was running a double life, she probably wasn't.

The kettle was boiling now, and Toni poured the tea into the pot, bringing it over to the table to steep. She took down two hand-thrown stoneware mugs from the cabinet above the sink and brought them over as well.

"Adam made me these. He's one of the artists who lives in the building—a potter. He's got a lot of stuff at Mad Monk, down on Sixth and Nineteenth. If you need any dishes or anything like that, he's got a special rate for tenants."

"Thanks," Eric said. From the look of the mugs, he already had a few of Adam's creations in his own cupboards. Beth had insisted on the hand-thrown pottery, saying that fine china was too soulless—and too easy to break.

When the tea had steeped, Toni poured both mugs full and added a liberal dollop of wild honey to her own. Eric picked up his cup and inhaled the fragrance. *Fresh mint, no matter what the box said. I wonder if it grows wild anywhere around here? There's a lot of wild herbs and plants growing in empty lots here, if you know what you're looking for.*

"Do you ever worry about your kids, I mean, living here in the city?" Eric found himself asking. *Gods, where did THAT come from?*

Toni checked in the middle of raising her own cup. "All the time, *mi hermano*. I worry about them following in my footsteps—and I worry about them not. Drugs, gangs, stray meteors—life is just one big anxiety-filled minefield when you're a parent," she said, with a rueful note of amusement in her voice. "But I wouldn't have it any other way. I only wish their father had lived to see them grow up. I think he'd be proud of them."

Eric nodded, his thoughts turning to the other things he'd come to ask her about. "I'm wondering—Greystone said there were three more of you in the building? Would it be a good idea if I threw a little private housewarming for the four of you? And anyone you want to bring along, of course. That might be the best way for all of us to get a look at each other." *And for everybody to get the chance to interrogate me at once.*

She pondered that for a moment. "It wouldn't be a bad idea," she said slowly. "Maybe it should be just the five of us and Greystone. Believe me, I know these apartments like the back of my hand, and six people will more than fill up your living room. How's next Saturday night for you?"

It sounded good to Eric—he'd need a break after the brutal first week of classes.

"Sure. I'll get the usual party stuff—ah, except for one thing." He flushed, a little embarrassed, but not too embarrassed to insist on it. "No alcohol. I don't do it anymore, and I don't like having it around me."

"No problem. As it happens, none of us drink, other than the old honey-and-whiskey thing for a sore throat." Toni looked oddly relieved, and explained why in the next sentence. "The House doesn't like druggies and drunks, and it seriously doesn't like addicts of any kind. The House doesn't make mistakes, but people change, especially here. I've had the unpleasant duty of finding reasons to evict some of the tenants in the past who thought that artists had to debauch themselves in order to be artists."

Eric winced, since he had come rather too close to that line himself a time or two. Looking back on it now, he'd been on a collision course with oblivion before he'd stumbled into Kory. *All the freedom in the world, and no place to go but down.* "Right then, I'll see you all Saturday night?" He swigged down the last of his now-cool tea and stood.

Toni Hernandez smiled, and held out her hand and shook his. Her grip was warm and quite firm. "Once you meet them, I think you're going to find that you fit in here quite well, Eric. Even if you actually turn out to be an elf or something."

Eric managed not to wince. "See you Saturday, then."

\* \* \*

Over the course of the week he found that he had cause, more than once, to look forward to that party on Saturday. Fitting back into the student life was much harder than he'd expected.

His alarm clock jarred him awake at seven a.m. Monday morning. It was set to an all news, all the time station, and a woman who sounded far too perky for this hour of the morning was chattering on about tie-ups at various bridges and tunnels. Eric staggered out of bed, groping for the "Off" switch.

A cold shower jolted him awake, but his brain didn't seem to want to take the hint and join the rest of his body. He dragged a comb through his hair and tied it back with a strip of rawhide, then grabbed the first things out of his closet—chambray shirt, featherweight suede vest in a deep rich burgundy, and well-broken-in jeans.

*Not bad, if I do say so myself,* he decided, glancing into the mirror.

His stomach was too jumpy for breakfast to seem like much of a good idea, so he grabbed a handful of granola bars and stuffed them into his messenger bag for later. Fortunately he'd made most of his preparations the night before, so his course schedule and the paperwork he'd need for today was already stowed away, along with his flute in its case. With one last look around the apartment—amazing how much it had started looking like home in just a few short days—he headed for the street.

The hot weather had broken overnight—though according to his friends uptown, it would be back a time or two before autumn really came to stay—and the morning was bright and cool, a perfect early fall day. He hesitated about taking Lady Day over to the school, but then decided against it: the only easy-to-find

parking around Lincoln Center was paid parking in garages, since most of the students couldn't afford to keep cars in the city, and public transportation made it really unnecessary. He'd been in the subway a few times since his arrival, and there was a stop only a few blocks away. That would do for now.

The subway station was hot—the trains were air conditioned to the point of pneumonia, but the platforms weren't—but as he passed through the turnstile, Eric was surprised to hear the sound of music echoing off the walls: a busker setting up his pitch to take advantage of the early-morning commuter traffic.

*Can't beat the acoustics*, Eric thought, looking around for the source of the music. He saw a tall, regal young woman, her hair dyed a surreal cherry-black, playing an electric violin. Its silvery surface gleamed with rainbow iridescence in the florescent lighting of the platform. Her case was open at her feet, and there was already a tidy accumulation of coins and bills—even a few subway tokens. He caught her eye and grinned, giving her a thumbs up. She smiled back and nodded without missing a beat: he recognized Copeland's *Variations on a Theme from Appalachian Spring*.

For a moment Eric thought about joining her for a little impromptu jam session, but decided against it: he'd heard that street musicians had to have a license to perform in New York, and that was something he hadn't gotten around to finding out about just yet. He dug in his pocket and tossed a handful of change into her fiddle-case. With the practice of long experience, the violinist brought her music to an end just as the train pulled into the station and her appreciative audience began moving toward the open doors. Eric joined them.

In a few short stops he reached his destination: Lincoln Center. The Center was essentially the Juilliard campus: the school itself was a tall building tucked off in a corner behind Lincoln Center. Though when evening came this would be one of the busiest parts of the city, there were few people in the plaza at this hour of the morning. Familiar with the layout from previous visits, Eric found his way to his classroom without difficulty.

\* \* \*

The halls were filled with students, some new, some returning. Juilliard wasn't "just" a music school. It offered programs in Drama and Dance as well. The dancers were easy to spot, most of them already in leotards and soft shoes from early-morning practice, with their dance-bags slung over one shoulder. A number of the other students were carrying—or towing—instrument cases.

He found the auditorium without difficulty. There were several of his fellow students waiting around outside. One of them—a short blond kid who looked like he should still be in grade-school, waved.

"Hi. You must be 'Pappy' Banyon." He grinned, relishing the joke. "I'm Jeremy Mitchell. Oboe. You know what they say about double-reed players."

"Hi," Eric said, holding out his free hand. "Pleased to meet you. Back when dinosaurs ruled the earth, they always used to say the pressure on the brain'd drive you crazy. Glad to hear it's still true."

"Some things never change," Jeremy agreed happily. "I'm a musical prodigy—but then, hey, aren't we all? This is Lydia," he added, pulling a redheaded girl forward. "Lydia Ashborn, meet the legendary Eric Banyon."

"Hi," Lydia said, blushing heavily. If he hadn't met her here, Eric would have been sure she was one of the drama students. She had the looks for it—flaming red hair, ivory skin, and the most amazing eyes Eric

had seen outside of Underhill, a deep violet color.

"With Banyon here, Rector won't have any time to pick on you," Jeremy promised her. "He's supposed to be a real monster—likes to keep his students from getting too stuck on themselves, from what I hear."

"I know the type," Eric said. "Ashborn. Isn't—"

"Yeah," Lydia said too quickly, looking even more uncomfortable than before. Marco Ashborn was a world-class violinist, and Lydia was obviously his daughter. And equally obviously would rather be anywhere but here.

"But it isn't your fault," Jeremy said. "Nobody's going to hold it against you. *We* won't, anyway. Right, Banyon?"

"Right," Eric said, because it seemed to be expected of him. For all his upstart sassiness, Jeremy seemed to be fond of Lydia and doing his best to put her at ease. It couldn't be easy coming here as the child of a star of the music world. Talk about performance pressure. . . .

*At least that was one thing I never had to face: parents who were expecting me to follow in their golden footsteps.*

Just then the bell rang. "Time to face the lions," Jeremy said cryptically. "C'mon. Let's sit together."

\* \* \*

Before long, Eric knew exactly what Jeremy had meant, and was grateful for the warning.

Professor Rector taught History of Music. He was new since Eric had last studied here, and seemed to be one of those professors who believed in teaching through intimidation. That meant that somebody in the class had to be the scapegoat, and after meeting the sixteen-year-old Lydia, Eric was just as glad it was him. Before the hour was over, he'd already had his fill of sardonic comments about unusual aspects of the work of this or that obscure composer aimed directly at him and ending with, "but I don't imagine that you encountered any requests for his work in the subway, Mr. Banyon."

It was obvious that his history had preceded him, and if there'd been anyone at the school who didn't know that he'd left Juilliard years before and gone out to make his living as a street-busker, they all certainly knew by the end of the first class.

Eric kept his temper, although the constant gibes really began to grate after the fourth time. When Mr. Rector actually phrased his comment as a question, Eric answered it when he could, and when he could not, he admitted it. Otherwise, he ignored the constant stream of barbs—at least that was something at which he had plenty of practice, thanks in no small part to having studied under Dharinel. Dharinel didn't like *anybody*, least of all half-trained ragamuffin scapegrace dragged-up-anyhow human Bards foisted on him by his liege-lord. When it came to hitting nerves, Dharinel had all the accuracy of a surgical laser, and had taken just as much malicious enjoyment in getting a reaction out of Eric as Professor Rector did.

Probably Rector thought Eric was a pushover, and some of the students might, too—but the ones who weren't getting off on seeing Eric constantly slapped down were beginning to see just what a sadistic bastard the man was without having to become a target themselves. So in a way, Eric was giving them a useful lesson in maintaining dignity in the face of adversity. And that was certainly a vital survival skill in the world of music.

*I've faced off with bastards who could kill the populations of entire cities, and who got a kick out of the kind of torture that leaves lifelong scars. I can handle a little harassment. And besides, it's still the first week. Maybe he'll get tired of it. It's possible.*

Fortunately, none of his other professors were as confrontational as Rector, nor did they seem to want to waste class time busting his chops, and by the end of the day, Eric had figured out a way to take the wind out of Rector's sails if he ever needed to. He'd bought a very nice microcassette recorder with a good microphone in order to tape all of his lectures in addition to taking his own spoken notes. When he got home that evening, he sat down to transcribe his notes—including every word of Professor Rector's lecture, inappropriate gibes and all.

When he was done, he labelled the tape and put it aside—from now on he was going to save every golden word of Rector's lectures, and if the man tried to drive Eric out of Juilliard by any monkey business with Eric's grades, he'd find out in a hurry that Eric Banyon wasn't the pushover he'd thought. Those tapes would be in the hands of the president of Juilliard—along with a neatly typed transcript with the important parts highlighted—within hours, and the good professor would have a hard time explaining away what would look like a really unhealthy negative fixation on a student.

Microcassettes were wonderful things.

But Eric didn't think he'd ever have to use that weapon. He'd eaten lunch with Jeremy and Lydia, and Jeremy seemed to be a clearing-house for every scrap of gossip on the Juilliard campus. He'd told Eric that Professor Rector didn't have tenure—and as a result, Rector didn't have any real power in the Juilliard hierarchy.

So Eric didn't waste any energy fretting over one more bully. Energy and time were two things he didn't have enough of to waste; there was an awful lot to learn, and the structured classes—with their structured expectations—were more of a drain on his energy than he'd thought they'd be. Students were expected to do three things in the course of their studies: learn, perform—and compose original works.

When it came to composition, he'd always worked on pure inspiration and impulse; now he had to learn music theory and be able to explain why certain things worked or didn't. It was a lot like mathematics, and left his head aching with the amount he was trying to comprehend. And this was only the first week, the overviews of what students would be expected to master in the weeks ahead.

It was only when it came to performance that Eric was completely at ease. The years of playing at RenFaires and on the street had taught him how to improvise endlessly on common themes, and playing before the Sidhe—the toughest audience on either side of the Hill—had polished his performances. All of that showed, even when he was playing classical or contemporary music, and so Eric was quickly recruited, not only for the main orchestra, but for the chamber group and a trio.

He wouldn't take any more ensemble groups after that, in spite of the fact that he was repeatedly asked to, and the fact that many of the Advanced Certificate students were carrying a lot more. He was older than they were. He needed a life away from music; he was too old to be able to dedicate himself obsessively the way some of the younger kids could, playing in half a dozen chamber groups besides their regular work. Granted, some of it paid—and that was another reason not to take potential work away from people who needed the money more than he did.

He reflected with some irony that, as with mainstream religion, it was easy enough to dedicate your life to music before you discovered sex—but afterwards, it was a different proposition. The way the kids



threw themselves into everything—they had an intensity he'd lost somewhere along the path to growing up. He didn't regret his loss—change was normal everywhere but Underhill—but sometimes he envied the passion the younger students seemed always to carry at their fingertips.

By Friday, Eric had less idea than before if he was going to come out of this experience as a really brilliant musician (as opposed to a Bard) or merely a competent one, like the normal run of Juilliard graduates. If he didn't add magic to the music he played, just how good a flute player was he going to be, anyway? He was way too old to be a prodigy now, but had the years of actual playing been enough to make up for lack of formal schooling?

It was not a question that caused him to lose any sleep—as Greystone had pointed out, he could get a decent-paying professional gig just as he stood, and he could even go back to the Faire circuit with time in between spent Underhill—but it was a question that he pondered in the few moments not devoted to his coursework. Did he really want to be another James Galway? Eric didn't think so—being a True Bard and having the high profile of a celebrity musician could be a dangerous combination.

But being very good didn't necessarily mean you had to be very famous. There was always studio work, for instance, if he wanted to stay in one place. And there were a lot more recording studios in New York than most people thought.

The weekend arrived, and he spent Saturday afternoon happily shopping for his party, taking Lady Day rather far afield to obtain some of the things he wanted. After all of the celebrations Underhill and in the house in San Francisco, he had the feeling he would never again be content with potato chips and dip, a platter of cheddar and jack, and boxed crackers, and he was rather proud of the spread he assembled.

*I know I don't really have to try to overawe these guys, even if I could, but heck, It sure would be nice if they liked me. Greystone's cool, and I like Toni—and I guess I can judge the rest of them by the company they keep, at least more or less—but it never hurts to make a good impression. And besides, after a week like that one, I'm entitled to a little celebration.*

By the time his guests began to arrive, he'd finished arranging the food in the living room and kitchen—not at all bad for a lone bachelor, he congratulated himself. There was something here for every taste—he figured that between him and Greystone, there wouldn't be any leftovers, either. There were two plates of the sushi rolls he'd grown to love on the West Coast; a cheese platter containing brie and neufchatel and other strange or strong cheeses; lox and cream cheese and bagels from the corner deli; a cold hors d'oeuvres tray from Balducci's, with shrimp and miniature quiches and spinach rolls and stuffed mushrooms; fresh-baked, thinly sliced, miniature loaves of bread for the cheese and the handmade Amish jams and jellies he'd found down at the 14th Street Farmers' Market.

Remembering what Toni Hernandez had said, for drinks he had gourmet teas and coffee, his vast assortment of designer waters, Classic Coke, plain seltzer, and a couple of oddball soft drinks. He could hardly wait for his guests to arrive.

Eric found himself going to the mirror nervously, over and over. He'd dressed carefully, in a mix of the clothing Kory had kenneled for him and more mundane garb. Tucked into a pair of black suede trousers from a leather store was a deep burgundy silk shirt straight from Underhill, and the pants were tucked into his Faire boots with the burgundy leather pattern laid into the side. Under a side-laced, black suede vest he wore his sword belt without the sword, and wondered if any of the four would notice that omission.

Greystone slipped in the window as he was going to the mirror for the fourth time. "You look simply

fah-bulous, kiddo," the gargoyle said, with a wink. "Settle down, you'll like these people, and they'll like you. You've already made points with them, just by being low-key."

"I wish you'd told me more about them," Eric fretted. "At least what they look like! I mean, I'm never comfortable meeting people cold, and you're hitting me with three total strangers! I don't even know how many are men and how many are women—"

"Well, they won't be strangers for long, now, will they?" Greystone countered, scarfing up a plateful of food and a bottle of water. "Toni an' me, we didn't want you forming any opinions in advance. Have some sushi and relax."

"As if I could," Eric grumbled *sotto voce*, and just then the door buzzer sounded. He opened it to let in the four "senior mages" of the House.

And as Greystone had said, maybe it was a good thing that he hadn't been told anything about these people, because he couldn't have picked out four more normal folks if he'd tried.

"Everyone, this is Eric Banyon," Toni said, as they all moved inside and Eric shut the door. "Eric, this is Jimmie Youngblood—that's short for 'Jemima,' and she'll kill you if you use it. Jimmie is with NYPD Detective Division."

Even in her street clothes, Jimmie looked like a female cop; Eric had come to be able to recognize the commonalities with other LEOs he'd met. She didn't have to look tough, it was simply a part of her. In point of fact, if you only looked at the surface and not at the way she moved and the carefully wary way in which she was always checking her surroundings, you'd have said she looked frail—but she wasn't thin, she was whipcord and muscle. It was difficult to identify a nationality for her; she had thick, lustrous straight black hair, very dark eyes, a bronzy complexion under a good, even tan, and cheekbones a model would kill for, though the rest of her face was too strong to be called "pretty." *Maybe some Cherokee in there?* Eric thought.

"Good to meet you, Eric," Jimmie said formally, shaking his hand firmly. She raised an eyebrow, glancing at his waist. "Nice belt, but isn't there something missing?" she asked with a glint of a smile in her amber eyes.

"Now it's my turn to make an introduction. This is Paul Kern: computer nerd by day, gaming addict by night."

"Eric," Paul said, shaking his hand with a grin. Paul was a tall elegant black man who carried himself with the grace of a dancer. Most of the computer nerds Eric had known had moved as if they weren't sure where to put their hands and feet, but Paul moved like a cat turned into a human. Eric noted that his eyes had already flicked to the computer in the corner and back to Eric's face in the brief instant of their introduction. "You get in trouble with that system of yours, give a shout," he said with a grin. His voice held a faint trace of a British/Islands accent.

"I will, if you won't mind," Eric replied fervidly. "What I know about computers would fit in a greeting card."

Paul laughed. "Now I make the last introduction—this is José Ramirez, who leads a triple life to my double one. He's the super—which is less work than you'd think, since the House's systems tend to cooperate rather than break down at the drop of a power surge—he's our fourth Guardian, and when he's not fixing faucets, he's raising African Grey parrots who are probably more intelligent than most of

our tenants." There was general laughter at the last remark, which had the flavor of a family joke.

"Pleased to meet you, Eric." Like the others, José had a firm, warm handshake. His bronze skin and strong square features made him attractive—if not as model-handsome as Paul—and he reminded Eric slightly of a darker Charles Bronson. "If you are ever considering a parrot as a companion, please let me know. I can help you decide whether or not you will have the time, and if so, which breed would suit you best." He grinned. "I'm afraid, like most bird people, my conversation tends to begin and end with my little ones."

"So?" Toni put in, gesturing with a piece of sushi. "That's not much different from any other person with an all-consuming avocation. Or a parent, for that matter, but I promise I'll leave Raoul and Paquito out of the conversation tonight. José is night-shift supervisor for any extraordinary problems here at the House; I'm day-shift. We cover for each other if a problem takes one of us outside."

All of them found places in the living room; Eric took the kitchen chair, Toni and José shared the sofa, Paul got the chair and Jimmie stood leaning against the wall where she could watch all of them. As usual, Greystone sat on the floor, since his wings tended to get in the way of using furniture.

Eric had a million questions he wanted to ask, but he didn't get a chance to, for Jimmie, who'd gone and gotten her own plate of food, got her question to him in first.

"So, Banyon—just where did you learn your stuff?" she asked, direct and to the point. "And how come your clothes have magic all over them?"

He'd intended to tell them anything they wanted to know, but he hadn't planned on telling them about Kory and Company quite yet; he'd hoped to warm up to the subject.

"Ah—" he hesitated, then tried to look apologetic. "I'm not sure just how much you people are going to believe."

Granted, Greystone already knew about Underhill, but from his conversations with the gargoyle, Eric had been led to believe that these people had yet to encounter anything like the Sidhe. He'd gotten the impression that their problems had all dealt with the consequences of powerful, untrained amateurs dabbling in magic, or powerful, trained magicians doing very nasty things.

"Hey, they believe in living gargoyles," Greystone said (now around a mouthful of bagel). "How much harder to believe in can your pointy-eared friends be?"

"Pointy-eared friends?" Paul raised both eyebrows. "Somehow I don't think Greystone's referring to Vulcans."

"He's not," Eric said faintly, then gave up and blurted it all out. "Elves.*Seleighe Sidhe*. The Fair Folk. I learned my magic from them."

At first, the four Guardians looked at him as if they thought he was joking. Then they looked at each other, questioningly. Finally, they looked at Greystone, who nodded emphatically.

"Cross my heart, folks," the gargoyle said, making the appropriate motion. "He's not putting you on. I'd never seen a Sidhe before his buddy Korendil showed up to help move him in, but I'd heard about them. No kidding; under the glamourie that made him look human, there wasn't a doubt. I knew what Korendil was the first moment I saw him."

*So much for disguises*, Eric thought. He'd have to remember to mention to Kory that his Seeming spell wasn't as seamless as it might be.

"Elves." Jimmie pondered that for a moment. "Well, that's not the sort of thing you expect to hear about in the Big Apple, and I've never met anyone before who could say he'd seen elves, but—well, we've seen weirder things than elves, I guess. So, okay. Elves." She sounded as if she were pronouncing a judicial verdict. Luckily, it seemed to be in Eric's favor.

"My impression is that there's too much Cold Iron around this town for elves to be anything but uncomfortable here," Eric put in, hesitantly. *At least, without a Nexus closer than the one at Elfhame Everforest.* "Kory can stand it only because he wore silk from neck to toes while he was here with me, and because he's been conditioning himself to handle it. I've heard that Sidhe can manage to build up a resistance to what they call Death Metal—kind of like you or I developing a tolerance for snake venom. Most of them, though—at best, they'd be uncomfortable all the time, and at worst, in terrible pain, depending on how sensitive to Cold Iron they were, and how much experience they'd had being around it."

There were more questions about Eric's friends, as his four guests batted the idea around until they got comfortable with it. He was rather surprised that it took them as little time as it did, but then, they were trained professionals.

"If elves taught you magic and took you Underhill, how did you get away from them?" Paul asked pointedly. "All the legends I've heard indicate they tend to grab musicians and keep them prisoner for extended periods of time. Thomas the Rhymer, Tam Lin, Taliesen—" He shrugged, breaking off what promised to be a lengthy catalogue of examples.

"It's a long story," Eric admitted. "Basically, you can't believe everything you read. I wasn't their prisoner. I was an honored guest. And—well, the whole story involves elves in Los Angeles, and elves in San Francisco, some of them Seilighe and some of them Unseilighe, and—it's a long story."

"We have food, drink, and it's Saturday night," José said, settling down on the couch as if he was prepared to stay for as long as it took. "So, stranger among us—tell us the story. As you are a Bard, it should at least be entertaining."

Since Eric couldn't think of any reason why he shouldn't tell these people the truth, he did, starting all the way back at the Grove of Elfhame Sun-Descending at the L.A. Fairesite.

"Once upon a time—a very long time ago (more or less)—there was this traveling musician named Eric Banyon. . . ." he began.

And the story did take a very long time to tell, but not as long as he had thought it would, since other than the Sidhe themselves and the existence of Underhill, the four Guardians were quite familiar with magic, nodes, Groves, and other arcanities, including power-mad Black Magicians. And while they were hardly a group of conspiracy nuts, they were also more than familiar with some of the military, governmental and quasi-governmental projects involving psychics that were floating around the espionage underworld—including many that were supposed to be secret.

To Eric's surprise, they even knew about Nightflyers, those terrifying, life-devouring creatures from the Chaos Lands Underhill, and were about as fond of them as Eric was.

"Not my chosen dancing partners," Jimmie said with a shudder. "Not that you really get a choice once they show up. Well, Eric, you just verified your story for us. We knew something about the business in San Francisco—not everything, of course, but nothing you told us conflicts with what we already knew, and most of it dovetails very nicely. You couldn't have done that if you'd been making it all up."

Eric felt himself relax inside. Jimmie Youngblood seemed to be the one in charge of vetting newcomers for the group, and even on such short acquaintance, Eric found himself valuing her good opinion.

"That thing with Project Cassandra's something I don't ever want to have to go through again," Eric told them soberly. He thought of Warden Blair, the madman responsible for hurting Bethie and hundreds of others so horribly. "It would have been so easy for everything to go terribly wrong—as it was, well, people got hurt, and people got killed, and I can't help thinking it was my fault that they did. If I'd realized what was happening sooner—if I'd figured out a better way to handle the situation—"

Jimmie patted his hand and the others murmured sympathetically, but none of them said the kinds of things others had said—about how it wasn't his fault, and that he'd done the best he could. He was grateful for that. Platitudes didn't help, not when he remembered how many people had been hurt or even killed.

"Every time you have a situation, you always think it could have gone better," Jimmie sighed. "And you know what? It probably could have. My partner always says you can only try to keep it from eating at you so bad that you can't learn from it. He might even be right." She grinned faintly.

"So, what about this guy that taught you about being a True Bard?" Paul said, quickly changing the subject to something less painful. "How'd that happen? I thought you said that most of the older elves didn't much like humans."

Explaining Dharinel—which meant trying to explain a little about Underhill—was harder than explaining the last several years of his life, and by the time they were done with their questions, Eric felt like a wrung-out—but content—dishrag. It was nearly four in the morning, all the food was gone, and most of the drink, but he didn't have that dissatisfied feeling that usually came when he'd been raked over the coals. It felt more as if these were four people who really wanted to be friends, but needed to find out everything they could about him and didn't have a lot of time to do so.

That impression was reinforced when Toni called a halt to the "party."

"That's enough. You're tired, we're tired, and we all know for certain that you're all right. Next time, I promise it will be your turn, Eric," she said, for they had all quickly gone to a first-name basis, even Jimmie. "None of us will ask any questions, and you can put us through the wringer."

"I'll help," Greystone offered, grinning wickedly, and Jimmie groaned. "Oh, no. *Not* the Jell-O shooters story! If you turn it into another 'Truth or Dare' game, I swear I'll wring your neck," she threatened.

"Who? Me?" Greystone spread his wings and managed to look as innocent as it was possible for a gargoyle to look—which wasn't very.

"Meanwhile, we all need sleep—well, except José," Toni continued, ignoring both of them, and setting a good example by getting out of her seat. "Thank you, Eric; we know what we needed to know. You've got a lot of power, but you're also responsible and mature. We don't have to worry about you getting all of us into trouble by doing something stupid, and we don't have to worry about you messing up something we have going by blundering into it. I think you're going to be a welcome addition to the

House."

"Absolutely," Paul seconded, as they all got up, stretched, and took their leave. It was all accomplished smoothly and efficiently; so much so that they were out the door almost before Eric was ready to say good night.

He shut the door behind them and turned to face the suddenly empty apartment. Well, almost empty.

"You made a good impression, kiddo, like I said you would," Greystone told him. "And they're a tough house to play for, y'know what I mean?"

"They aren't planning on recruiting me, are they?" Eric asked, a little anxiously. "I mean, all that about being a welcome addition to the House—I'm not up to taking on other peoples' problems, you know. I have my hands full with my own!" He knew it sounded a little selfish, but it was the plain truth. He hadn't done so well on his last outing as a would-be Worldsaver that he wanted to repeat the experience.

"Naw. If you were going to be a Guardian . . . believe me, you'd'a known a long time ago, laddybuck. Or your elf buddies would've, and pointed you our way a lot sooner. No, they folks're just glad you're smart enough not to attract trouble, and skilled enough to duck anything that comes here. Wish I could say the same about some people that've moved in. I could tell you stories. . . . And—I will, but not tonight. Get some shut-eye, kid," Greystone said severely. "You're about to go up with the blinds."

"Yeah, thanks. I will." Eric felt exhaustion drop over his shoulders like a too-heavy cloak, and stumbled into the bedroom, barely noticing that Greystone was courteously picking up the party detritus. He managed to get undressed and make it as far as his bed, and all he remembered of the rest of the night was a deep and dreamless sleep.

## **THREE: ON THE SEACOAST OF BOHEMIA**

*I can do this.* The woman walking down the expensively-carpeted hallway that led from the express elevator to the penthouse boardroom gave no hint that there was anything amiss. From her Manolo Blahnik pumps to her fashionably disheveled ash-blond hair, Ria Llewellyn looked as if she belonged here.

Once she had. The world of mega-corporate high finance had been her element, and she had moved through it as naturally as a shark moved through water. Until the Accident.

*Oh, Christ, Ria. Tell the truth, if only to yourself. Before Beth Kentraine hit you over the head with a Fender guitar and the backlash from your loving father's magic scrubbed your brain like a copper pot.*

\* \* \*

Almost against her will, she remembered. It all began with the Nexus, the rent in the fabric of Reality that let the power from the World Beyond seep over into this one, to be tapped by the Sidhe and others with similar magics. Only a human Bard could create a Nexus, for Creative Magic was the human power. Elves could imitate, copy, refine on the original. But they could not create something as unique, as powerful as a Nexus.

Since before she was born, Perenor had plotted to steal the Nexus of Elfhame Sun-Descending near Los Angeles and bring it under his direct control. He'd created LlewelCo to do that. He'd created Ria to run it, to deal with the daily grind that elves had so little taste for. And after years of plotting, he'd managed to buy the Fairegrove where the Nexus was—in order to destroy it, bulldoze the great trees that anchored the Nexus in the World. The warriors and mages of the Sidhe Court were powerless against him, lost ages before to Dreaming and despair. It should have been easy.

But at the eleventh hour, the Sidhe had found an unlikely champion. A human Bard, living in ignorance of his true nature and his great power: Eric Banyon, street-busker and Rennie. Perenor had ordered Ria to destroy him, but she'd thought she'd found a better way. She'd enamoured him, taken him and hidden him away, with her.

And it had worked, for almost long enough. But then he'd awakened to the danger—come into his birthright of power, driven by dire necessity and danger to his dearest friends. He'd awakened the High Court, stolen back the Nexus from Ria's control to move it to Griffith Park, high above the city, a place where bulldozers and urban development could never come. To protect it and him, Eric's ally and lover, the human Witch, Beth Kentraine, had gathered those humans together who had not quite forgotten the Old Knowledge, and offered battle.

Ria remembered driving like a madwoman in her Porsche, up the twisting mountain roads that led to the park. The sun had been high—a glorious bright L.A. day, the last she was to see for quite some time. Even then she'd thought there would be some way to end the war without bloodshed. With the power of the Nexus at her command, Ria could have sent the surviving Sidhe of Elfhame Sun-Descending across the Veil, to the Faerie Lands beyond. She'd thought that Perenor had agreed to that. But conciliation had never been her father's way. He'd intended to kill them all, in repayment for an eons-old insult.

She remembered the hot smell of summer grass, remembered how glorious Perenor had looked in his armor the color of blued steel, remembered the music that had filled the air, the Celtic rock of Kentraine's group Spiral Dance. Since that day she'd never been able to listen to Celtic music, though she'd once loved it. The memories were too terrifying, too painful—as if she'd been given a glimpse of Paradise, only to have it ripped away before she could reach it. Most of all, she remembered her first sight of the Court in all its glory, gathered around the musicians and the Bard on that sunny hillside. In all her life, she'd never seen any Sidhe other than Perenor. How beautiful they had all been in their silks and armor! Something glorious, out of the oldest dream of strength and beauty there was. In that moment she had hated them, for being something she, by the curse of her half-human blood, could never be.

But she had never meant to kill them.

But Perenor had. By what right? they had asked him. She remembered the defiant words he had shouted in return:

*"By the right of the strong over the weak, Eldenor. Of the master over the slave—the right of one who was unjustly banished, cast from his place among you, and has dreamed of the moment when all of you shall lie lifeless in pools of your own blood—"*

In that moment, a moment far too late, she had truly understood her father for what he was—a monster, without love or charity, compassion or honor. He had reached out to her, stripping away all her carefully constructed shields and defenses with no more than a thought, making her nothing more than a tool of his madness, a wellspring of Power for him to draw upon in the fight. Imprisoned by his magic, she had been forced to watch as day became night, as the sunlit hillside became a shadowy glen filled with billowing black fog, as the *Seleighe Sidhe* had clashed with nightmare monsters of Perenor's summoning.

They had died to music, to the clashing of blades and the wild howl of guitars, to the hammering of drums and of sword-blows. The black ground had gone red with blood, and the screams of the dying had melded with the frenzied song of the Bard's flute. The day would have been lost in that moment, save that Terenil, Prince of *Elfhome Sun-Descending*, had shaken off his despair and challenged Perenor directly.

And all Ria could do was scream silently within her own mind, fighting uselessly against what Perenor had made of her.

She had not seen Terenil die, though die he had. Before that moment, the Witch *Kentraine* had realized the truth, and had struck her own blow against Perenor and his nightmare allies.

Ria remembered that last moment: *Kentraine* standing over her, her Fender guitar raised like a club. She had willed the girl not to flinch, to do what had to be done to stop the madness and slaughter. And *Kentraine* had—striking with all her strength, smashing her guitar down on Ria's head, shattering the magical link Perenor had forged, saving them all. Saving the Nexus, and the *Sidhe* foothold in this world.

Ria had only learned the details of the end of the battle long afterward—how the dying Terenil had slain Perenor with his last breath, how Eric had reached beyond himself to pierce the Veil and anchor the new Nexus in a place beyond harm, how when *Korendil* would have slain her, *Elizabeth* and *Kayla*, healers who had been drawn into the conflict on the very morning of the war, had claimed her life in payment for their help.

Together the two, Healer and Apprentice, had brought her back on the long slow journey from the edge of death, piecing back together Ria's shattered body, mind, and soul. She owed them a debt she could never repay.

Even when she was well at last, it would have been so much easier just to slink away and hide herself forever. As Perenor's heir at law, everything they had built together was hers. She never needed to work another day in her life if she didn't want to.

But when she'd tried to offer *Elizabeth* money, the Healer wouldn't accept it. "You'll repay me best by taking up your life again, Ria. I don't Heal people so that they can hide from their lives. You have responsibilities in the world. Go see to them."

So now she was here.

\* \* \*

But that was old news, and Ria preferred not to dwell on the past. Perenor was dead, his bid to claim the power of *Elfhome Sun-Descending* a failure, thanks to a Witch, a Bard, and an elven knight. She'd never figured out by what twisted mercy the three of them had spared her to claw her way back to memory and sanity once more. She tried not to think about it.



Ria had other things to think about.

She reached the end of the corridor, and the uniformed LlewelCo security guard opened it for her.

There was an audible hush as she entered the boardroom. Nine men and three women were gathered around the gleaming oak table. A breathtaking view of Los Angeles and the Valley was visible through the enormous windows that filled one wall of the room, but most of those at the table were sitting with their backs to the view. An oil portrait of Ria—done in Early Hagiography, she'd never liked it—hung over the head of the table. She'd been wearing black when it was painted, but today she wore red. Phoenix red, the color of rebirth.

She shut the door behind her.

"Good afternoon, gentlemen. Ladies. I hope I'm not late?" she asked with a warrior's smile.

Several of the people sitting around the table glanced from Ria to the portrait as if confirming her identity. Ria smiled inwardly. She didn't look a day older than she had when it was painted. One last advantage of her elven-Blood heritage—she wouldn't age as fast as mortalkind, though she didn't share the elves' immortality. In the mortal world, especially in these rarified corporate circles, her prolonged youthfulness would be taken for the work of an excellent plastic surgeon, nothing more.

Jonathan Sterling had gotten smoothly to his feet as she entered—of all those in the room, he was the only one who had been expecting her arrival here today—and stood aside as Ria took his place at the head of the table. The seat at her right was unoccupied—*how had he managed that feat of choreography?* a small part of her mind wondered idly—and he settled into it, trusted courtier to a grand prince. Only a shadow of a smile marred his perfect corporate mask, and you would have to know him very well to be able to see it. An answering flicker of amusement in her own green eyes, Ria took her seat.

She let her gaze sweep slowly up and down the table, taking careful note of who flinched, who looked angry, who looked relieved—and there were one or two—and who couldn't meet her gaze at all.

"I understand that there was some doubt about the extent of my recovery," she said dryly. "Thank you for your concern. Now, if you will all direct your attention to point one on the agenda. . . ."

For the next three hours Ria worked them unmercifully, probing for signs of timidity and unsoundness in LlewelCo's interim rulers. It was primarily a display of power, proving that no matter how long she'd been a bed-ridden basket case, she was back now, and as much to be feared as ever. It was easy enough to know what buttons to push: their minds fairly shouted out their deepest fears and reservations, allowing her to leaf through their eddying surfaces like the pages of a high-fashion magazine. Only Jonathan, beside her, was a still pool of well-organized calm.

There had been lapses and attempted coups, of course. She'd hired the cleverest and most ambitious corporate sharks, and one had to expect a little feeding frenzy now and then. Baker and Hardesty, in particular, had taken advantage of her absence to do things they knew she wouldn't approve of, and that Jonathan would be hard-pressed to discover. Several of the companies they'd bought had been bleeding money for years, with precious little to show for it.

"So we're all agreed on breaking off the courtship of TriMark Pharmaceuticals?" Ria said, looking Sabrina Baker right in the eye.

"Of course, Ms. Llewellyn," Baker said. She put up a good facade, but the TriMark deal had been all Baker's idea, and everyone here knew it. Most of them didn't know that TriMark was substantially funded by certain South American investors, but Baker did, and if she didn't, she should have.

"And the leveraged remortgaging of our Far East assets?" she added, turning to Colin Hardesty.

"Well, with the Asian dollar going soft . . . yes," Hardesty said, capitulating all at once. Ria hadn't quite made up her mind whether he was stupid or just subtle, but what was plain was that he'd overreached himself mightily with this deal. And now he and everyone else here knew it.

"Good," Ria purred. "I imagine this concludes all our current business. I'd like to move our next meeting forward a bit, so that I can get an update on your other projects. So shall we say two weeks from today? I'll have my secretary prepare you a memo."

She did not smile now. Smiling was a sign of conciliation, and she had no need of that. There wasn't any argument—she hadn't thought there would be—and her staff quickly gathered up their papers and left the room. Ria stayed behind, watching the long blue shadows stretch over the L.A. Basin and savoring the moment.

Jonathan remained behind.

"I thought for sure you were going to can Baker and Hardesty," he said.

She smiled then, a genuine smile without edge or malice. "So did they. They know that I know, and they know I let them off just this once." Her expression turned grim. This was not the whole war, just a minor battle in it. Today's victory settled very little. "And from this second on, they are going to be so careful how they operate that if I get run over by a bus the moment I walk out of here, the two of them would still wait a year before making any moves, just so they could be certain I was dead." She heard an echo of her father in her own voice, and steeled herself against flinching. Perenor was a part of her—her blood, her bone—and once she would have exulted in that. Now it was only a fact, and one that sometimes made her tired.

Jonathan chuckled. He'd been the one stuck with riding herd on them over the last several years, after all. "And they aren't clever enough to hide their activities from that suite of computer hackers you insisted I hire. And I know they know that."

"Which puts you safely in the driver's seat for about a year if anything happens to me." Ria shrugged. "If you can't get firm control of LlewellCo by then, you aren't ever going to." She owed Jonathan the truth, and Ria had always valued honesty over kindness. In her world, kindness had always been a feint, a prelude to war.

"And if I don't, I'm not the person to handle it in the first place," Jonathan answered. "Which, by the way, I'd rather not, unless you're going to be around to pick up the reins again."

Ria looked at him quizzically. It was almost an admission of weakness, and Jonathan Sterling was anything but a weakling. If he had been, he could not have survived to rise in the company she had built at her father's orders, much less managed to keep control of it in the aftermath of her . . . injury. All her life, she'd never depended on anyone in quite the way she depended on Jonathan. Theirs was not a romantic relationship—he was quite comfortably married, and she'd never seen any reason to change that—but it was a partnership that was stronger than any bond formed of bodies. He had always been her trusted aide, but the relationship she had forged in the arrogant assumption of her own invincibility

had changed when she had come to truly need him. He had given her unswerving loyalty and trust; even in her weakness, he had given as a gift what she could no longer demand, and that gift had changed both of them. In another age, Jonathan would have been squire to her knight, trusted vassal to her prince, a relationship to endure beyond all testing. She'd trusted him, and had been given his trust in return. In the last six months she'd learned more about his family from a few oblique remarks than she'd learned in all the years he'd been her assistant.

"I don't like the feeling of the hounds nipping at my heels," he explained simply.

"And you'd rather be married to your wife than your work. I can't blame you there," she added.

"You would have, once," he replied.

Ria shrugged, getting to her feet. "Now I just envy you, sometimes," Ria said.

She walked to the window to stare out over the Valley. The sunset light painted the scene before her in tones of fire and gold, the light bouncing off the inversion layer that hung over the metropolis. She'd told him the truth. She received truth in return.

"There's something you'll want to know," he said, and something in his voice kept her from turning back, kept her gazing out over the city. Her unacknowledged kingdom, bought with blood.

"Eric Banyon's surfaced. I waited until I had definite word from the PI I hired for you that it was the same Eric Banyon you wanted, but there's no doubt. He's in New York, enrolled at Juilliard. After all this time, the Feds aren't looking for him any more; I checked that too. I suppose he figured that."

*Eric!* She forced herself to relax, and when she spoke her voice was even, neutral. "And?"

"No sign of his friends. He's there alone."

Jonathan, her trusted champion, knowing what she wanted to know and making certain to tell her those things first. Money could not buy such care. Fear could not command it.

So Eric was back at Juilliard. She had as complete a file on him as money could buy. She knew he'd been a child prodigy, knew he'd dropped out of Juilliard on his 18th birthday to make his living on the street and at Renfares, a rootless rebel, as shy as a wild hawk. The Eric she'd known would never have gone back to the scene of his failure . . . much less abandoned his friends.

But had he? Or had they abandoned him?

Perhaps the truth was somewhere in between.

She'd traced the three of them as far as San Francisco, but there they'd vanished. She'd assumed that meant they'd gone to Underhill—the elves would always welcome a Bard, and Korendil and Eric between them could have sponsored the Kentraine bitch—but why had he come back?

Did she dare go and ask him? His enrollment at Juilliard argued that he'd be easy to find. He must feel safe if he'd been willing to go there. But of course the years in Underhill would have been as good as a disguise.

"Does our set of New York interests need a shaking up as well?" she asked. *No. Leave it. He's the*

*past. Let him stay there.*

But Jonathan came to her side, silently holding out a slim leather pilot's wallet. She took it, seeing the sheaf of paper inside from the travel agency LlewelCo used. Plane tickets. A hotel reservation.

"I think you'll just have time to pack and catch the red-eye," Jonathan said. "Your schedule's there. There's a board meeting scheduled for LlewelCo East the day after tomorrow, which should just give you time to get over jet lag."

He handed her another folder, this one legal-pad-sized and thick. "This is the PI report and contact information. You'll have time to read it on the plane. The reports on our East Coast holdings are there, too. Have a good trip."

She might have kissed him then, but such gestures had never been a part of what was between them. Instead she turned away from the window and favored him with a cool Sphinx-like smile.

"Thank you, Jonathan. You always know just what I need."

His answering smile was only in his eyes. "It's good to have you back. And now . . . your car is waiting, and I've just got time to return a few calls before I hit the freeway."

\* \* \*

The old yellow-brick building occupied most of a city block, and dated back to the days when there'd been factories in Manhattan. It faced the East River, in an area that was sporadically gentrifying. But no matter how many new glass office buildings studded Hudson Street and Second Avenue, old dinosaurs like the riverside warehouse remained, legacies of the past of The City That Works.

And as always, they adapted to circumstances.

The logo in gold on the front door said Threshold Labs, as did the sign over the loading dock doors. It was a cryptic declaration, that might mean almost anything. Whatever Threshold did, it was clear that the company—and its employees—valued their privacy.

For good reason.

\* \* \*

Despite its functional, down-at-heel exterior, serious money had been expended on the interior of the building. The three floors had been remodelled and subdivided into offices, Cray sequencers and the power lines to feed them brought in, microwaves and centrifuges, air scrubbers and clean rooms and serious water purification systems installed, as well as a number of modifications below-street that would never have passed any New York building inspection, no matter how well-bribed the inspector.

The small clandestine lab three floors below the street was bisected by a wall of triple-sealed glass, and could only be entered through an airlock by technicians in full clean suits. The lab was kept at negative pressure, so that in case its seals were broken, the air would flow in, not out. On the other side of the glass was a windowless office. It, too, was dark, but there was someone there, sitting behind the desk with a guitar in her lap, fingers soundlessly stroking the strings. She was working late as usual, mulling over the last run of tests. It wasn't as if she had someplace else to go, after all.

She looked up as the timer cycled the lights in the lab down to sleep-time levels. The sudden darkness in the room beyond turned the thick glass into a mirror, mercilessly reflecting the office's occupant. She met her own gaze unflinchingly, a woman who prided herself on having shed all her illusions.

She'd had plenty of help in doing so. If she hated what she saw at 31, she also knew that wishing wouldn't change it.

Romantic loners of any sex should be tall and slender and dressed in black. Jeanette Campbell was short and sloppily plump, with thin fine mouse-brown hair dragged back in an unforgiving ponytail, persistent acne, and short stubby fingers that struggled to fit around the neck of a guitar. She was a loner through both arrogance and fate—verbal and opinionated, she had always been the sort of person who, when teased, lashed back viciously, taking no prisoners.

By the time she reached high school, Jeanette was a full-blown social pariah. Through pride, she rejected the few tentative overtures that were made to her—it was very clear to her that those willing to be kind to her branded themselves worthless by the gesture. She'd yearned for romantic isolationism while longing to be popular. She'd dressed in studs and leather, knowing she made herself look ridiculous, but still somehow unable to give up the gesture. She was desperately unhappy and worse: bright and insightful enough to know she had woven the tapestry of her sorrows strand by strand through the long years that separated third grade from high school freshman, but unable to find her way out of the web. She would not bow down to the pretty and popular whatever it cost her. She would never admit that their opinion mattered.

High school was hell, but by then Jeanette had calluses on her soul as well as her fingers. She concentrated on her classes and her part-time job, intent merely upon getting things over with: so fixed upon the destination that she discounted the journey.

Then something happened. Halfway through her senior year, Jeanette slowly became aware of something that had never been true before.

Nobody cared.

Nobody slimed her locker, tripped her in the halls, stole her homework, made crank calls to her house. Nobody mocked her in classes, pasted stupid bumper stickers on her guitar case, cut in front of her in lines, or stole her lunch. She could read any book she liked, in public, without being afraid it would be snatched from her hands and ruined.

Nobody cared about her at all.

It took her a long time to believe it could be true, and longer to trust her good fortune. She'd spent more than half her life in a war she'd known she could never win. Nobody had ever told her that it wouldn't go on forever. And one day, when she wasn't looking, it had just stopped. The enemy had declared peace and gotten out.

She didn't know what to do about it. At first the relief had been so great that she didn't care about anything else. And when the truth finally sank in, it made room for an anger as devastating as grief.

*That's it? You ruin my life, all of you, and then you just walk away? You don't even pretend it never happened. You just FORGET IT?*

*Well, I can't forget it.*

She tried. But all that left her was the realization that she had nothing at all to say to her former tormentors. The only connection she'd had with her classmates was being their scapegoat, and now she didn't even have that. They had shaped her more than she had ever understood and left her to cope with the result. Freed of constant peer pressures, Jeanette sought new pressure as instinctively as the flower seeks the sun. She drifted into things that appalled her, but she couldn't summon up the interest in her own actions to stop. She couldn't even take refuge in a romantic self-image. She'd always longed to—she dressed the part—but it required a level of self-delusion that Jeanette Campbell had never had. She was not and could never be the thing she loved most.

Unless she found the answer.

That there *was* an answer was something she'd never questioned. She'd read all the books, the ones that told her the human mind had powers which, if she could only unlock them, could transform her life. She'd started studying the mind then, reading the classics in the field. The brain was a biological machine. It could be reprogrammed with the right tools.

She'd grown up at the tail end of the period that considered drugs recreational, and for a while she'd thought that was the answer—the right chemical cocktail could do what she wanted and needed it to, unlock the hidden powers of her mind and make them available. A few semesters at the community college had given her the rest of the tools she needed to pursue what she thought of as her Research, and as soon as she had the basic tools for her quest, she'd dropped out. She already knew that legitimate research wouldn't divulge what she sought. For one thing, it frowned on human experimentation.

And she had experimented—first on herself, then on others—a combination of loneliness and rage pushing her down the easy road from science geek to outlaw chemist. Bills had to be paid, and research took money. But she knew the answer was there, somewhere. If she only had the courage and the discipline to find it.

The answer was in the hallucinogens. She'd always known that, from the first time she'd dropped acid. But LSD alone wasn't enough. It was too diffuse, too variable, too soft. She'd added mescaline, crystal meth, cocaine, trying to come up with the right cocktail that would let her push through all the barriers and claim the lightning for her own. She'd known she was on the right track, but every time she had a compound she was ready to try, it failed somewhere along the way. Sometimes people died, but she hadn't cared. She worked frantically, desperately, knowing her time was running out, because life on the street just wasn't safe, and when you were supplying illegal drugs, the working conditions and your co-workers left a lot to be desired. Sooner or later somebody would sell her out, and she'd go down.

But in her own strange way, Jeanette was heroic. Inevitable arrest and imprisonment didn't faze her. Finding the key was all that mattered.

Then Robert Lintel came, and that changed everything.

\* \* \*

She'd been in the back room of a garage somewhere in New Jersey, cooking up a batch of methamphetamine in a makeshift kitchen. She'd had to move three times in the past month because of the Feds, and the last time she'd lost her whole lab. If the Sinner Saints—the bikers who were her protection and distribution network—hadn't tipped her off, she would have lost more than her lab, but her product was pure and consistent, and they knew that if she went down she'd sell out as many of them as she could.

*Won't live to see thirty if I do, but I don't think that matters, do you, Jeannie?*

Of course, they might kill her themselves to keep that from happening. Even without the psychic powers she coveted, Jeanette could tell that. She could almost hear Road Hog thinking that, when he set her up out here in the middle of nowhere. But the Saints were greedy, and already had a deal in place for this current batch. She was safe at least until it was done, and maybe longer if the heat died down.

When the door of the garage opened, she looked up, irritated, thinking it was Road Hog or Hooker coming back to chivvy her along. But it was someone she'd never seen before, a well-manicured man in an expensive dark grey suit, walking in like he owned the place.

Her hand had crept toward the gun in her knapsack—people in her profession always went armed—but she hesitated for a crucial second, because the room was full of acetone and ether and the muzzle flash from a shot would send the whole lab up like the Fourth of July.

And he'd smiled at her, like there was something that he wanted. Her hand closed over the gun, and she pulled it into her lap, behind the desk where he couldn't see, but she didn't fire.

"Jeanette Campbell? Hi. My name is Robert Lintel. I've got a business proposition for you."

With those inane words he'd changed her life. So that now she could look in a mirror, and not flinch quite so hard.

\* \* \*

The lights in her office flared to full merciless brightness, and Jeanette blinked and squinted up at the figure in the doorway, laying her guitar aside.

"Hey, Campbell. What are you doing sitting here in the dark?"

There was an edge to Robert's voice, but there always was. He'd rescued her years ago, but it was for reasons even more selfish than her own, if that were possible.

While she wanted the powers that were hers by right—and god help anyone who stood in her way once she had them—Robert wanted Ultimate Power. She wanted the power for herself, Robert wanted to control the powerful people. He saw himself in charge of a group of perfect psychic spies, assassins, and saboteurs, whose work was undetectable . . . and whose skills were for sale to the highest bidder, though he never said that.

He didn't have to. Jeanette, better than anyone else, knew how his mind worked. Hadn't he sought her out back there in Jersey because he'd gotten to see the research notes she'd left behind in the lab the Feds had seized, and knew she could be a means to his ends?

Just so.

There was no love lost between predators.

"Thinking," Jeanette answered sullenly. She gestured toward the primate cages waiting on the other side of the glass. The experimental animals were only one of the things here that shouldn't be. When she'd been a street chemist, she had to make do with what she could get, with random customers as her

experimental subjects. These days things were much more satisfactory: absolute immunity from the law, pure chemicals to work with, the best apparatus, and an unlimited budget.

But no human subjects.

"It's too dangerous," he'd said, and for years she'd accepted that. There'd been too much else to do—first, catching up on all the schooling she'd sluffed off, then re-documenting and refining her previous research, as what good was a breakthrough you couldn't replicate at will?

She'd made do with primates—chimps siphoned to Threshold from other projects or bought on the black market. On paper—and more or less in fact—Threshold was a small pharmaceutical research company. Most of its employees were engaged in legitimate research into the neurochemistry of the brain. Few of them even suspected the existence of the Black Labs that occupied the cellars of the building, the place where Jeanette Campbell did research that went far beyond simple cures for ADD, narcolepsy, clinical depression, bipolar disorder, and the like. Some of the hundreds of primates shipped to Threshold every year even went to the careful legitimate experiments of the people in the labs upstairs, but more of them went to the Black Labs.

The brain structure of a chimpanzee was similar to that of human beings, and some of them even knew sign language. Jeanette wasn't interested in talking to them, but language use modified the deep structure of the brain and gave her a benchmark by which to measure the effects of her drugs.

She had three consistent results from her drug protocols to date: dead chimps, crazy chimps, and superficially unaffected chimps. She'd lost count of the number of brains she'd centrifuged, looking for results and reasons. But she was getting closer. That was all that mattered.

"Thinking," Robert echoed scornfully. "You want to get up off your dead ass and do a little more than think? Beirkoff told me you were going to be ready for another trial today."

Beirkoff was Jeanette's personal assistant—somebody had to do the record-keeping gruntwork who was in on Threshold's big secret—but she'd always known he geeked for Robert. It was how the world worked.

"Yeah, well, I am ready," she said, getting up and putting her guitar down. The reflection in the glass mocked her like an evil angel, showing her the hated reality so far from her dreams. "Beirkoff should have the chimps prepped. I can shoot them up and leave the cameras running, then check them out in the morning. It's better to do this sort of thing at night, anyway."

No need to put into words the nebulous feeling, not even a hunch, that something about the drugs would just work better in the small hours of the night when most people were asleep. Once upon a time she'd fancied herself a magician, but in the years since then Jeanette had put both magic and superstition behind her. She worked entirely with what was, abandoning dreams.

"What's your hurry, anyway?" she asked incuriously.

"I'm not paying you to sit around playing that damned guitar," Robert said grudgingly, and Jeanette smiled inside, though she allowed no vestige of that expression to reach her face. In fact, Robert *was* paying her to sit around playing that dammed guitar, and whatever else she wanted to do with her time. Her work was as much inspiration as anything else—and the accidental discoveries along the way had proved her worth. She'd come up with a compound that induced abject terror in its subject and one that destroyed the sleep centers. Both killed the subject in anywhere from 24 hours to a week, but Robert



had liked them, even though they'd never be mentioned in Threshold's quarterly report to its parent company. He'd taken them off somewhere and never told her what he'd done with them, but Jeanette knew those discoveries were what had bought her a free pass for the foreseeable future.

"I'm going to go down and inject them now. Want to watch?" she said.

Robert gestured, indicating she should precede him. It was one of the few things she actually liked about Robert. He wasn't squeamish.

\* \* \*

She walked out of her office and down the grey-carpeted corridor to the room that held the airlock that would let her into the primate lab. She didn't bother with a clean suit—the whole fantasy of biological contamination was just a useful fiction for any of Threshold's legitimate employees who might stumble accidentally onto her work area. No one but Robert and Beirkoff really knew what it was she did here, and neither one had the brains to follow her science. Secrecy was power. She remembered that from her magical days.

When she walked in, the full-spectrum lights brightened slowly to their daytime levels, washing every corner of the main floor in pitiless illumination, illuminating the row of cages so brightly that their contents seemed like unliving mannequins. The room was warm, and smelled strongly of ozone, ammonia, and fermenting fruit. She looked up, and saw the blinking red lights of the cameras. They'd record every move that anyone made in this room from half a dozen angles, no matter the light level, and store the images in digital computer memory for instant retrieval, so that later Robert and Jeanette could scrutinize and speculate about every squeal and twitch of the subjects. The oldest files were purged on a six-month rotation, leaving no trace of themselves behind. Robert ran a clean operation.

Her subjects were in the five cages along the wall, brought in from the larger primate lab at the other end of the building. Beirkoff had sedated each of them an hour ago, so that now they were torpid and manageable, but most of the sedative had already been processed, so that chemical residue wouldn't screw up her study.

Satisfied that everything was in readiness, she went over to the big refrigerator at the end of the room—past the stainless-steel exam table with its drains and shackles—and punched a nine-digit code into its locking key pad.

The light at the top of the pad turned from red to green, and Jeanette opened the door. Inside, it looked like any other lab refrigerator, with anonymous bottles and bundles neatly stacked and labeled on the shelves. She pulled out the jar she wanted. It was half full of a sparkling white powder, as pure and anonymous as salt. "Threshold 6/157" was written on the label. Sixth year of trials, test 157.

From the cupboard beside the refrigerator she took a fresh bottle of distilled water, and mixed and measured until she had a seven percent solution of T-6/157. She filled five disposable syringes with the liquid, and then advanced on her subjects.

She'd had a lot of time to get good at wrestling primates in the last six years. Pop open the cage door, make sure the damned thing wasn't lying doggo, find a vein, drop her load, snap the cage door shut again. The chimps' bodies were warm and flaccid in sleep, their muscles relaxed. It was over in less than five minutes, the subjects twitching and restless, rousing to wakefulness under the tonic effect of the injection. The temporary restlessness would pass—T-6/157 was a minute variation on a previous recipe, and she knew the spectrum of effects almost by heart—and the subjects would fall into a brief coma. In

about fifteen minutes the compound would begin to take effect, though most of the subjects continued to sleep for several hours. The effects would pass completely within twelve hours. Then they could review the tapes and start again.

"What are you waiting for? Brass bands?" she snapped. This was the part that always got her down, when she injected the drug and nothing happened. She knew she couldn't expect anything to happen right away, but it still depressed her.

Robert had already turned away. As he reached the door, he tapped the switch, and the lights went back to nighttime levels. Jeanette followed him back into the hallway, in the dark.

\* \* \*

The sound of the bedside telephone woke her. Jeanette groped for it in the dark, but at her first flailings the night-lights went on, motion sensors activating a strip of illumination all the way around the floor. With that to guide her, she grabbed the telephone. The clock on the bedside said 4:07.

"Get down here. Now," Robert said.

\* \* \*

The cab ride down from Central Park West—the posh uptown apartment had been Robert's idea, not hers—took about twenty minutes at this time of night, but it was plenty of time for Jeanette to think. Obviously, something had happened—fire?—break-in? At any rate, something big enough that Beirkoff had freaked and phoned Robert—which was as it should be. Threshold was Robert's baby. He was the CEO, and she (on the books at least) a lowly researcher. She even had a tiny office upstairs, with a window looking out over the river, and attended the monthly staff meetings that were a part of Threshold's legitimate side. But her real work was here, down in the Black Labs, alone and unconnected to the rest of the company.

But in that case, why had Robert phoned her?

\* \* \*

She came in through the night entrance, using her passcard, and Beirkoff met her at the doorway. His eyes glittered with excitement and she realized that whatever was going on here, it was really huge. Big enough to get Beirkoff excited, anyway, and most of the time the technician approached his job with all the verve of someone working the counter at McDonald's.

Sometimes Jeanette wondered where Robert found all these people. Beirkoff didn't seem to have any life outside Threshold. The security staff were hardcase mercs like she'd never seen working the sunny side of the law. Dr. Ramchandra, who handled the medical side of the Black Ops project, smiled a lot, but from living outside the law Jeanette knew a stone cold spook when she saw one. And she wouldn't have the first idea about how to pull a crew like this together.

Either Robert had a lot of backing, or a complex secret life, or maybe both.

"Mr. Lintel says you should meet him downstairs—" Beirkoff began.

An unfamiliar emotion filled her—hope—and she pushed past him and headed for the executive elevator. She had to present her passkey again, but once she had, the elevator descended into the secret

world beneath the street, the one that most of Threshold didn't even suspect was there. Robert was waiting for her in her office, looking as immaculately corporate as ever.

"Tell me," she said, when she saw his face.

"Look for yourself." His eyes were shining with the same light that was in her own: the glow of pure triumph. He turned off the lights, and in the darkness it was easy to see through the wall of glass into the small lab.

"Nobody's gone in there yet. I gave orders," Robert said. His voice was hoarse with sheer stupefied emotion. "Nobody's gone in there since you left, four hours ago."

For a moment she didn't understand what she was seeing. At last her eyes and brain worked together to tell her what she saw.

This was what success looked like.

The room was a mess. Drawers and cabinets had been torn open, their contents strewn around like a fall of strange snow. The wheeled cages were scattered around the room, as if someone had been shaking them, and blood, urine, and chimp feces were spattered everywhere. But most of all, there were only four cages, and four hours ago there had been five.

Four. Yes. She was sure of it.

There was movement in the corner of the room—since no one had gone into the room, the lights were still nighttime dim—and she saw it was the fifth chimp. He was moving slowly, as if he were ill.

"How did he get out of his cage?" she asked aloud. *And where's the cage?*

"Keep looking," Robert said, his voice filled with unholy glee.

She turned her attention to the other cages. One was empty, its bright yellow plastic security seal still intact. In two of the others, the animals were obviously dead, having ripped themselves to pieces with their own teeth and nails. She'd seen that side effect often enough.

But in the fifth . . .

Its occupant was an older female chimp, obviously once somebody's pampered pet until she had grown too inconvenient. Her body was smeared with red, and for a moment Jeanette mistook it for blood, until her disbelieving mind finally admitted what she saw.

Strawberries. Raspberries. And Godiva chocolate-covered cherries. She knew they were Godiva cherries because the distinctive gold-foil box was still in the cage.

*How?* cried half her mind, and: *It worked!* said the other half.

She looked at Robert, her eyes alight.

"It was T-6/157," she said.

"Yes," Robert said simply. "It does seem to have been."

"We'll have to arrange for more trials—find out what happened—maybe direct injection into the neurocortex. I'll review the surveillance images—we'll have to prep some more chimps—" she said, almost babbling.

"No need. I told Beirkoff to put the rest of the chimps down, anyway."

All she could do was stare at him, stunned by the enormity of her success. Robert smiled, as pleased by that as by the nearness of his ultimate goal.

"Campbell. We aren't going to learn anything from a bunch of monkeys that can't answer our questions, now, are we?" Robert asked, almost playfully.

"Human trials." She felt a thrill of excitement course through her. There was an exhilaration at watching a drug take possession of a person that all the lab animals and private funding in the world couldn't match. Finding volunteers for this sort of experiment was difficult, but there were ways. Expensive. Unethical. But ways. "I'll tell Beirkoff to get the Large Primate Containment set up. I'll need at least half a dozen subjects to start with."

"But not volunteers," Robert said, as if reading her mind. "Not yet. But that's nothing for you to worry about. I'll have your lab rats for you by tomorrow night. This is New York. You can find them on every street corner."

## **FOUR: THE DARK CARNIVAL**

He had been born a Lord of the Bright Court when mortalkind was still painting itself blue on a small island off the coast of Europe, and for uncounted years of Man's time what the mortals did had not mattered to him. Among his own kind, Aerune mac Audelaine was a high prince, a Lord of the Sidhe, and his rank and birth had insulated him from the petty squabbles that others of his race liked to fall into, spending eons on a vendetta in retaliation for some petty slight. Strong emotion was the bane of the near-immortal Sidhe, tied as they were so closely to place and kindred. Instead of great wars that could tear Underhill apart and doom them all, their energy was spent on small battles and long-running spitefulness.

Aerune, even as a youth, rejected this code of cool serenity. Passion drew him as the flame drew the moth. Grand hatreds, nurtured in secret, had sustained him from his earliest memories, leading him inevitably to declare his allegiance to the Great Queen Morrigan, ruler of the Unseleighe Sidhe. He was her courtier and most trusted lieutenant—but in secret. For centuries Aerune was as trusted a guest at the Bright Court as the Dark, until that shadow-game began to pall, and he withdrew from them both to follow his own inclinations. Still he ignored the race of Men, whose antics so amused the other Sidhe.

*And I would have left them to their sordid lives forever, were it not for Aerete. Aerete the Beautiful, my love . . .*

She had been barely a woman when Aerune had known her: golden as the day, a child of the Bright Court, filled only with love. She had spent that love upon the mortalkind, healing their wounds, listening to their woes, ruling over them as their Queen.

It was she who had opposed him, standing alone before him when Aerune would have taken his Wild Hunt among the tribes under her protection. She had stood unafraid in the path of the Unseleigherade, her child's face stern, telling him that he and his folk must ride another way.

He might have cut her down, bespelled her, done a thousand things to remove this obstacle from his path, for Aerune cared for nothing living. But something in her stern innocence had stopped him, and he had turned the Hunt aside.

Afterward, he had sought her out. She knew him by reputation, but had accepted him into her hall as a guest. She had spoken to him of the humans, the lastborn of Danu, and had tried to show him the good in them, the spark of magic that they shared with Danu's firstborn, the Sidhe. Aerune felt his dark heart open to her like a flower to the sun. He begged her to come away with him to the World Beyond.

"But how can I abandon my human children, Lord Aerune? They are so innocent, so helpless. Their lives are but a brief span compared to ours. Stay with me, and offer them your guidance as well."

He had not stayed, but he had come to her often, always hoping to persuade her to come away with him. And perhaps, Aerune told himself, he would have succeeded in time.

But time was not granted to them.

War came out of the East. At first Aerune paid no attention to it. Mortalkind's battles were the echo of the Sidhe wars, eternal and unchanging. They could not matter to him.

Or so he thought.

Aerete tried to make peace between the two tribes. It was hard, for the newcomers had the secret of a strange metal far stronger than the flint and bronze weapons of her people, and their losses had been heavy. Aerune had urged her to fight, counselling that only their victory would end the threat. He had not meant for Aerete to take the field beside her war-captain, using her magic against their iron blades.

Iron. It was iron that had killed his love, a spear thrown to strike her in her chariot, piercing the elvensilver armor that she wore. She had cried out for his aid. . . .

And Aerune had come, with all the hosts of Darkness at his side. But he had come too late.

He cradled her dying burning body in his arms, there on that bloodsoaked human battlefield. And as she died, all there was of kindness and mercy died with him. When he left the battlefield that day, all that lived upon it were the ravens of Morrigan. There were no survivors, and no victors. Only his pain, his loss, remained. He would have vengeance upon everything that had conspired to take his Aerete from him.

He began by seeking to crush the Bright Lords who were his kind's natural enemies—those who had let his golden darling go among Men to find her death. His campaign against them had blossomed secretly, silently, over the course of centuries.

It had failed at last, beyond any hope of success, and finally Aerune turned his attention to the world of

Men. Men who, in what seemed only a moment of his inattention, had gone from weapons of bronze and stone to weapons of smith-forged iron—deathmetal, fatal to all who drew their life force from magic. These he could kill, if he was careful, but no matter how many he killed there were always more to take their place. They called him Arawn, Lord of Death—but even as they cowered in terror from his Hunt, they fought back in a thousand other ways, breeding like the vermin they were, challenging the Sidhe in their Groves and high places.

His kindred fought back, of course, trying to retain their pride of place. But Men had magic of their own, and the love of powers far greater than Seileighe and Unseileighe alike. With love and iron, mortal Man bound and banished its elder brothers, the Sidhe, until at last the Courts fled the Old World entirely, searching for a place where they could take up the Old Ways unmolested. And Aerune fled with them, wrapped in his hatred and pride.

But Man—arrogant, presumptuous Man—followed the Sidhe even across the Great Water, destroying the ties the Bright Court forged with the mortalfolk of this new land. Destroying the mortalfolk as well, in a slaughter that would have gladdened Aerune's heart if it had only been his own work. At last elvenkind was banished into the shadows of this world, its foothold a tenuous one, its vast empire shrunken to a handful of *hames*.

From his stronghold Aerune had watched all this, too bitter in his wrath even to ride forth as he had once done. The natives of this new land sensed his presence, and avoided his place, but when Mortals followed the Sidhe across the sea, many of them disregarded the warnings of their brown-skinned cousins, and flocked to settle in the place that Aerune had made his own. Aerune tolerated them. There was much to learn before he could work their doom. Cautiously, Aerune sought allies, but even in this extremity, the Sidhe had battled one another, as if seeking to do the humans' work for them.

He had watched from his tower as the Seileighe Sidhe of Elfhome Sun-Descending had destroyed Lord Perenor and saved themselves from the Dreaming. He had watched as the Sun-Descending elves had summoned great sorceries and forged a new Nexus that would allow them to flourish safely forever in the lands of the Uttermost West, forging a strong alliance with Elfhome Mithold. They thought themselves safe. They would not swear fealty to him now.

And so, like any good general, he had turned his efforts elsewhere—to the iron-haunted city that had grown up in the World Above. To the world of Men, Men who were kin to those who had slain Bright Aerete.

Underhill was a place composed of all places and none, Chaos Lands given form and substance by magic alone, in which the hames glowed like abhorrent stars, welding all Underhill together into one vast tapestry. The Seileighe Sidhe were the bright threads in this weaving, the Unseileighe were its shadows, and once—long ago—that balance had satisfied him. But within Aerune's memory, Elfhome Everforest, with its Nexus so near the heart of the Lands of Men, had grown stronger as well, and the Dark Sidhe could foresee a time when the Bright Lords' weaving would bind the shadows in an unbreakable net, and the Bright Lords would bow their necks and their pride to a yoke forged by mortal Man.

Aerune planned accordingly.

If he could not defeat his Bright Kindred directly in Underhill, nor bring them beneath his banner, then a flanking attack was needed. Aerune turned his attention once more to the Lands of Men.

*Aerete, Aerete . . . if you could see what they have become, surely you would renounce them as well!*

Cold Iron was their weapon, and in their hands, it could slay Seleighe and Unseleighe alike. But if the Sidhe of Elfhame Fairgrove could learn to tolerate Cold Iron, why shouldn't he and his be able to do likewise? On his dark throne, Aerune dreamed of a mortal army under his command, bearing the Cold Iron that could allow him to wrest the Nexuses from the control of the Bright Lords and plunge all of Underhill into endless night; a first step before he turned his human armies on their mortal brethren, sweeping aside everything that stood in the way of vengeance, his Dark Queen's rule of all the lands, mortal and Sidhe.

But to summon such an army, he needed a foothold in the World of Iron. He needed a Nexus under his control, one that would allow his followers—boggles and boghans, his bane-sidhes, water-horses, nixies, and the like—to move freely in the world of Men. Without that power source, even opening a Portal between the worlds would drain him, and so he moved cautiously, searching for the perfect time, the perfect spot. And in the concrete canyons of Manhattan, he had found it.

*Take this city, and with it such souls as these mortals possess. I shall humble them in the strength of their fortresses, until not one stone remains set upon another.*

And at last he was through with waiting. It was time to act. And so, in the sanctity of his greatest stronghold, Aerune began the weaving of his webs.

The place in which Aerune held his Court would have been beautiful to mortal eyes, if any had lived to see it . . . a forest of dark silver, with leaves of shadow. He sat upon a throne forged of darker shadow yet, his hellhounds lolling at his feet, his Court surrounding him, a host of insubstantial wraiths and bound servitors, all of whom owed him fealty, just as he owed it to the Morrigan. From the base of his throne stretched a pool of black mirror, in which Aerune often watched the antics of his future subjects, into which he sent dreams to guide them. Even the happiest mortal carried within himself a spark of darkness, the phantom of Death whose dark wings would one day enfold him, and it was from that phantom and that fear that Aerune forged the chains that bound mortals unknowingly to his service.

Just as the joy of the Bright Lords had created a human land of magic and imagination around their grove, so did Aerune's dreams create a darkness in the World Above his palace—a vast dark iron city that the mortalkind had crafted out of blood and betrayal and the dreams he had sent them, filled with pain and sorrow and suffering enough to glut even a rapacious Unseleighe lord. There was even a place in its heart filled with great trees such as his followers needed to anchor themselves—Central Park, the mortalkind called it.

And so, at last, Aerune made his first move upon the chessboard of war.

He sent for the least of his servants, the redcap, Urla.

\* \* \*

"My lord?"

Urla seemed to coalesce out of the mist of the grove itself. The redcap was one of the Lesser Sidhe, shaped by the nightmares of generations of men. It was small, barely the size of a child, but with a distorted, misshapen form . . . and very long arms. It wore a laborer's smock and ragged pants, but upon its head there was a soft cap of bright scarlet, as bright as the blood of men.

It approached the Shadow Throne nervously, bowing low and grovelling as it judged its lord's mood.

One of the hellhounds raised its massive shaggy head and growled, red eyes glowing. Aerune silenced the beast with a gesture. Today he had need of Urla, for of all his servants, Urla was one of the few who could move with relative freedom in the World Above, for the redcap preyed upon men, stealing their strength to replenish its own. So long as the blood in which Urla soaked its cap remained fresh, it had the strength of those it had slain.

"Do you love me, Urla?" Aerune asked gently.

The redcap winced, and grovelled more deeply, inching its way toward Aerune's feet. "More than death. More than darkness, Great Lord. All my strength, all my power, are yours."

This was nothing more than the truth, and Aerune accepted it as such.

"Then you are mine, to do with as I choose. And so I choose to send you back to the world of Men. Hunt this city for me. Slay whom you will, hunt whom you will, saving only that you choose those souls who will not be missed in the World of Men. But find me the power to open the door between the worlds once more.

"Find for me . . . a Bard."

\* \* \*

*Why did I ever decide to do this?* Eric asked himself again. He ran his hand down the side of his slacks to dry it, and then transferred his flute to that hand and repeated the gesture. He was wearing the standard "school uniform" for recitals—white shirt, black pants, dress shoes, and tie. His long chestnut hair was pulled back in a length of black velvet ribbon. His feet hurt, and his collar felt as if it were strangling him. *Look at me. I'm sweating like a novice.*

He'd already been out there once before tonight, but that had been with the chamber orchestra, and there'd been safety in numbers. But now it was time for his chamber group, and there were only seven of them. The other six members of his group—Jeremy, Lydia, two French horns, a violin, and a cello—were standing nearby, waiting to go on when the previous group finished playing. He took what consolation he could from the fact that they all looked as if facing a firing squad would be preferable—even Jeremy, who normally carried ironic detachment to new heights. And Lydia looked as if she were about to faint.

"Hey," Eric said gently, reaching out to gain her attention. "Relax. It's just another performance."

She turned toward him, her scared violet eyes huge. The three of them had become friends in the last several weeks, though Eric's need to keep his other life under wraps, and the crushing weight of rehearsal and course work, had kept them from becoming as close as they might otherwise have done. While a part of Eric regretted that, mostly he was grateful. He wasn't ready right now for any more of what Toni Hernandez had called "hostages to fortune."

But right now, it looked as if Lydia could use a friendly hand. Her red hair was pulled back into a tightly scraped bun and her pale-gold freckles stood out against her skin like a dusting of golden pollen on the surface of skimmed milk. Lydia had real talent, but even in the short time he'd known her, Eric was afraid that the Juilliard pressure cooker would destroy any love she had for the music . . . assuming Marco Ashborn hadn't done that already. Lydia was a technically flawless musician, but with her it was *all* technique, no heart.



"It's *aperformance*," she said in a low trembling voice. "People will be watching. Important people. Father's friends."

"So what?" Eric said cheerfully. "Our friends will be there too."

Lydia blinked as his words penetrated. Each student got a limited number of tickets to hand out to recital performances, and empty seats could be filled by Juilliard students on a stand-by basis 15 minutes before the performance. Eric had given his passes to Toni, José, and his other friends from Guardian House, including Caity, a children's book writer (with no magical gift outside her stories, so far as Eric could tell) whom he'd met while doing laundry in the basement of the House. He wasn't sure if they'd be able to attend—Jimmie had the usual last-minute crises that came with an LEO's job, and Toni might run into something that kept her at the House.

He'd only wished there was some way for Greystone to attend as well. At least the performance was being taped, and he could play it for his gargoyle friend later.

Lydia hesitated, about to say something, but just then there was a wash of applause from the other side of the curtain. The previous group was finishing, and it was time for them to go on.

"It will be fine," Eric said coaxingly. "No matter what happens."

He could see that the girl didn't believe him. If there had been time, he might have used magic to calm her and give her some of the confidence he felt, but the other musicians were moving past them, making way for them on the stage, and he knew better than to meddle with another musician's concentration just before they played. Lydia would be fine once she got on stage—Eric knew that from experience—but he also knew that no matter how well she played, it wouldn't be good enough . . . for her, or her father.

Then he had no more time to consider anyone else's problems, because the septet was moving out onto the stage.

He always forgot how hot the house lights were, dazzling his sight even as they pressed down on him like a heavy hand. The small Lincoln Center auditorium was full—he could tell from the sound, even though he couldn't see the audience—and in the first row sat their instructors, clipboards in hand, preparing to grade the performances of their students.

*Oh, sure. No pressure, right? Just a big chunk of your final grade and no way to gloss over any missed notes.*

And, of course, the fact that, since he was sitting First Chair, the others were looking to him to set the tempo and carry them along.

Their first piece was a sprightly Mozart contradance—fast, but not too fast, with a French horn solo in the middle that Lisa choked on half the time, even in yesterday's dress rehearsal. Eric waited for the others to take their places, gathered them in with his eyes, and smiled encouragingly.

*It's just like leading troops into battle. Act confident, and they'll be confident.*

Then he raised the silver flute to his lips, nodding to set the tempo, and blew the first note.

\* \* \*

The little trio he'd formed with Kory and Beth, Beth's group Spiral Dance, and the pickup jams at RenFaires were no kind of preparation for working with a real ensemble. It called for discipline as well as spirit, cooperation as well as feeling—all characteristics that Eric had grown used to thinking of himself as lacking. But if the difficulties were greater, the rewards were greater as well—the complex surge of melody filled him like a storm of light, the passion and discipline of the others creating an ocean that bore him up like a windjammer upon its surface, its master and victim all in one.

*There is nothing better than this*, Eric thought, in the last moment in which words were possible, before he surrendered to the music and simply *was*.

Their first piece ended—there was applause—and he led them through the second, a sprightly rondo that called for fast fingering on everybody's part, five separate threads of melody weaving into a glorious braid of sound. Moments later—too soon—it was over, and he and the others were coming to the edge of the stage to take their bows. Lisa had hit every note perfectly, the horn's golden mellowness soaring over the brightness of the flutes and the deep echos from cello and bassoon. Jeremy had regained his usual bland expression, and even Lydia looked radiant.

"It was good, wasn't it? It was good," she said, as soon as they were off.

"It was okay," Eric said, smiling back at her. And best of all, it was a part of himself that he could share with those who could not share any other part of his life—this music was a matter of skill and craft, not magic, though the discipline he'd learned in those long lessons with Dharinel certainly helped here.

*In fact, I don't think I could have gotten this far without it. You've got to want it, and work for it, to be able to do it. The first time I was here it wasn't my idea at all—it was Mom and Dad, wanting to add "prodigy" to their list of my Trophy Child accomplishments. But this time it's my idea. My success.*

"Are you coming to the dorm party?" Jeremy asked.

"Sure." Eric paused to consult the program tucked into his pocket. "I've got a solo after this, then the reception, then I'm there."

"I'll see you, then," Jeremy said, turning away to go look for his bassoon case. "Good luck."

The others had already wandered off, still giddy with the high that came with performance. Eric smiled. No matter how often you performed, it was always a rush to find yourself off the stage alive and in one piece, and these kids didn't have a lot of experience with performing yet.

*"These kids." Boy, does that make me feel old!*

There were times when the gulf of years—only a handful by the calendar, but far more in terms of experience—made Eric feel like he came from an entirely different planet than his classmates. Sometimes he just felt like grabbing them and shaking them, telling them to value what they already had, to see how precious it was. The mood, fortunately, always passed. If there was one thing he'd learned from his time Underhill and his experience with the elves, it was that you couldn't pass on wisdom just by talking about it. Wisdom came only from experience.

He hung around backstage while two more groups went on, doing his best to stay out of their way. There was a woodwind trio—the clarinetist faltered badly at the beginning and they had to start over—and a baroque group whose members were already getting outside gigs, they were that good. The

wail of the shaum and dronepipe sent shivery hackles up his spine—not Bardcraft, but close, close. . . .

But it was time to focus inward, because his next performance was only minutes away. The evening had started with the full chamber orchestra, moving slowly toward smaller and smaller groups as the stagehands cleared away the stands and chairs during breaks. The soloists traditionally closed out the evening. In the high-stakes world of classical music, they were the heavy horses that everyone was waiting to see, the next Galway or Weisberg.

Tonight there were three of them, including Eric. And the whimsical gods of misfortune had placed him last.

Professor Rector was out there laying for him, Eric knew. Tonight wasn't only a solo for him. It was his first Juilliard performance of his own composition, "Variations on 'Planxty Brown.'" He'd picked the tune not only for its lively melody, but because it had no associations with Bardic Magic or elves or anything else uncanny.

The other two soloists—one piano, one violin—acquitted themselves honorably (as Dharinel might have phrased it), and then—too soon!—it was Eric's turn to step out on the stage again.

He was sure he'd sweated all the way through his shirt, sure the audience could see his nervousness and uncertainty. Some of them, probably, still remembered his last memorable solo appearance on this stage, when he'd unwittingly summoned Nightflyers with his nascent Bardic Gift.

*Oh, THERE'S a cheery thought!*

For a heartbeat he was filled with panic, and for just that moment he was tempted to call up the magic again—under control this time—to exert just a tiny bit of influence on the professors grading and critiquing his performance. It would be so easy. . . .

*No. I came back to do this on my own terms. No magic, no Gift but the music I was born with. I know I'm a good Bard. I'm here to see if I'm a good musician, too.*

He lifted the flute to his lips and began to play.

It wasn't as powerful an energy surge as playing with an ensemble. That was like driving a team of wild horses, a swelling power that came from many hearts and minds all working as one. This was more like flying, soaring over the earth on the wings the music lent him. As always, his anxiety vanished with the first note, and he carried his audience with him through all the intricate variations of the old dance tune. And perhaps because it was music made for dancing, he felt his audience caught up in his rhythm, toes tapping and heads nodding to the music.

He brought the piece to an end with a flourish, and there was that one moment of silence as he lowered the flute that was the true tribute every musician looks for.

Then the applause began, and Eric stepped forward to take his bow. The house lights came up, and for the first time he could see the people he'd been playing for all night.

He looked down at the front rows—still bowing—looking for Rector and the other professors. He could just imagine the sour look on Rector's face—he'd been good, and he knew it, and so did they. He was smart enough not to catch Rector's eye—the man looked to be in a towering snit, and his mood wouldn't be improved by knowing Eric had seen it—and glanced around the rest of the house as he straightened.

And froze.

Ria Llewellyn was there. Second row aisle, the critics' seats.

She was wearing something in pale blue, looked just the way she always had, the ice princess who had turned his world inside-out. Only years of professional experience kept him moving, and smiling, and got him off the stage.

*Ria! How did she get here?*

Backstage was full—friends and relatives coming back to congratulate the musicians, stagehands, other performers. Several of them tried to stop him, to congratulate him, but Eric tore through them, looking for the stairs that led down into the house, his flute still clutched in his hand. By the time he reached them, the audience was getting to its feet, preparing to leave.

He didn't see Ria.

He shoved through the concertgoers, fighting his way up the center aisle like a spawning salmon. He reached the street ahead of most of the audience, but he didn't see Ria anywhere.

The biting chill of late autumn cut through the damp cotton shirt he was wearing, bringing him back to himself. Even if she had been here, he'd never find her now.

*And face it, Banyon. You could have been imagining things. And the only question that leaves, is—why would you imagine Ria Llewellyn coming to Juilliard?*

\* \* \*

The Sherry-Netherland was the grande dame of New York hotels . . . expensive, tasteful, and with better security than the White House. It kept secrets better than the White House did, too, even with the Joint Chiefs thrown in. If you wanted to vanish in style in Manhattan, you booked rooms at the Sherry-Netherland.

LlewellynCo kept a permanent suite here to pamper its out-of-town execs and to provide a perk for visiting guests. It had probably been occupied when Jonathan booked her flight. It wasn't now.

Ria didn't care. She'd had a long day with a killer ending.

Damn the boy!she thought furiously, and then, with grudging honesty:No. That isn't right. He's no boy. He's a man, now—and how does that make you feel, Ria-girl?

She didn't know. That was the worst. Not the loss of command of her emotions, but the turbulent swirl that didn't even let her know clearly what they were.

She walked into the bathroom, shedding pieces of her ice-blue satin dinner suit as she went. She kicked off her Ferragamo pumps and tossed her jewelled Judith Leiber handbag onto a chair, standing before the bathroom mirror wearing only a silk slip and enough pale-gold South Sea Island pearls to finance a startup company on the Internet. The bathtub beckoned invitingly—water hot enough to scald away her sins, and bath salts from a little shop down on Chambers Street that blended them to her personal specifications. She turned the taps on full, then, too keyed up to simply stand there, walked back out to

her bedroom to pace.

The papers from this morning's meeting were still strewn across the bed, as if she'd have the discipline to look at them any time soon. She felt a faint pang of guilt, knowing that she'd dealt with the New York people a bit high-handedly. She'd pay for that later—if there was one thing years of corporate infighting had taught her, it was that while friends came and went, enemies accumulated. She was sure she'd made more than a few enemies today.

But she hadn't been able to give the meeting her full attention, because more than half her concentration had been on the contents of that folder Jonathan had given her, and on the lunch appointment she'd made to interview the private investigator that she'd hired as soon as she'd started reading the report. She'd taken the woman to Le Cirque to overawe her, but the woman hadn't been overawed, and Ria had liked that about her at once.

Claire MacLaren was an uncompromising woman in her fifties, prosaic as bread. She made no effort to hide either her age or the fact that her figure had long since lost, if it had ever possessed it, the whippet slenderness of youth. She resembled the Miss Marple sort of detective, grey-haired and kindly, her strong Scots bones and pale blue eyes showing her heritage, even without the faint flavor of the Hebrides still in her voice, and was, very simply, the very best at what she did.

"I'm pleased to have the opportunity to speak with you personally on this matter, Ms. Llewellyn," she'd said, after they were both seated and the waiter had taken their drink orders. Ria had ordered white wine. Claire had unabashedly ordered Scotch.

All around them the hubbub of Le Cirque's lunchtime clientele eddied and flowed, providing perfect privacy for their conversation. Mechanical eavesdroppers would be foiled by the background noise, and magical ones would be baffled by the sheer numbers of minds all thinking at once. Even Ria, whose gift was very small, had some trouble shutting them all out. But even with her shields in place, Ria could easily sense the unease radiating from the woman seated opposite her at the table.

"I find it's always best to do this sort of thing personally," Ria said. "There are always some things that don't make it into a report. Things too . . . tenuous? to commit to paper."

"Oh, I wrote it all down," Claire assured her strongly. "Everything I could find. And that wasn't enough—considering. There's the matter of the money, for one thing."

"Money?" Ria said, momentarily at a loss. She knew Jonathan had already paid Claire MacLaren's exorbitant fee in full.

"Money doesn't just appear out of nowhere," Claire said. "And that young man has quite a lot of it. Where'd it come from, is what I'd dearly love to know."

"Oh, that," Ria answered.

She kept a show of interest on her face, but in fact, the source of Eric's money didn't concern her very much at all. A full elven mage could ken and replicate anything—rubies, diamonds, Krugerrands, bearer bonds. She couldn't work that magic, and neither could Eric, but all that meant was that someone Underhill had set Eric Banyon up with a serious stake and the means to finish his studies Here Above.

*Why?*

That was the question that had occupied her throughout the meal, as she'd fenced with Claire and finally thrown a small glamour over her to quiet Claire's worries that Eric Banyon was being financed by drug lords, industrial espionage, or worse. It had nagged at her through the round of afternoon meetings with various LlewelCo East department heads. She'd been supposed to have dinner with one of them, but had cancelled at the last minute. That was good luck of a sort. If she hadn't, she wouldn't have given in to the impulse to drive past Juilliard and seen the notices of a student concert to be held that evening. She wouldn't have looked at the list of the soloists and seen Eric's name. She wouldn't have gone inside—gaining a seat by a minor enchantment—and seen Eric soloing up on the stage, performing with a surety, a grace, and an art that he had never had before.

The bathtub was full, and she walked back into the bathroom, shedding the last of her clothes, and turning off the taps. She picked up the bottle of bath salts and shook in a generous helping, watching the crystals dissolve and stain the water a rich living green.

She sank into the water, wincing at the temperature. But the heat did its work, leaching away the nervous energy that filled her, calming her.

*Eric is back, and he has Underhill backing. And why is he back? Because he's finished with everything he needed to learn Underhill—that much was clear from tonight. You saw that performance. The old Eric couldn't manage to play "Baa Baa Black Sheep" without some magic leaking. This Eric has as much control and discipline as any Elven Bard I've ever seen.*

She closed her eyes, trying to surrender to the spell of the water. In a lot of ways, an Eric in control of his magic was the scariest thing she'd encountered since she'd reentered the world after her coma.

*First of all, who taught him? And most of all, who sent him back?*

She knew that most of the Seleighe Sidhe didn't blame her for Perenor's attempt to grab the Nexus back in Los Angeles. She'd changed sides at the last minute, at great cost to herself, and that counted for a lot with their kind.

But what if Eric's teacher were one of the few who did bear a grudge against her—either because of her past actions or because of her halfblood ancestry? What if Eric had come into the world as a kind of secret agent, intending to lure her out?

What if, for that matter, Eric held a grudge of his own? She'd tried to kill his friends, after all. Most people tended to take that personally.

She sighed, sinking deeper into the water and inhaling the fragrant steam. She had no idea what Eric was feeling right now, and that disturbed her more than she could express. She hadn't been able to read anything in his face but shock when he spotted her, and after that . . .

She'd panicked, plain and simple. Proof (as if she'd wanted any) that her feelings for the man were too strong to lightly dismiss. There was unfinished business there, and like it or not, one way or another, it was going to be finished. *Before the turn of the year*, she thought, with an undependable flash of Foresight, and shivered.

The bathwater had grown cold while she'd sat musing, and now Ria got to her feet, swirling her long ash-blond hair up into a towel and wrapping herself in another of the voluminous Turkish towels the hotel provided.

It was just too bad the problem wasn't on Eric's side, she thought, rubbing herself dry until her fair skin was pink and tingled. If Eric hated her, it wouldn't matter. Ria had been hated by experts. It made little difference in her life.

The trouble was the fact that *shewantedhim*. Still. Again. Not as a pet, as she had before, a graceful subservient boy who could amuse her while she used his magic for her own ends. No, if it were that, if her own desires were that simple, it would be an inconvenience, but not a problem.

The problem—the real problem, the insurmountable one—was that seeing him tonight on that stage, assured and totally in control, Ria had realized that Eric Banyon would never again be anybody's pet. Not a boy, not a toy. He was a man now, with a man's will and determination. Her equal, and more.

And everything in Ria's half-Blood Perenor-nurtured soul rebelled against the thought of accepting anyone on equal terms. Conciliation was weakness. Cooperation was only a trap. Only the strongest had any right to survive, and Ria knew that if she matched her power and her tricks against the Eric she had seen tonight, she might very well lose the battle.

And the worst was, she had no heart for such a fight. Unless he truly was here hunting her, he was no threat to her, and unlike Perenor, Ria had never had any taste for empty cruelty. She was ruthless. That was her nature. But viciousness had never been a part of her spirit, and if it had, that part of her was purged long since. So she had no quarrel with Eric Banyon, True Bard of Underhill, and if he were in truth sent here as her foe, mercy would be impossible. For either of them.

I can't be his pet. He won't be mine. Where does that leave us?

*Where does that leave ME?*

## **FIVE: GOBLIN FRUIT**

It was cold out here under the highway tonight, but Daniel Carradine tried to ignore it. There was money to be made, and the need to make it. Bobby wanted his money, and Daniel wanted his White Lady, the demanding mistress for whom Daniel had given up everything else.

Not that there'd been all that much. When home was a decaying Pennsylvania steel town and a father who couldn't accept that times had changed, even the underside of the West Side Highway on a freezing December night was better.

The wind came whistling in off the Hudson, cold as memories. If he'd been able to fix before he came out, Daniel wouldn't have minded the cold, he knew, but Bobby didn't sell on credit. *Still*, Daniel told himself hopefully, *it might be a good night*. He was seventeen, and looked younger, and that was good. It was what the marks liked, the guys who came cruising down here with their Mercedes and their Jags, looking for what Daniel and the others were selling. Goblin fruit, like in the Rossetti poem, where no matter how much you ate, you were always hungry for more.

A friend of his—Tony—went by, and he smiled and waved. Bobby had come across for Tony before he left the flop tonight—it was obvious in the way Tony strutted, as if he were living in a warm world where the river wind didn't blow—and for a moment Daniel felt a pang of envy that was shocking in its violence. He quashed the emotion firmly. There was no point. Nothing came free. That was the first lesson growing up in Cartersville had taught him. There was a price for everything, even freedom. And if the only freedom he could buy with the only thing he owned—his body—was the freedom of a derelict flop down in the Bowery that he shared with half a dozen other rentboys, then he'd take it.

A car cruised by—slowly, on the prowl—and Daniel smiled hopefully, arching his back and shaking his head so that a lock of bleached-blond hair fell down over his eyes. But the car moved on, and Daniel hunched back into himself again, seeking what comfort he could.

He wanted to get this over with and go find Bobby. He really did.

\* \* \*

From a few feet away, beneath the body of a burnt-out and abandoned car, Urla watched its victim. The redcap had been about to rush out, but the cruising car had stopped it. The Great Lord had said there must be no witnesses, and Aerune's command sat upon Urla like *ageas*.

He had also said that Urla must take no one who would be missed, and Urla knew that nobody would miss this one. Still young and strong, and filled with such self-hatred and despair that the redcap was nearly drunk with it, all laced through with a yearning, a fiery craving for something that was not food or drink or sex. Urla dismissed its own curiosity. It did not matter what the boy hungered for, for he did not hunger as much as Urla did for the bright warmth of the untasted years, the unspent years the boy would have had if Urla had not come hunting here tonight.

Another car passed, then two more, and each time the boy was assessed and refused. His fear was stronger now, and Urla licked its lips in anticipation. Soon, soon. . . .

At last the boy stumbled away from the pillar by which he stood and began shuffling up the street, his steps uncoordinated. He shivered, wrapping his thin jacket tighter around his starved body as if the thin cotton had the power to grant him the warmth he lacked. In a few moments more he would pass directly before Urla's hiding place.

But the redcap's anticipated feast was not to be. Another great black chariot turned down the street, its night lamps pinning the boy in their beams. Urla saw its prey stop, hopeful once more, as the car drew level with him, and the door opened. The boy stepped forward, and a mortal—tall, tall, with the stink of Cold Iron about him—rose up out of the car and grabbed Urla's prey, dragging him into the car as he began, too late, to struggle and cry.

The door shut. The chariot moved away, more quickly now, belching foul gasses that made Urla cough.

*No! They will not have him! He is mine!*

Snarling its disappointment, the redcap wrapped itself in shadows and began to trot after the black chariot that had taken its prey.

\* \* \*



"I said no alkies, goddammit! Which word don't you goons understand?"

The tall dark man with the sleepy eyes blinked at her. Jeanette wished she could kick him, but she didn't dare, quite. She took a deep breath and tried again, marshalling her hard-won and inadequate social skills.

"Look, Elkanah." Was the name on the tag first, last, or even his? Not her problem. "Most of these people are fine. But you see that one in the corner?"

Jeanette gestured toward the monitor in the Security Room. It showed the space they called Large Primate Containment—a euphemism for the Black Labs and holding cells set up for human experimentation. Just now it was dressed to look like a police holding cell—an environment she was sure all of her guests were more than familiar with. Junkies, rentboys, and hookers, the lot of them, and that was fine with her.

Except for the man in the corner, the one in the tattered vomit-stained trenchcoat, his face long-unshaven and caved in upon missing teeth and malnutrition. The others gave him a wide berth, and she could imagine why. He probably stank to high heaven.

"That guy is a juicehead. I can't use him. His liver's already shot to hell—drugs process through the liver, *Elkanah*, did you know that? Alcohol's *legal*—by the time a juicehead gets to the street he's already a walking corpse; all his insides pickled and shot to hell. I told you guys when you went out: no alkies, no crazy street people. Junkies and whores, that's what I told you to get."

The man in the uniform of Threshold Special Security blinked down at her, as impassive as a cigar-store Indian, and for a moment Jeanette didn't think he'd heard her. Didn't any of Robert's hardboys speak English, for God's sweet sake?

"So what do you want me to do with him, Ms. Campbell?" Elkanah finally said. His voice was slow and deep and thoughtful, and despite her fury, Jeanette did not for one moment make the mistake of thinking he was stupid. Stupid people did not rise to key positions in Threshold's Black Ops.

She took a deep breath.

"I don't care what you do with him. Throw him in the East River for all I care. But get rid of him before lights out, because if he's still there tomorrow when my Judas Goat goes in to offer these losers a trip out of this world, I am going to be seriously pissed. And when I'm pissed, Robert Lintel is pissed. Are we communicating?"

"Yes, Ms. Campbell. I'm sorry about the confusion."

He wasn't sorry and there'd been no confusion. Jeanette knew that perfectly well. But she'd won, and that was all that mattered.

"Okay," she said. "I'll be in my office if anyone needs me."

She turned away and walked quickly out of Security before this Elkanah person could guess how scared she was. When she'd been running with the Sinner Saints, she could have eaten corporation rent-muscle like Elkanah for breakfast, but it had been years since she'd had to face off anything but chimps and wimp lab technicians, and, unlike riding a Harley, some skills didn't stay with you forever.

Security and personnel were Robert's problem. They always had been. She supplied the science. He supplied the money and muscle. That was the deal. So why did she have to do everything around Threshold herself?

She reached the safety of her own private lab and closed the airlock behind her gratefully, irritation and a feeling of narrow escape both fading as she surveyed her private kingdom. Nobody would bother her in here. Nobody would dare.

The room had been cleansed of all traces of the chimps' occupation, though they were still looking for the one that had vanished. The two that had died instantly had been autopsied, and she'd found about what she'd expected: massive stroke and brain hemorrhage, the inevitable side effect of chemical Russian roulette.

The other two—the ones that had manifested the bizarre powers—had also died, but several hours later and of something that looked surprisingly like starvation, though how the old female could have died of starvation with all she'd eaten was an interesting question. She was the one who'd survived the longest, and Jeanette was looking forward to seeing those autopsy results, but right now both bodies were in freezers awaiting their turn. Ramchandra had better work fast, because in a day or so those chimps were going to have a lot of company.

Jeanette fully expected that the people Robert had gotten for her off the New York streets would die of the drug the same way the chimps had. That was what lab trials were for—to find out what killed them and to try to refine the next batch even more. She'd obviously found the right button to push, the one she'd been looking for ever since she was a teenager.

*Now all I have to do is keep their heads from exploding.* A few more hours alone would clean her test subjects out of whatever they'd been using, then another of Robert's goons would be thrown in with them, the packets of T-6/157 in his pockets looking like any other sample of party dust. He'd say he needed to get rid of it before the police searched him, and if Jeanette knew junkies, they wouldn't ask too many questions when there was free dust on offer. They'd suck the stuff right down, and then . . .

Then she'd finally start getting some answers.

\* \* \*

*Hell couldn't be worse than this,* Daniel thought. And to think, he'd thought his luck had changed when that limo had pulled up.

He could still feel the shock of anger, almost of betrayal, when the big man had seized him and dragged him into the limo. He and his buddy had tried to make it look like they were vice cops ringing him in on a solicitation bust, but Daniel had been through that mill more than a few times since he'd gotten to New York, and he'd never seen a vice cop that rode around in the back of a fancy car—or that put a hood over your head so you couldn't see where you were when they dragged you out of it.

That was weird, and for a while he'd tried to console himself with the fantasy that they were just two kinks looking for a wiggly party, but he couldn't make himself believe it. He'd never seen a co-ed holding tank, for one thing, and no matter how much this place might look like the Tombs, it just didn't smell right. And it was way too quiet. In prison there was always somebody screaming, somebody crying, somebody jonesing for a fix that wasn't going to come any time soon.

That would be him, in a couple of hours. He needed his White Lady, his beautiful lady who made the

world all soft and sweet. He didn't know about the other eight people stuck in here with him, and he didn't care. Life on the street was rough enough without caring about other people, and Daniel had jettisoned his emotional baggage early.

They fed him a couple of times, and once the lights went down low and he'd slept a little, but by the second day he was too sick to care about his breakfast. A lot of the others were just as bad off, and when one of them started screaming and wouldn't stop, two guys in black almost-a-cop uniforms had come in and dragged her away pretty quickly. The rest of them sat, huddled in silent misery, waiting for the torture to end.

*No lawyers, no bondsmen, no arraignment. This isn't any bullpen I've ever been in. But I ain't gonna be the one to say it. They're probably watching everything. Whoever they are.*

The word must have gone out to make up the numbers after the woman disappeared, because a little while after dinner—he'd forced himself to eat, but thrown up again almost instantly—they brought in someone new.

He was dressed better than they were, but still street. Daniel's internal radar prickled instantly. He was pretty sure he knew what this guy was, and he was only hoping that the rest of his guess was right as well. The guy was holding. He could smell it. Nobody had searched Daniel when they brought him in. Why should they search any of the others?

He waited until the lights went out, when everyone was curled up in their bunks. There were twelve bunks—four sets of three tiers each—for nine people, which meant that nearly everyone could have his pick of places to sleep. The New Guy took what was left—a bottom bunk, of course, since anyone with brains wanted a top one.

Daniel made sure he had the top bunk on the New Guy's tier. It wasn't his to begin with, but he got to it first and stared down the woman who'd been sleeping there. She just shook her head bitterly and went to find another bed.

"Hey," Daniel called softly. "Hey, New Guy?"

"That's me." The voice came out of the darkness, pleased and mellow and unafraid. "You got a name, pilgrim?"

"Danny-boy." It was what Daniel answered to on the street, as if keeping the name he had been called at home a secret could somehow lend him armor against the cruelty of the streets.

"Well, Danny-boy, you can call me Keith."

"Hey, Keith." Daniel's voice was ragged with relief. He knew the moves of this dance, and knew he'd been right. The man was holding, and Daniel meant to cut himself a slice of that pie.

"Now Danny-boy, I got me a problem that maybe you could help me with. I was checking you out earlier, when I came in. You look like an intelligent kind of a guy."

"Yeah, that's me." He wasn't entirely successful at keeping the bitterness out of his voice. If he'd been really smart, would he have ended up here?

"Well, I've got this inventory. And I kind of need to hold a fire sale, as it were."

Daniel dropped down out of the top bunk, quick as a cat, and squatted beside the bottom bunk. Keith was resting on one elbow—looking toward him, though it was hard to see that in the darkness. A gold ring in the shape of a phoenix glinted in one ear, the brightest thing Daniel could see.

He's holding. And he needs to get rid of the stuff before the cops figure that out. Daniel held out his hand.

Keith dropped the small white packet into it. "There's plenty for everyone," he said in his mellow voice, as the other inhabitants of the holding tank began converging on him with a slow tidal movement.

Daniel backed away, defending his prize. In one pocket, along with other odds and ends, was a chopped off bit of soda straw. He tore open the small glassine packet—carefully, oh so carefully—and dipped the straw end into the white powder. It wasn't as good as spiking a vein, but it would do, oh, yes. He snorted hard, pulling the powder up into his sinuses, and from there, straight to the bloodstream. He didn't know what Keith had offered him—coke, horse, one of the new supposed-to-be-legal concoctions—and right now he was too far gone in need to care. Just a little something to quiet the dragon trying to gnaw its way out of his bones.

He felt it come on almost instantly: a velvet-wrapped pile driver that made his heart race, even while it wrapped him in soft clouds of not-caring. He blinked, forced himself to look up, and saw Keith handing out packets to everyone.

"Hey," Daniel croaked. "Save me some for later." The white tide was rising, carrying him off to a place where nothing hurt and no one was cruel.

"Don't worry, Danny-boy." He heard Keith's slow rich voice as from a great distance. "This stuff, nobody ever needs two."

And the heaven and hell of it was, Daniel heard him. Heard him and didn't care.

\* \* \*

Five minutes after the last of the meat had gone on the nod, Keith stood up and stretched. The floor of the cell was covered with unconscious junkies. He shivered, looking down at them. Whatever this stuff was, he was sure as hell glad he hadn't sniffed any of it.

He looked up at the main security camera in the ceiling.

"Hey. What are you guys waiting for? An engraved invitation?" he demanded.

There was no response, but a few minutes later the lights came up in the corridor outside, and technicians in white lab coats wheeling gurneys appeared. The one in the lead opened the cell door, and Keith stepped outside hastily, as if whatever had sent the eight people in the cell off to dreamland might be catching.

"Everything go all right?" Beirkoff asked.

"Fine as frog hair. What the hell was that stuff, anyway?"

Beirkoff smiled, and the lights turned the lenses of his tinted glasses silver. "Hey, you know the drill. I could tell you, but then I'd have to kill you."

Keith growled wordlessly under his breath, and stalked off to report.

\* \* \*

Jeanette had slaved the security cameras to her desktop PC. She could have been down in the security room, where all eight holding cells were being monitored on visual and audio as well as by a whole spectrum of other devices, but she didn't want to share this moment with some wage slave of a technician. She could see all she needed to from here, anyway. By tapping a few buttons, she could watch as her unconscious subjects were transported to separate holding cells, implanted with transceivers that would monitor their heart and brainwaves. As soon as the pickups were live, she killed the picture and brought up the telemetry. Slow rolling delta waves billowed across her screen like the waves of an ancient ocean.

What are you feeling? she asked the silent screen. Where are you?

But the answers, she knew, would have to wait. Until the awakening.

Beneath the edge of the desk, her hands tightened into fists. *Give it to me*, she demanded silently. *Give me something I can use!*

\* \* \*

Outside the building, wrapped in a darkness of its own weaving, Urla watched the metal door through which the car had gone. Day had come and gone while the redcap waited. When the sun rode high in the sky, Urla retreated to the friendly darkness of the city's sewers, killing rats to amuse itself while it waited. Their tiny deaths were only an appetizer, though, one that left the redcap restless and unsatisfied. Urla hungered for its stolen prey, taken by the men in the black night-wagon, the one that had burned with such painful inner fire.

There were others like that one in the grimy yellow building, and Urla comforted itself with fantasies of a gluttonous feeding, one that might slake even the redcap's eternal hunger, for there were many within the yellow building filled with terror and such a burning despair that it made Urla's mouth water. When night came again it took up its watching post once more, though by now it had lost all hope that the prey it had tracked here would emerge once more.

Its tiny mind had been occupied for several hours with the question of whether it would be better to abandon its waiting and go once more in search of the Bard its dark master had commanded it to find, but instinct told it that this place contained many secrets, and secrets were always good to know.

The moon rose high and began to set. And then, just before the sky began to lighten and Urla must once more choose whether to retreat into the sewers again or to admit its failure, something happened. The prey-creatures' lives burned in Urla's consciousness like bright candles, but suddenly several of them simply . . . went out.

Urla crawled forth from its concealment beneath a parked car, leathery brow wrinkling in puzzlement. They had been there a moment before, and now they were not there. It did not sense the tang of death, and sleep alone could not render prey invisible to a redcap's hunger. Urla crept closer to the strange building, wondering.

The riptide of fury that followed the strange quenching was enough to send the redcap sprawling stunned

in the middle of the street, visible to any who might look. After the first shock, Urla dragged itself to concealment again, shaking its head as if to ward off the effects of a mighty blow. The rage still keened through its senses—an unhinged fury worthy of a mighty Unseleighe lord, black and all-devouring.

It had to know more.

Forcing itself forward against the tempest of madness, Urla began searching for ways to enter the building.

\* \* \*

She'd ordered someone to go out for pizza—one good thing about New York, you could get takeout at any hour—and most of a deluxe pie now sat on the corner of Jeanette's desk, cold and forgotten. Styrofoam cups, half full of cold coffee, studded every available surface within reach. Across the screen the readouts scrolled, changing only slightly from moment to moment.

*The first effects of the drug should be wearing off now*, Jeanette thought. It had been four hours, and her psychoactive cocktail was layered, like a fine perfume, to deliver its effects in calculated stages. So at least some of those loser-freaks should be coming around by now. Jeanette ground her teeth in impatience. They couldn't all just die on her!

Suddenly two of the readouts . . . vanished. Jeanette stared at the screen, galvanized to alertness by the impossibility of it. A moment later she heard the faint hooting of the situation alarm sounding through the building. She pushed herself to her feet and ran.

\* \* \*

"What is it?" she shouted, flinging open the Monitor Room door. The technician turned toward her, white-faced and scared. Galliard, her nametag said.

"I was watching them every moment," the tech babbled. "Every moment! They didn't go anywhere, they couldn't have, I locked them in myself—"

The denials made no sense until Jeanette looked at the screens. Eight were live. Six showed sleeping subjects, lying on the floors of their padded cells.

Two cells were empty—as in, nobody home.

*Well, Galliard, you're going to wish you'd chosen another career when I get done with you.*

"Where the hell are they?" Jeanette asked in dangerously reasonable tones. She took a step toward the cringing girl.

A scream from the monitors stopped her. The subjects were awake, going from a comatose sleep to full consciousness in instants. She watched, spellbound, as first one, then another, of her test cases began throwing himself about his cell, violently seeking escape, battering and tearing at the padded walls until streaks and flowers of blood appeared.

After a timeless moment, Jeanette realized that the technician was staring at her, waiting for her to give orders. Jeanette reached out and turned the master audio control on the console to "Off." It didn't totally shut out the screams, audible even through the soundproofing, but it did make it easier to think as she

mulled over what to do next.

Sedate them? No, with the dose in their systems, that would be a quick ticket to the boneyard, and even if they were doomed, she didn't want to kill them so quickly. Restrain them? Gazing down at the gyrating madmen, Jeanette wasn't sure there was enough money in the world to pay anyone to enter one of those cells. One of the madmen—the display at the bottom said his name was Nelson—cheated of any other outlet for his rage, had turned his fury on himself. He'd gouged out both his eyes and clawed his skin to bleeding ribbons, and was still tearing at himself, howling in a deep voice as he drooled blood from a mouth from which he'd torn his own tongue.

Galliard was still staring at her, eyes wide and scared.

"Go find Mr. Lintel. Tell him two of the subjects have escaped. Tell him to find them," Jeanette ordered. That should keep both Robert and this bimchette busy!

Galliard scuttled out. Jeanette settled down in the vacated chair to watch the show.

\* \* \*

Urla was inside the building now, crawling through the ventilation system unseen, making slow progress against the invisible headwind of madness that buffeted it. The presence of Cold Iron was a palpable weight against its bones, but unlike others of the Seleighe kin, the redcap was not affected by its poison. It winced as the first mind was joined by one, two, three others, until the four of them raged in a torment that was almost Power—the rage of a demon lord. What was it the mortals did here to cause such anguish? Urla desperately wished to learn their secret, for it would make the redcap's kind a rich banquet. Some there were among the Unseleighe Court who fed on emotion as Urla fed on lives, and did it own the secret of such cosmic despair, it could trade it to them to its advantage.

But then something happened that thrust all thought of self-interest from the redcap's mind. For the last of the mortals prisoned here awoke, and the uprush of true Power nearly blinded his Sidhe senses. Here was the power of Bard or Elven mage trapped in mortal flesh—a wellspring of such Power as the dark lord Aerune had sent him to find. It was here, somehow here where it had not been a moment before, in mortals who had not possessed it before this instant.

\* \* \*

Daniel Carradine awoke with a sudden start, shivering and sweating, his strongest emotion a cheated anger that whatever it was that Keith had supplied, it hadn't taken the edge off his need. The long-unslaked craving, stronger than he had ever known it, filled him now like a wild thing desperate to be free.

His Lady . . . his beautiful White Lady . . . . Somehow Daniel could sense her somewhere near, somehow certain that this was Truth, and not some withdrawal-fuelled hallucination. His hunger was strong enough to tear down walls, to see into all the hidden places of the world as if they were made of glass. He knew she was here, knew that all he had to do was reach out for her, and he could have her.

Daniel reached. The first attempt brought pain, enough almost to blot out the fire in his bones, but it also carried a teasing promise of certainty. If he could only try a little harder . . .

He reached out again, whimpering as he did it, his whole body shaking and drenched in a greasy sweat. The pain flared again, blinding him, but behind it he felt a strange cool flexing of senses he'd never known

before, and abruptly there was a hard roundness in his hand—the object of his desire, summoned to him through all the walls and barriers that separated them. In his surprise, he dropped it, and then crawled frantically across the padded floor after it until he'd grabbed it in both hands.

He looked down at the stoppered jar half filled with glistening white powder. He didn't need to open it to know what it was. His Lady. The White Lady. Pure, pharmaceutical-grade heroin.

He could have taken her that way, opened the bottle and snorted its contents or spilled it across his tongue, but now Daniel knew he didn't need to. The rest of what he needed to make everything perfect was out there. All he had to do was imagine it, and its location appeared in his mind. Then all he had to do was . . . reach. This time, when his hand was filled, he clutched the bottle tightly, chuckling with success. Here—and here—and here. *And wilderness is paradise enow*,<sup>3</sup> he quoted out of some half-full store of memory.

He broke the seal on the pint of distilled water, and slopped a little into the Pyrex beaker. The powder dissolved into the water easily, turning it a milky moonstone color. The rest of what he needed was here, summoned from the same place as the water and the beaker. He syringed the mixture up with the ease of long practice.

*Now everything will be all right*, he thought, tapping his arm to find a vein.

And it was, for those few moments before the massive overdose of uncut heroin—far more, far purer than any fix he'd ever known—carried Daniel down into the darkness and the safest place of all.

\* \* \*

Ellie Borden woke suddenly out of a long confused dream. Her whole life the last few months had been a dream—a bad one—as she lost first her job, then her health insurance, then her apartment, ending up on the street doing whatever she could just to survive one more day.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. The automatic protest no longer held either fury or grief, only a weary resignation. She'd paid her taxes, obeyed the law, been kind. She was supposed to be safe, protected by Society from cradle to grave. But that hadn't happened. All the social services' safety net that was supposed to be there to catch people like her had melted away the moment she needed it. The programs that were supposed to help had waiting lists months long, and Ellie didn't have months. She'd discovered that the halfway houses were not for people like her, that the only place that would take her in on that terrible day she'd gone home to find everything she owned piled on the curb in front of her former apartment was the street.

She'd quickly learned there were ways to take the edge off the pain, to gain the minimal money that would buy her a room in a flophouse she'd never have dared enter when she'd had a life, to buy her the things that would let her live with the sickness that was eating her life away, but the things she'd had to do to get them were best forgotten.

When she'd been arrested, it had almost been a relief, because you got medical care in prison, didn't you? Only that had turned out to be another grim joke like the rest of her so-called life, because all they'd done was dump her in a cell with a bunch of other street people and forget about her. She'd taken the packet from the dealer the way a starving man would take food, not caring what it was, half-hoping it would kill her if it would only end the pain.

But it hadn't.



She awoke in a strange room, not the holding cell, all by herself. The pain was gone. Gone! She felt better than she had in almost two years. The evil shadow that lived in her bones had vanished forever, she knew it. She felt reborn.

*What have they done?* she thought in slow-growing wonder. *What did they do to me?* She stared at her hands, marveled at the soft brown skin. No longer cracked, scarred, covered with sores. New again, reborn.

Just as she had been reborn.

Thank You, God, Ellie thought silently. I won't forget this. I won't throw it away.

\* \* \*

One was dead, killed by his overreaching appetite, but the other remained, still connected somehow to the magic so very like that of Underhill. In the air ducts, Urla gnashed its teeth, hating the choice it must make, the choice of gluttony deferred.

This was not the answer that its dark master sought, the news of a human Bard who could form the Nexus Aerune sought to build, but it was news worth the bringing, regardless. The redcap abandoned its own hunt and turned back the way it had come, hurrying back to the door in the air that led into Underhill and the road that led to the Dark Court.

\* \* \*

Jeanette glanced at the clock on the wall of her office. The digital readout said 11:36 in glaring red numbers—a 24-hour readout, so it was a little before noon of some damn day or other. She rubbed her eyes. She hadn't slept all night—she hadn't left the lab for two days—and the strain was beginning to tell on her.

It had been a busy morning, full of new discoveries. And mistakes, but those happened in any research program.

The first mistake she'd made had been in assuming that all six of the surviving test subjects would react the same way. Obviously they hadn't. The four that had gone psychotic had fixed everybody's attention on them until it was too late . . . sort of. And by the time they'd gone catatonic, what was going to happen, had happened.

For the thousandth time, she replayed the tape of Cell One on her computer screen. That had been a young white male, early 20s. Keith said he'd given his name as Danny-boy. She watched as Danny-boy awoke, agitated but obviously not as crazy as the berserkers. She watched him reach out and pluck things out of the air—a jar of white powder, a bottle of water, a beaker, a syringe. He'd teleported them all from her lab—she'd been able to tell by the inventory number engraved on the beaker, and the bar codes on the stock—but how had he gotten them through a locked door and a solid wall? And how had he known they were in her lab in the first place?

*If we'd been watching, could we have stopped you?* she wondered. She watched as he fixed, hands shaking with his addiction, and watched as he slumped a moment later, dead in a heartbeat from an overdose of pure heroin.

*Stupid boy. Don't you know street drugs are stepped on six or seven times—if you're lucky—before they get to you? This was the pure stuff. You should have cut back the dose. You should have WAITED, you blockhead.*

She sighed, and rubbed her tired eyes. Now, dammit, she had no way of knowing if her mix would have killed him without the heroin, and an autopsy probably wouldn't be able to sort it out either.

"Campbell?"

She looked up from the screen with an effort as Robert came into the office. If he'd spent as many sleepless hours as she had, it didn't show. He had an ulcer, too—she'd hacked into his personal files once out of idle curiosity—and that didn't show either. Robert Lintel was the original Teflon boy. His three-piece grey suit was immaculate, and he was wearing the particular smug expression that Jeanette liked least. But Robert always had only seen the possibilities in her work, the ultimate goal, and not the long process that led there.

"What?" she said sullenly, knowing that letting him see her mood was weakness, and weakness had always been the thing she defended herself hardest against showing.

"Hey, Campbell. *Smile.* We're almost there, you know. It worked!"

"Two missing—have you found them yet?—four crazy, and of the two qualified successes, one dead. Some success," she grumbled.

"We're looking for the two that vanished, but frankly, I think they went to the same place the chimp did. I had Elkanah dump the other four out on the street. They should be dead by now, or at Bellevue. Either way, not our problem." He walked into the room and stood over her desk, beaming down at her paternally.

"So that leaves—what's her name?—Borden? And her readings have gone back to normal. Whatever she had, it's gone," Jeanette said.

"But while she had it, it was enough to get her clean. I had Dr. Ramchandra give her a quick once-over. According to his interview with her, she'd been diagnosed with terminal cancer. But she doesn't have it now. In fact, she's in perfect health. What do you think of that?"

"I think you aren't paying me to find a cure for cancer," Jeanette answered, but Robert's smug smile only grew wider.

"That's right. But actually, I don't think you need to work on refining your formula any more. We know it works on ten percent of the population. We just have to find the ten percent it works on." He sat down in the chair opposite her desk, the big comfy leather one that only Robert ever sat in.

He was talking about mass trials.

"So where are you going to get enough people to put together a profile for that? Carradine and Borden both manifested Talent, but other than that, they have nothing in common. He was white. She's black. He was a teenager. She's in her thirties. They were both users, but we don't even know they were using the same things."

"Campbell, Campbell, Campbell. When are you ever going to learn to trust me? I have this all figured

out." He leaned forward, and she caught a whiff of soap and expensive cologne.

"I want you to go into production with this. Whip me up a few kilos of Batch 157 and portion it out into single-dose packets—we'll call it something like T-Stroke. I'll put it out on the street—we'll sell it of course, but we'll undercut everything else—crank, Mexican brown, snow, the whole menu. They'll buy it, and you'll have your test pool—cheap, easy, and nothing for us to clean up after. We'll rope in the ones that survive, run them through the mill, and find the common thread. Once we have that profile, we can use it to find volunteer subjects."

Jeanette had always been serenely convinced that nothing could shock her, that she didn't care about all those faceless drones she shared the world with. But the butcher's bill Robert was proposing so guilelessly startled even her.

One out of the eight in the first group had survived. Statistically, that meant the odds were that if eighty people received T-6/157, seventy would die. And if you took those numbers out to the thousands of doses that Robert was recommending they spread across the streets of New York . . .

"There's going to be dead junkies stacked like cordwood on every street corner," Jeanette said slowly, trying to decide how that made her feel. She knew she ought to like the idea, but instead she felt curiously numb inside. How confident must Robert be, how eager for his results, to suggest a plan that held so much possibility of . . . unforeseen consequences.

But Robert didn't even seem to notice her lack of enthusiasm. He bored in, eyes glittering like a high-pressure salesman closing a big deal.

"And your point is? C'mon, Campbell, we're looking for results here, not scientific validation. If we generate the Survivor Profile, nobody's going to care how we got it."

"You're right," she said, knowing it was true. Who cared how a lot of junkies died, anyway, so long as the deaths couldn't be traced back to Threshold? She got to her feet, making Robert stand also. "Look, I've got to crash. Beirkoff knows the stuff to order to make up about ten keys of T-Stroke. I'll come back tonight and put it together."

"We could take care of that," Robert said, too casually. "The formula's in your lab notebook, isn't it?"

Jeanette smiled at him, the street predator that had been hidden beneath a veneer of years and good living suddenly stark and plain in her eyes. It wasn't that she didn't trust Robert—she didn't, that had never been an issue. But T-Stroke was an entirely bigger deal than the other compounds she'd handed over. She intended to keep control of it until she was satisfied.

Of what, she wasn't sure.

*You're hoping you'll fit the Survivor Profile he'll come up with, don't you? The Survivors—Robert's new race of psionic hitmen. What're you going to do if you do, Campbell? What are you going to do if you don't?*

"Aw, c'mon, Robert. You don't want a numb-nuts like Beirkoff to futz this up at the eleventh hour, do you? You don't want to be wondering if he got the formula exactly right and have to do it all again to be sure? Give me a couple of hours. It'll take him that long to get the stuff here anyway. You can call me when it comes in. And meanwhile, you gotta make up your mind what you want to do with the Survivor bitch you've already got."

She didn't wait for him to reply. She grabbed her coat and headed out the door before he'd quite rearranged his face into whatever expression he'd chosen. She knew he'd go looking for the formula. He always did. She knew that.

And she always left one ingredient out of her notes.

*He*knew that.

## **SIX: TO CHAIN THE PHOENIX**

If it was her, so what?

Mechanically, Eric Banyon went through the motions at the après-concert Artists' Reception, standing around an overheated room with a glass of seltzer in his hand along with the other soloists, featured performers, and those who'd paid money to meet them and each other. Politically, it was the most important part of the show—at least if you were aiming for a paying gig in the hothouse incestuous world of classical music. There were many other job openings besides Featured Soloist or Touring Superstar—to name just one example, there were chairs in any number of orchestras, from the Boston Philharmonic to the Hudson Valley Symphony Orchestra, that always needed to be filled with the best, the brightest, and the most underpaid. Music scouts made careers out of tracking the progress of new young talent the same way other talent scouts cruised college athletics. Eric had already been approached about a few spots—Composer in Residence in an artists' retreat in someplace called Glastonbury, New York, various "sure-thing" grants from one program or another, even a booking agent who swore to him that Juilliard had nothing to teach Eric and it was time to look at professional gigs. *As if I haven't heard that song a lot lately, with all of its verses. . . .*

Eric had turned them all down politely. For one thing, none of his reasons for returning to Juilliard were about worldly fame and power—as a Bard, he already had more of both than most people could imagine. For another, he couldn't get Ria out of his mind enough to give any of them serious attention.

He was glad he hadn't been pressured into wearing a tie to the concert tonight. He'd already unbuttoned the neck of his tab-collared shirt—it was that or strangle in the tropical heat of the reception room. He hoped he looked raffishly artistic—it was one of the reasons he'd left his hair long. *Image isn't everything. It's the only thing. Or so they say.*

His flute in its case was slung over his shoulder; Eric didn't delude himself that everybody at Juilliard loved him, and a musician's instrument was an easy target for jealousy. Better to keep it with him than bespell it to keep it from sabotage and risk harming somebody unintentionally.

*Once I never would have worried about that. Give me the power and I would have used it any time it benefited me, and de'il take the hindmost, as my old Irish grandma would have said. I guess this is maturity—taking the responsibility of protecting idiots from themselves.*

*I bet Ria wouldn't think twice about something like that. She'd say it was their own fault for messing with her in the first place.*

He frowned. That had been true once. Was it true now? He gave up trying to ignore the inevitable and devoted some serious thought to the question of the hour. It wasn't impossible for Ria to have been here tonight. She wasn't either dead or in a coma—in fact, the last time he'd talked to Kayla and Elizabeth (though between juggling Underhill and World Above time zones, he wasn't quite sure when that was), they'd said Ria was on her way to making a full recovery.

They also said she'd acquired a conscience and morals, but dammit, what does that MEAN in real-life terms? They said she was still Ria—memories, Gifts, and all—so it's not like she's been Touched by An Angel or something sappy like that. She's still the same Ria I knew, and the Ria I knew was ruthless.

*But not vicious. She didn't care what happened to other people, but she didn't go out of her way to hurt them. Not like Perenor. Not that it mattered a lot if you happened to be the person who got in her way. . . .*

All the while his brain kept turning over that unanswerable question, he smiled and made meaningless conversation with men and women in expensive clothes. Lovely concert, yes he was very pleased with his performance tonight, no he hadn't really made plans for what he'd do after he graduated. Round and round they circled, drawn to Eric by something they probably didn't even understand—the aura of Power that a fully trained Bard wore like an invisible cloak—though the other performers got their fair share of attention as well. It was a little like being in a shark tank—but Eric wasn't afraid of any of these particular sharks.

*There's nothing they can do to me. None of them is pointing a gun at my head or offering to torture any of my friends. They're all just looking for some way to use me. Once upon a time that would have driven me crazy with righteous indignation. Now it just seems kind of sad.*

He circled around behind the buffet. It was pretty well denuded by now—only some cheese and fruit remained—and the ice-sculpture centerpiece was so melted it was now impossible to tell what it had originally been. Eric reached out and placed his hand against it, savoring the coolness. You'd think they could just open the doors and let some December in, but apparently nobody'd thought of that.

"I'm not going to let you ruin your future over some silly girlish tantrum."

The voice was low and furious. Eric glanced up in surprise. Lydia Ashborn was standing backed into a corner by a tall man in a very expensive suit and an even more expensive haircut. Eric recognized Marco Ashborn, Lydia's father.

"Do you want to be a bit player all your life, just some faceless unknown musician without even a separate credit? You should have had a solo tonight, and you know it. Don't you want to record and tour in your own right? Why are you trying to piss it all away? Is this about me? Is that what this is all about, Lydia?"

*Man, does it all have to be about you?* The uprush of anger was automatic, stemming from still-unhealed scars. He'd been in Lydia's position once: a Trophy Child, treated as nothing more than a playing-piece on the parental chessboard. An accessory. *Athing*, not a person. And that was wrong on so many levels.

Eric saw the glitter of tears as Lydia ducked her head and fought to control his anger. Discipline above all things, Dharinel had told him. A Bard's displeasure could wound. A Bard's anger could kill.

"Don't you look away from me, dammit!" he heard Marco hiss. Marco grabbed his daughter's arm roughly, and Eric saw Lydia's face go white with the pain.

*That's enough.*

Eric reached for the *stillness within* that Dharinel had created in him with all those long months of training, and composed his face into a simple harmless expression of hero worship as he walked over to the two of them.

"Hey, excuse me, but aren't you Marco Ashborn, the violinist?"

The burly man turned toward Eric, irritation warring with the game face that every public performer learns to assume at need.

"It's an honor to meet you, sir," Eric went on, blithely ignoring the emotional undercurrents swirling around Marco and Lydia. "I've enjoyed your work so much." That, at least, was true—though how much he'd ever like Marco's playing now that he knew what a goon the guy was in real life was an interesting question. "Lydia's certainly inherited your talent—I'm in some of her classes as well as her chamber music group." Eric held out his hand, still radiating peaceable obliviousness. "Eric Banyon."

Marco's face cleared. He recognized Eric, and more, he responded to Eric's calm confidence, his assumption of being someone whom the famous Marco Ashborn would want to know. It was the simplest sort of magic—and not really magic, because in its own way, it was true.

"I saw your performances tonight. Both of them. That solo was most impressive," Marco rumbled.

"Thank you, sir," Eric said. "I was pleased with our ensemble work. Lydia made me look good," he went on, deliberately misunderstanding the other man's words. "You must be very proud of her."

He could almost see the conflict between the desire to administer another put-down to his daughter and the instinct to appear praiseworthy chase themselves around Marco's face, but the older man, as Eric had expected, went with political expediency. You didn't get to where Marco was on talent alone. A career was built on a network of relationships. Prima donna attitude might make good news stories, but professionalism and tact built a career that lasted.

"Yes, I am," Marco said, gazing into Eric's eyes with deep sincerity. "I only wish her mother could have been here to see her."

Eric felt rather than saw Lydia dart an angry glance at her father, hating him for his hypocrisy. Eric sent out the tiniest tendril of Power, willing someone to appear who could end this deadlock before Marco could resume taking Lydia apart again.

"Marco—darling! I've been trying to get you alone all night. Hello, Eric—you were wonderful this evening. You must come and play for us some time soon. Now, this won't take a moment—" The tall grey-haired woman—Eric had spoken to her earlier, but didn't remember who she was—expertly claimed Marco for her own and led him off. As Eric had hoped, Marco was too much a manipulator to want to carry on abusing Lydia with witnesses present. That sort of emotional torture worked best when no one suspected it.

*Well, I suspect it.* For a moment he was tempted to cast a *geason* on Marco that would keep him from ever being cruel to Lydia again, but Dharinel had emphasized, over and over, that use of the Power was like a

stone thrown into a still lake—ripples spread out from every action, and the smallest uses of Power could have the largest—and most unforeseen—consequences. Unless he was certain of what would happen, he'd better leave the matter alone—at least magically.

Eric glanced at Lydia, who favored him with an effortful smile before turning blindly away. He knew he hadn't done much to help, but at least he'd done something. And undoubtedly Marco Ashborn would be jetting off to some exotic foreign city soon to leave his daughter in peace.

*For a while. But maybe a while will be enough.*

\* \* \*

After a few minutes more, Eric was able to make a graceful exit from the Artists' Reception and head over to the student party in the dorms. The celebration there was a lot noisier and a lot more honest—everybody was blowing off steam, filled with relief at having gotten through the all-important Winter Concert without absolute disaster.

There was a "No Alcohol" rule for the dorms, honored except by those few who simply had to break any rule just because it was there. But this party was proctored, and after the performance high of the concert, nobody really needed anything other than soda and fruit juice to get really rowdy anyway.

"Hey, Eric!" Jeremy shouted, waving. The young bassoonist was balanced on the end of the battered couch in the Student Lounge, his pale hair damp and standing up in spiky cowlicks. He looked like a goblin-child from a Victorian children's book.

*Now where the hell did THAT simile spring from?*

"Hey, Jer," Eric said, coming over. There was a big cooler beside the couch. Trust Jeremy to take up a strategic position by the refreshments. He was as savvy in his way as Kayla, Elisabet's young Healer-apprentice, was in hers.

"Have a drop of the pure," Jeremy said, lifting the lid of the cooler and pulling out a bottle of Glacéau.

It was spring water flavored with various fruit essences, and was a great favorite with the elves: Eric's refrigerator at Guardian House was full of it. Eric twisted the cap off and chugged the bottle, relishing the shock of cold. The reception had taken more out of him than he'd thought it would. He felt grimy, like a window so covered with smudged fingerprints that the light barely shone through.

*Dharinel told me there'd be days like this. "Nothing comes without a price," he always said. Being a Bard makes you vulnerable to influences most people never even notice, while at the same time it gives you power most people can never imagine.*

Jeremy handed him another bottle without even asking. "You looked better backstage before we played. So. How many propositions did you get?"

Eric stared at him blankly. *Do you mean that the way it sounds?* Jeremy was 17, but he was short and round-faced, and looked much younger. The boy's face twisted, and for a moment it wore a bleakly cynical expression that Eric had never seen before. "You know. The 'I could do so much for your career with just a little private tutoring' line?"

*Funny. Isn't that the phrase Ria used once?*

"Oh, you know," Eric said lightly. "The usual nebulous job offers. But nothing like that."

"You're lucky," Jeremy said, then looked guarded, as if he felt he'd ruined his Captain Cool image by saying too much.

If he'd been someone else, Eric would have urged Jeremy to tell him more, to report incidents like that to his Student Advisor. But Eric already knew that offers like that were rarely made openly. It was all interpretation and innuendo, impossible to prove. And the act of bringing the accusation could bring an end to a promising career before it even started.

"Yeah, well," Eric said. "Nobody rides for free. Isn't that what they say?" "Everything comes with a price. Too bad they don't always tell you what it is going in.

"That's what they say," Jeremy said, obviously relieved that Eric wasn't going to go all over Adult and Role Model on him.

"Hey, Eric!" someone called. It was David, another of the soloists, calling him over to congratulate him on his playing. Eric turned away, the second bottle of Glacéau still in his hand.

\* \* \*

He'd only meant to look in at the after-concert party, pick up his jacket, and then go on home. He didn't have any classes tomorrow, or even any rehearsals, but he did have a big assignment in Music Theory that had to get done Real Soon Now, and that meant making time for work instead of socializing.

But the next time he thought to look at a clock—watches didn't work well Underhill, and Eric had never been much for timebinding at the best of times—he realized it was after midnight and the party was starting to break up.

By the time he stepped out onto the street, Lincoln Center was deserted, the cafes and restaurants that abounded in this high-living area mostly closed for the night. If someone wanted a set for New York After The Bomb Dropped, they couldn't pick a better place than right here, right now. Eric shivered, even in the dark-red leather jacket he wore, as he juggled his options. He had to get home somehow. It was too cold to walk, and he hated the subway. The Center was usually a good place to pick up a cab, but since the Mayor's new policy on medallion licenses, cabs were in short supply everywhere. He looked up and down the deserted street, and decided to chance it.

Putting his fingers to his lips, he whistled loudly and shrilly, a few bars of her signature tune forming in his head as he summoned his elvensteed to him. The tune was "God Bless The Child," a Billie Holiday song. He'd named Lady Day for The Lady of the White Camellias, and the song was his surest link to the elvensteed. He felt her acknowledge the call, and a few moments later—far too quickly for a vehicle that had been paying any attention at all to the posted speed limits—he heard the deep growl of Lady Day's engine and saw the gleam of her lights as she suddenly popped visible.

The elvensteed pulled to a stop in front of him and waited, engine thrumming. She looked almost smug, and so she should, having figured out all by herself how to get here while drawing the least attention to herself. If any mortal had enough Talent to manage to glimpse her as she drove by, he wouldn't have seen a riderless motorcycle—and if he had, well, people had a way of editing what they saw until it made sense.



Eric patted her gently on the gas-tank, and heard a ghostly whicker of amusement inside his mind. He climbed aboard, retrieving his helmet and gloves from the back of the saddle and putting them on. As he settled into the saddle, Eric realized that he'd been neglecting Lady Day these past few weeks, taking cabs and subways to school and even walking, and a good run was just what they both needed. A little magic would take care of the cold, and there was nothing on earth more sure-footed—or sure-wheeled—than an elvensteed.

"What do you say, girl? Want to go for a run?" He squeezed the throttle experimentally, and was rewarded with a wail of glee from the elvensteed's engine.

\* \* \*

A few turns, and they were headed up Riverside Drive, going north. The enormous bulk of the George Washington Bridge towered above him, and for just a moment, riding through the night, Eric felt a flicker of temptation to just keep on going, let the road take him away from all pressures and responsibilities and everyone he knew. But the thought quickly vanished—not out of any artificial sense of other-imposed responsibility, but because he'd already done that dance in all its many variations. The footloose existence of the open road no longer held any enchantment for him.

*I've already done that. It's part of the past, not who I am now. But the past doesn't go away neatly, does it? It's always there, like the key the music is written in.*

All unbidden, an image of Ria as he'd seen her—or thought he'd seen her—at the concert tonight rose up in his mind, vivid as a Sending. Unlike the rest of his old life—the drinking, the drugs, the running away—she still had power over him. That was what had been nagging at him all evening, driving him to do everything but think his problem through. Like it or not, he and Ria Llewellyn had unfinished business.

*But what? And how? And is all this—seeing her and the rest of it—just what Bethie's old therapist would have called "displaced anxiety"? Juilliard is rough—no secret about that—so maybe I'm just trying to come up with reasons to quit without having to blame myself for quitting.*

It was a valid point, and Eric realized he needed somebody to talk it over with. Someone he could tell the whole story to, without editing out the magical parts—a sounding board of sorts. Right now he felt as if an invisible trapdoor had opened up beneath him and left him standing on air.

*:Eric. Bard, do you hear?:*

It was Kory's voice in his head, and if Eric had actually been driving a motorcycle rather than being a passenger aboard an elvensteed, Lady Day would have gone down and he would have been kissing asphalt.

*:Kory?:Eric Sent back.:Kory—what's wrong? Is it Bethie?:*

*:She is well, Eric. But come to us here. We must speak.:*

Unbidden, an image formed in his mind, and Eric knew where to go. Lady Day continued northward, much faster now that Eric had a true destination in mind.

\* \* \*

Sterling Forest State Park was larger than just the few acres the Faire covered every year. The park

was nestled in the gently-rolling Ramapo Mountains—known for centuries to be filled with haunted places and strange creatures, and for good reason. If he hadn't known that NYC was 90 minutes away, Eric wouldn't have been able to guess from the surroundings. He rode through the gates of the park, heading away from the long-gone Faire encampment—the Faire had already closed two months before—and a few moments later saw the pale flicker of a Portal open before him.

Kory and Beth were waiting for him just inside. At a quick glance, the place where they stood looked just like the park—grass, trees, dark sky above. But the air here was warm and perfumed, the trees were in full leaf and the grass was green and soft and lush. He could see clearly, even into the darkest shadows, and nothing in the mortal world had the rich perfection of the meadows and forests of Underhill.

Kory had shed the glamourie which protected him in the World Above. Now he appeared as himself—an elven knight and Magus Minor, with pointed ears and jewel-bright eyes, dressed in the silk and gold and baroque armor of a warrior of Faery, with a faint glowing nimbus of magic all around him.

Beth was dressed in elven-kenned clothing that was a mix of Earthly and Underhill styles in soft deep greens and russets. She was visibly pregnant now, though the baby wouldn't be born for some months yet—her cheeks were rounder, and in the magic-laden air of Underhill she glowed with the power of Life and Creation. When she saw him she gave him a cocky "thumbs-up" salute, looking pleased.

"Looking good, Banyon."

Eric grinned back. Whatever the reason Kory had summoned him here, the trouble couldn't be as bad as all that if Beth was in such a mood. Of the three of them, Beth had always been the one to see the trouble from farthest away, the one who planned for the future, even when a future for any of them seemed most unlikely.

He glanced toward Kory, and his attention was almost immediately captured by the Sidhelord standing beside Kory—one whom Eric had, quite frankly, never expected to see again once he'd left the halls of Elfhame Misthold: Dharinel, Master Mage, Elven Bard, and Prince of the Sidhe. Dharinel looked about as happy as a wet cat.

Eric swung himself off Lady Day's saddle, pulled off his helmet, and bowed formally to his teacher—however much you could let slide in the World Above, in Underhill proper form and due courtesy were absolutely indispensable—before turning back to Kory and Beth. He'd said there was nothing wrong with Beth, which meant the baby was okay too, and Beth's cheeriness seemed to underscore that, but seeing Dharinel here, Eric desperately wanted to know why he'd been called.

"There is trouble in your city," Kory said, looking pretty troubled himself. "We have come to warn you."

"Warn me?" Eric risked a glance at Dharinel. *My city? New York?* Try as he might, he could not imagine his teacher caring whether or not Manhattan sunk into the ocean or flew off into space. There weren't any elves there, and Dharinel thought mortals were a waste of time. "About what?"

Beth started to answer, but Kory put a hand on her arm, silencing her.

"First you must know its history," Dharinel said, glaring in a way that warned Eric not to interrupt, no matter how impatient he got. "As you know, many centuries ago as mortals reckon time, the World Above and the World Under Hill lived together in harmony, until elvenkind was faced with a harsh necessity: either to seek new lands beyond the sunset, or to withdraw from the world altogether into the

Fairy Lands Beyond.

"This necessity fell upon both Courts, the Dark and the Light, equally, for all that many believe that the Unseleighe Sidhe draw much of their form and power from mortalkind, being shaped in the image of your fears and hungers—" Dharinel didn't quite sneer, but Eric was used to that. The origin of the Dark Court, and the reasons for its difference from the Bright, was a topic of endless discussion among the elves, and Dharinel's theory was a common one.

"And so it was that the Sidhe, Seleighe and Unseleighe alike, came to the West, planting their Groves and shaping their Nexuses as they had in the Old World, gracing the tribes of Men with their puissance and their strength—in the case of the Bright Court—and shaping mortals in accordance with their own base nature—in the case of the Dark."

Eric fretted, trying not to let it show, but Dharinel would not be rushed, as he knew from bitter experience.

"But there were always places that all the Sidhe avoided, for good and sufficient reason. Places belonging to neither Court. In some of those places mortals have built great cities, where their own natures flourish without influence. Others, mortals had the good wit to avoid, until recent times. You have gone to such a place."

*New York?* Eric thought, even as he boggled at the thought of calling the city "recent"—the Dutch had first settled Manhattan back in the 1600s. Still, he supposed almost four centuries was recent by Underhill standards.

"Yet before you did so, another came here before you, and now, he seeks to take this mortal place and make it his own. This Unseleighe Prince is subtle and patient, and did we openly oppose his works, it might be . . . inconvenient."

"Inconvenient," Eric knew, meant that the network of treaties and promises that bound the Elfhames, and even the Dark and Light Courts, together in an unbreakable web of favors, customs, and obligations, would be severely strained by such interference, maybe even broken. And that would mean a war that nobody in either Court wanted.

"Elves are invading Manhattan?" Eric asked, just to make sure he had it clear. Beth snorted. Well, it did sound kind of funny when you said it out loud.

"One elf," Kory corrected, looking unhappy. "But he is very powerful, very old . . . and very Unseleighe."

"He wishes to build a Nexus there," Dharinel said shortly. "As you know, it requires great power to open a Gate between the Worlds. It is his way that he will seek others to provide it."

"Others like me," Eric said, and surprised a chilly smile on his old teacher's face.

"There are no others like you, Sieur Eric, and I trust that after all I have taught you, you would recognize the traps he would lay for you, and have the mother-wit to run for your life. Others will not, for our legend has become less than a nursery-tale for mortals in this time, and as you know from your own experience in the World Above, many will not believe the evidence of their own senses . . . until it is far too late. And so it has been decided in Council that in order to protect the mortals from the consequences of their own folly, you will carry this warning to the Guardians, and instruct them to take

steps to save the mortals under their care from this threat."

"I— But— Wait—you know about the Guardians?" Eric floundered.

Again that look of amusement from Dharinel, as though he were greatly enjoying Eric's discomfiture. "Once we knew them quite well, Bard, though undoubtedly they will have forgotten over the years. Humankind has always had its defenders, paladins of the Light. Some are great warriors, whose exploits are known to all: Launcelot, Roland, Beowulf. Others work in secret, for the knowledge of the forces that they fight would do as much harm to the mortals they choose to protect as those forces themselves. Once we fought side-by-side, brothers on the field of battle. Now they fight alone. But we remember those days, even if they do not. Tell them what you must to arm them against this foe, and warn them well."

Eric sighed, knowing that babbling more questions would only irritate Dharinel when he was in a mood like this, and not get Eric anywhere. Neither Dharinel nor Kory had named the Unseleighe enemy that was causing all this trouble, but Eric knew that to do so in Underhill—and even in some places in the World Above—would be like shouting a warning of their intentions in the Unseleighe Lord's ear. And it wasn't as if Eric would be confusing his new enemy with some *other* Sidhe Lord trying to turn Manhattan into his own private fief.

"Do only that, send them fair warning, and nothing more," Dharinel warned. "Do not let yourself be drawn into the battle against this opponent. It might well be that this is the very thing he looks for to complete his plans, and that your involvement could spell disaster."

"I'll remember that, Master," Eric said.

Dharinel grimaced. "And you will follow your irresolute mortal heart despite anything I may say. I am finished here," he said abruptly. A moment later, he was gone.

Eric blinked at Kory. The young Sidhe smiled, and shrugged sheepishly—a human gesture he'd picked up from Eric—as if to say "you know how he is."

"C'mere, Banyon," Beth said, now that the three of them were alone. She enfolded him in a fierce hug. He could feel the baby pressed between them, a daughter that somehow belonged to all three of them at once.

"God, I've missed you!" she said, letting him go at last. "How are you?"

"I— Well," Eric said, and stopped. How to compress the last two months into a comprehensible tale? He wasn't sure how to bring up the topic of Ria to Beth, either, and he wasn't at all sure this was the right time, anyway. Beth had other things on her mind right now.

"How's the baby?" he asked he asked instead.

"Impatient," Beth said with a grin. She took Eric's hand and placed it against her belly. He felt a flutter of movement against his hand, and stared at Beth, eyes wide.

"Yep, that's her," Beth said proudly.

*Hello, little one,* Eric Sent gently. He felt a flurry of unfocused response—happiness, eagerness, amusement—and withdrew his hand. Beth's eyes were shining.

"You see how she is," Beth said. "Just wait till she's born—we're going to throw the biggest party Underhill's ever seen!"

*And she'll have Power. I can already tell that. And she'll grow up in a world where that kind of thing is understood and accepted. She'll never be an outsider, never have to wonder if she's going crazy because she can see and do things most humans can't.*

"Be sure to send me an invitation," Eric said. The thought brought his mind around in a tight circle to the reason Dharinel had called him here. "But right now, this thing with Dharinel . . . it must be something pretty important for him to come all this way," Eric said. *And to care about what happened in the World Above at all.* Another threat, this time not a quarrel between the Sidhe that humans blundered into, but one of the Fair Folk seeking out humans to use them in some plot of his own.

"Yes," Kory said. "It is a matter that is not a new one, I fear. This Lord is very old, and very cunning, and has long blamed humankind for his own misfortunes. But if he seeks human allies now, it is a matter for great concern. But Master Dharinel is right in this, Eric: this must not become your fight. We think he seeks to work through human agents, and so it must be the Guardians' work to protect them. I know you must warn them—but once you have, won't you come back to Elfhome Everforest with us? Surely you have spent enough time in the World Above?"

"Hey, I haven't even gotten up to mid-terms yet," Eric said, trying to downpedal Kory's plea by turning it into a joke.

"Aw, he just doesn't want to leave his new girlfriend, whoever she is," Beth said. "What about it, Banyon? Had any hot dates lately?"

*Of all the times for Bethie's erratic Sixth Sense to kick in! It's true there's a woman in my life . . . sort of. But not the way she thinks.*

"Too busy studying," Eric said lightly, turning it into a joke once more. "But I've made some new friends. One of them's a gargoyle."

Beth stared at him for a moment before deciding he was serious. "Only you, Banyon!" she said. "A gargoyle? That's a new one on me."

"His name's Greystone. He's a friend of these Guardians. Did you know that my whole apartment building's, well, sort of the equivalent of an Elfhome, only for humans? Everybody who lives there is special in some way, and some of them are actually magicians. Like these Guardians."

"You learn something new every day," Beth said wryly. "But hey, no reason to stand around here like strangers waiting for a bus. Kory brought a picnic. Kick back for awhile and tell us all the news. We've missed you. Not that you were ever the world's best letter-writer, as I recall, and anyway, e-mail doesn't work that well Underhill."

"As if I could figure out how to use it," Eric groaned. "I can barely get the thing to spit out my classwork assignments."

He looked around. Lady Day was getting reacquainted with Beth and Kory's elvensteeds. Since the other two were Underhill most of the time, they'd reverted to their "natural" form as horses. Bethie's mount was a glorious palomino, with a silvery mane and tail and a coat like dark gold. Its mane and tail

were braided with tiny silver bells, and Eric remembered the old tales that the Seleighe Court would braid bells into their horses' manes when they went out riding.

Kory's elvensteed was a little more startling—it had the form of a horse, but still retained the markings of its motorcycle form, maroon with black and silver lightning bolts along its sides. Both of them watched Eric with a certain amount of equine amusement.

When he looked back to the others, there was a blanket spread out on the grass, and Kory was kneeling beside a picnic hamper, unpacking savory dishes. The odor made Eric's mouth water—he'd been too nervous before the performance tonight to eat much, and his stomach was reminding him that he'd missed dinner, lunch, and midnight snack as well.

As Kory spread the feast before them, Eric helped Beth to sit down—the pregnancy made her a little awkward at things like that—and for awhile everything was like the best of the old times Underhill when the three of them had been happy together. But the present merriment only served to underscore how much things had changed, as well.

"And after the baby's born," Beth was saying, "we're kind of thinking of taking her around on the Faire circuit. Of course, that depends on . . . things," she finished awkwardly, glancing at Kory.

It wasn't hard for Eric to interpret that glance. Beth had talked about it with him in the time just after she'd first known she was pregnant. Beth wanted a large family, and she was hoping to have more children—*Kory's* children. But even full-blooded elven children were rare occurrences among the Sidhe; it was one of the reasons that the elves were so fond of human children, after all, and spent so much time among them. And children born to a human and a Sidhe were even rarer still. Eric feared that Beth had set her heart on something that was almost impossible, and the worst part of it all was that she knew it.

And being Beth, refused to believe that *anything* was impossible if you wanted it badly enough.

Kory took Beth's hand silently, looking wistful. There was an even greater problem that the young Sidhe lord faced than the problem of children. Korendil had centuries of life ahead of him—and Beth did not. Right now, it was easy for her to move back and forth between Underhill and the World Above, but eventually she would have to stay Underhill full-time, because humans who stayed in Underhill for too long didn't age . . . until they stepped once more into the World Above. Then, all the years they'd cheated by living in elven lands caught up with them instantly, killing them. So in a few decades—a short time by elven standards—Beth would no longer be able to do the Faire circuit without instantly aging. In fact, Beth wouldn't be able to come back to the World Above at all. But Kory loved the human lands . . . he'd hate to give up visiting them.

And he wouldn't want to visit them without his human lover.

As if he knew what Eric was thinking, Kory glanced hopefully at Eric. They both wanted children. Kory didn't want to lose Beth to death and age in an elven eyeblink. Both problems seemed equally insurmountable.

And the impossible was supposed to be his specialty.

A reputation is a terrible thing, Eric thought, looking back at Kory. When nothing's ever been done before, how come everyone looks at me? But I'll find a way, Eric decided, with sudden determination. I'm supposed to be this great magical Bard. What good is that if you can't help the people you love? And then, a wisp of inspiration: I bet Ria would know about the children. . . .

Eric forced a smile. He clasped Kory's shoulder companionably. "Don't worry so much about the future, Kor'. It gets here no matter what you do."

"Yeah," Beth said. "And I'm the one that's going to be having the baby. All you have to do is pace outside the delivery room door looking worried. And think of names for her."

"She will be a great warrior and Bard," Kory said seriously. "We should name her Maeve. Queen Maeve was a great warrior in the human lands of long ago."

Beth laughed, and the moment of sadness passed. "Maeve, it is, then. Who knows? Maybe someday Maeve Kentraine will have her own rock and roll band!"

At last it was time for Eric to go. Time in Underhill ran parallel to World Above time this close to a Gate, and though tomorrow—today, rather—was Saturday, Eric still had studying to do over the weekend. He ought to make time to check in with Jeremy to see how Lydia was doing, too.

He called Lady Day back from frolicking with the other elvensteeds, and reluctantly prepared to depart. He walked Kory a few steps away from Beth, who was gathering up the remains of their picnic and tucking them tidily back into the basket.

"I don't want you to worry about me—or anything," Eric told Kory. "I promise I'll stay out of this Sidhe Lord's way. And who knows what tomorrow may bring?"

" 'Don't borrow trouble, they give so much of it away free?' " the Sidhe quoted wistfully. "A true saying, O Bard. But the future is where mortals live."

" 'Never their minds on where they are, what they are doing,' " Eric misquoted, smiling. "Yeah. I heard all about that from Dharinel, lots and lots. But it's the way we are."

"And I would not change you," Kory said seriously. "Even if I could. Fare you well, Eric. Visit us again soon."

"I will," Eric promised, hugging Kory forcefully. Kory raised his hand in salute, stepping back. Beth blew him a kiss from where she knelt beside the picnic basket.

Eric swung his leg over Lady Day's saddle and reached for his helmet, settling it on his head. The elvensteed wheeled and turned back the way she'd come, taking Eric through the Portal and back into the park once more, into the sudden darkness and wintery chill.

\* \* \*

It was nearly two in the morning when Eric arrived back at the apartment house, so it was no surprise that Toni Hernandez's first-floor front windows were dark, but what surprised Eric was the sense of *absence* he felt as he walked into the lobby, as if all the building's tenants—not just the Guardians—had packed up and left while he'd been gone.

*That's ridiculous.* After all, he'd seen a few lights on the upper floors as he came up the walk. Artists and writers tended to be a solitary, nocturnal bunch, given to working in odd scraps of time stolen from day jobs. So he knew that there were still people here. Had to be. It was just that . . .

*It's just that this place feels like Sleeping Beauty's Castle, all of a sudden.*

It had started to rain on the ride back—thick slow drops on the edge of becoming snow—and Eric rode Lady Day right into the courtyard, leaving the elvensteed to find her parking spot while he rushed inside. His leathers had turned most of the rain, but his dress slacks were soaked and his shoes were wet as well.

Impatient with the usual glacial pace of the elevator, Eric elected to take the stairs at top speed. He was panting and out of breath from his climb by the time he reached the top, but he'd shaken the fey humor that had possessed him in the lobby. No matter where his other friends in Guardian House were tonight, Eric knew someone who was always here and never slept.

"Greystone? Hey, buddy?" Eric called, flipping on the lights in his living room. He kicked off his shoes and tossed his jacket aside. It was still the same mess it had been when he'd left for the concert at four this afternoon: clothes, CDs, and empty bottles of designer water scattered around like the debris of a small whirlwind. Housekeeping had never been Eric's strong suit, and he supposed if he was going to keep on living here he'd need to hire some kind of cleaning service, assuming he could find one that would pick up and put away his things . . . before he needed to hire an archaeologist to find the bedroom.

*Maybe a house-brownie would like to live here and do the dishes. They're supposed to come if you put out a bowl of milk for them, but with my luck, I'd probably just end up feeding half the neighborhood cats.*

Despite the season, he'd left the living room window open so that his gargoyle friend would know he was welcome to come and go as he pleased when Eric was out. "Hey? Greystone?" Eric called softly. The curtains billowed, and Eric heard the soft click of stone against iron as the gargoyle climbed down from its perch.

"Well, if it ain't O'Banyon," Greystone said, in his odd mixture of Irish and Bronx. "And how was the concert, laddybuck? Hmpf—you smell like you've been rolling in magic." The gargoyle wrinkled its nose and looked disapproving, much as if Eric had come home reeking with beer from the corner speakeasy.

"I took a little trip through the looking glass." Eric shrugged. "The concert went okay, but the ending was a real killer. I'll have the tapes in about a week and you can hear it then for yourself. At least I didn't screw up my solo, so Rector must be spitting nails; half the school saw me on stage and there's nothing he can do about it but give me a fair grade. And something really weird happened tonight—I saw Beth and Kory, and Master Dharinel asked me to pass on a message—and now that I get here, it looks like something really weird has happened here, too. Where is everyone? I kind of need to talk to Toni, but I'm not sure what I'm going to say."

As he spoke, Eric walked into the bedroom. He pulled off his slacks and shirt, and shrugged into one of Bethie's finds: a bathrobe of heavy cashmere. He began to feel warmer almost at once. From there he went into the kitchen and came back with two bottles of spring water. He offered one to his guest—Greystone was already crouched in his favorite spot in front of the TV—and flopped down on the couch, exhausted.

"What sort of a weird thing?" the gargoyle asked, ignoring the rest of Eric's speech.

"Two things, actually. First, I ran into an old friend of mine," Eric said. "Or else it was a really convincing hallucination. Either way I wanted to run it past some friends I could trust." *It's not that I think Ria's out*



*to get me. It's just that I . . . well, I don't know. It's Ria. I never could think straight when I was around her the last time.*

A sudden tactile memory, vivid as a kiss, intruded in Eric's mind: Ria in bed, wearing nothing but a seductive smile, her blond hair fanned out against the red silk sheets as she reached for him. . . .

"Yeah, well. . . ." The gargoyle seemed oddly embarrassed. "Toni and the guys . . . they're going to be out for a while."

Eric looked at him, jolted out of the unbidden erotic reverie by the tone in Greystone's voice. "'Out.' Is this one of those things that Bard was not meant to know, or can you tell me something more? Dharinel sent me to warn them, so I'm wondering if this is tied up with that." *And did Dharinel pass on his warning too late?*

Greystone shrugged noncommittally. "Might be a false alarm. It just seems that Something's loose in the city, and they're out there trying to find out what. I've seen a lot of cases like this before. Sometimes you never do find out what spooked you. Other times, it's Gotterdammerung with a full orchestra." The gargoyle shrugged again, unable—or unwilling—to tell Eric anything more. "But tell me what your mentor said. Ms. Hernandez will want to hear it directly from you, but it can't hurt to tell me as well. And that way, I can tell her the minute she comes in. You might be asleep, you know."

"More than likely," Eric admitted with a yawn. Now that he was feeling more relaxed, the tension and stress of the earlier evening was catching up with him in the form of an urgent need for sleep. "Well . . ." Eric marshalled his thoughts. "You know how there are Good Elves and Bad Elves?" Unbidden, a scrap of one of his old movies came to the surface of his mind, Glinda the Good, in Oz, asking, *"Are you a Good Witch or a Bad Witch?"* "Well the short version is, it looks like one of the Bad Elves has the idea of moving into New York and setting up a Nexus here."

"Can't be done," Greystone said promptly. "Too much iron—and everything else—here. New York goes down as far as it goes up—did you ever take a good look beneath the surface of the streets? There's a whole city under the city!"

Eric shook his head. "I know. That's why the closest Nexus is up in Elfhame Everforest in Rockland County. But what Dharinel told me is that this guy—he didn't give me a name, but I guess that doesn't really matter—really doesn't like anybody very much, elves or humans, and thinks he can use humans to take over the local territory. To top it off, he's supposed to be pretty powerful. So I'm supposed to tell Toni and the gang to be on the watch for something . . . er, unusually elvish."

"Hrumph. Been down to the Village lately?" Greystone snarked. "But what has this got to do with that old friend you said you ran into tonight? From what you've said, this Master Dharinel of yours doesn't exactly qualify as an old friend."

"Not quite," Eric said, grinning as he tried to imagine his mentor here in his living room hanging out with his new friends. "I don't think the two events are connected, but you never know." Although he doubted that Ria's presence in the city, even if she did mean harm, would be enough to set off the Guardians' alerts in the way that something obviously had. "I told you about a woman named Ria Llewellyn, right?"

"The half-Blood that kept that elf-lord from doing in all the Sun-Descending elves and ended up in a coma?" Greystone asked helpfully.

"That's the one, yeah." Suddenly he couldn't even keep his eyes open. He leaned his head against the

back of the couch, half-mumbling with tiredness. "Only I saw her at the concert tonight, and I'm wondering—if I didn't imagine it all—what she was doing there. All her corporate stuff is out in L.A."

"I take it she isn't a music lover?" the gargoyle said drily.

"No. I mean yes—I used to play for her. But . . . I don't know." Eric sighed, and reached up to pull the tie out of his hair. He shook his head, making the long chestnut strands—his natural color, restored by the same elven magic that had once turned it black as a disguise—spill across his cheeks.

"Yes, you do," Greystone said unexpectedly. Eric opened his eyes and looked at his friend in surprise. "You're a Bard. You see into people's hearts. You know whether she's a threat or not."

"But what if I'm wrong?" There, at last, was the thing that had been bothering him all evening, brought out into the open. What if I'm attracted to her for all the wrong reasons? What if I can't trust my own judgment? Leaving aside, for the moment, what HER reasons were for coming to the concert tonight. What if she's working WITH this Unseleighe guy?

"Do you think she could fool you that easily?" Greystone asked.

*Yes. No. Maybe. Dharinel once said that stage illusionism and true magic have this much in common—that the glamour only really works if the subject WANTS it to on some level.*

*I guess it's not really that I don't trust her. I guess, deep down inside, I don't trust myself. Maybe all this growing up makes me nervous. Maybe I'm looking for some way to pack in all this maturity and adulthood and go back to being what I was. Even if that isn't what I want on the surface, who knows what I want underneath? Caity's always saying "your mind is not your friend." Maybe this is what she means?*

"No," Eric said with slow reluctance. "Not if I don't want to be fooled."

"You're a Bard now," Greystone pointed out unnecessarily. "That might not have been true the last time you two tangled, boyo, but it is now. 'Trust your feelings, Luke.' "

"So you think I should believe in myself?" Eric asked, yawning again. "Is that the answer, Master Greystone?"

"I think you should go to bed," Greystone said. "You look all in. You can tell me the rest of your troubles tomorrow. Because if there's one thing *Idoknow* about mortals, it's that they don't function well without sleep or food."

*You can say that again, buddy.* Eric got to his feet, conscious of how tired he was. Sleep sounded like the best idea anyone'd had in quite a while.

"Don't wait up," Eric said, stumbling toward the bedroom. He heard Greystone chuckle as he closed the bedroom door.

\* \* \*

He discovered that he was walking through a forest. No, not walking. Almost like swimming; pushing the branches out of his way and pulling his body along afterwards. The slippery black bark was cold and silky against his fingers, reminding him unpleasantly of polished bone. The association was so peculiar that

he stopped, holding the branches away from his face as he tried to clear his thoughts. How had he gotten here, to this weirdwood, anyway?

I'm asleep, Eric realized. Dreaming.

With the ease of practice, he held himself in the lucid dreaming state, not intending to wake up until he found out what had summoned him here. Was this another warning message from Underhill? Half the elves he knew would have just sent him an e-mail, and Master Dharinel had already told him everything he was going to.

So this must be something else—one of those odd visions-cum-premonitions that Bards apparently got from time to time. But who was warning him . . . and about what?

*Ria?* But even as he thought the name, Eric realized this was none of her doing. Ria had always been more straightforward than this in her dealings with him. This was something else, and he'd better find out what. Feeling a great reluctance to do so, Eric forced himself to study his surroundings.

The bonewood he was in was lit with the sourceless silvery illumination that Eric associated with all things Underhill, but there the resemblance to the familiar Elfhome Misthold ended. Everything around him was in shades of silver—even the bark on the trees was not truly black, but the deep grey of tarnished silver. Swags of what looked like Spanish moss festooned their bare branches. Mist lay on the forest floor like a thick carpet, and in the distance the bone-trees faded to a pale grey in the hazy air before vanishing entirely.

There was no life in these woods. No birdsong, no small scuttling forest creatures, none of the playful life he associated with Underhill. Yet this *was* Underhill, his instincts told him, even if it was an Underhill much different than any he'd ever known.

*This must be what Underhill would be like if the elves were all dead. But that can't be. Dharinel and Kory both told me that without the elves, there is no Underhill, just Chaos Lands, so some of the Seleighe Sidhe must be around here somewhere or this place wouldn't have any shape at all.*

Cautiously, but with renewed determination, Eric forced himself onward through the dreaming wood. The sense of artifice—of being an actor moving across a well-dressed but artificial stage—was very strong, and Eric wondered once again what purpose had summoned him here. It wasn't that he was in the least worried about being able to defend himself. If things got hairy, he could just force himself to awaken. The dream had only as much power over him as he allowed it to have, but he did feel the need to find out why he was having it, especially coming as it did on the heels of Ria's appearance and Dharinel's warning.

It seemed as if he had walked for hours, when slowly Eric became aware that the character of the weirdwood had changed. He began to hear faint scuttlings behind him—they stopped each time he turned around—and now there were faint ghostly shapes flitting about at the edges of his vision: things with eyes that gleamed like faint red embers. And at last Eric realized why this place seemed so familiar to him.

*"The sedge is withered by the lake/and no birds sing."*

This was Keats' haunted wood, home of La Belle Dame Sans Merci. With a lagging sense of danger, Eric remembered that the Bright Court weren't the only elves inhabiting Underhill who might be sending him messages. The Unseleighe Sidhe had their home here, too . . . the Dark Court that had been the stuff

of human nightmares ever since humankind had crawled out of the caves.

Okay. Fun's fun, but this isn't going anywhere I like. Time to wake up now, Eric told himself.

But he couldn't.

\* \* \*

Jeanette Campbell came back to Threshold late that afternoon, and spent several hours in her private lab mixing up enough T-Stroke to waste a large percentage of the population of New York and the five boroughs. When it was finished, she trundled the cart and its several pounds of white powder—all neatly packed in large brown plastic pharmaceutical jars—to the Dirty Lab, where Threshold drones would have the unenviable labor of packaging it up in five-gram doses for the street. There was little need to bother with laboratory protocols or sterile conditions down in the Dirty Lab; it was used mostly for scutwork and mass production, and the people who administered the drugs Jeanette made weren't overly concerned with sanitary conditions or the safety of their users. By tonight, T-Stroke would be the new hot ride in everyone's pocket. By tomorrow morning, Robert would be able to start harvesting the Survivors.

And then they'd start getting an idea of how it worked.

Afterward, too keyed-up to sleep, and not willing to go back to her high-priced high-rise crackerbox, Jeanette went down to her office. Her guitar was waiting for her there in its shiny black case. She sat down in her chair, not bothering to turn up the lights, and took it out, running her fingers over the strings. Maybe a little time spent here would help her shake the headache she'd been running all day. Like many former users, Jeanette scrupulously avoided everything, even aspirin. She forced herself to concentrate on her instrument.

It was acoustic, strung with silver, just like the instruments in all the old legends. Once upon a time she'd thought that would make a difference. Now she knew that all she could reasonably expect from silver strings was a brighter sound and a little decoration. But maybe that was enough.

Music had always been her refuge. When the pain got too bad, when even thinking hurt, she could turn to the discipline of music and wipe it all away. She'd even transposed some old Celtic Harp pieces to guitar, and her fingers moved automatically into one now. Silvery rills of music filled the office, painting a vision of a future in which she could be happy and free, where the person she'd always wanted to be and the person she was would match. Where she wouldn't have to brace herself every time she caught sight of herself in the mirror.

*If T-Stroke works . . . if we can figure out how to keep it from killing people . . . what happens then?*

Would she take it? It was a long way from 16 to 31. She'd always thought her dreams hadn't changed, but that was before they'd come within reach. Now the thing she'd hoped for most was about to happen, and the thought both frightened and delighted her. The goal that had obsessed her for more than half her life—having Power, real power, invincible power—was almost in her hands. She'd done what she'd always dreamed of doing. She'd found it. She'd found the key to do what the fantasy novels she'd devoured as a teen only hinted at—a way to unlock the Talent that would set her apart from everyone else, make her special.

Give her revenge.

The music in her hands turned darker, mocking and warning at the same time. What revenge would ever be enough for all the disasters of her life? Where could she begin?

A sudden flood of light blinded her, and she pressed her hand against the strings, stifling the music into silence. Past and present jangled against each other, and she almost flinched before she remembered where she was. Jeanette had a lot of problems these days, but getting ambushed and beaten up wasn't one of them.

"I thought I'd find you here."

"It's customary to knock," she said icily. She winced at the light, squinting up through the glare to find Robert standing in the doorway of her office. She'd used to respect Robert in a way—he was so much more ruthless than she'd ever dared to be—but lately that respect had faded. She'd never really trusted him to protect her from prosecution the way he'd promised he would back at the beginning, but now she didn't even trust Robert Lintel to have his own best interests at heart. He was in danger of believing his own publicity, she realized with a flash of insight.

But he was still a dangerous man. And right now, he wanted something from her. She knew the look on his face, the one that told her he was going to try to talk her into something—but so close to her goal, Jeanette was feeling a little bit forgiving, and was pretty sure she'd agree to whatever he came up with. It was the easiest thing to do, and in her own peculiar fashion, Jeanette had always taken the easy way.

"They're packaging the stuff up now," she said before he spoke. She set her guitar back in its case. Robert always made fun of her music. There wasn't any power to be gained from music. Or so he thought.

*But a protest song can start a riot. End a war . . . or start one. Great musicians live forever.*

"That's great," Robert said warmly, oozing false charm from every pore. It must work on his bosses, whoever they were, but it'd never worked on her. And Robert was too self-obsessed to see that. "We'll be able to start distributing the stuff tonight, and have our next batch of subjects rounded up by the end of the week. I wanted to talk to you about developing protocols for the second round of tests, the ones on the Survivors."

"Sure." Jeanette grinned without mirth. "But don't you think it should wait until we have guinea-pigs to test it on? Anyway, I'm not sure what re-dosing the Survivors will do. Maybe it'll just kill them. In terms of practical applications you've got to remember that this stuff wears off fairly quickly. Twelve hours and it's out of the system—and from what we've seen with the chimps and the first round of people, the overt effects only last for an hour or two."

Robert smirked at her, sure he knew things she didn't.

"Well, that's just the thing. We could get started on that second round right now. We've still got that live one from the last round, and we've got plenty of T-Stroke. Why don't you shoot her up again and see what happens?"

The sadistic glee in his voice made her wince inwardly. Jeanette knew that all their human victims were going to be TTD—Tested to Destruction—and that none of them were going to be allowed to survive, but down deep inside somewhere she also thought that they should be treated with respect. Whether they'd chosen to be lab-rats or not, they were heroes. But Robert saw them as nothing more than toys.

And Robert liked breaking toys. She already knew that.

"She's the one who healed herself, right? Fat lot of good that is, for your purposes," Jeanette said grudgingly. She couldn't resist slipping the needle in, even if only a little. What if the only thing this stuff was actually good for was healing impossible-to-cure diseases? Not much power for Robert in that. *Too bad if that's true, party-boy.*

"Yeah. Ram says she had stomach cancer. I was thinking a higher dose might, I don't know—do something else," he said, too casually.

If there was anything Life had taught her, it was that trying to save anyone else only got you hurt. She'd sold folks down the river before. One more couldn't matter. Jeanette shrugged. "Worth a try, I suppose. And if her head explodes we can dump her somewhere like all the others. Okay. Tell Beirkoff to get her prepped and bring her down to my lab and we'll see what we can do. Oh, and Robert? Strap this one down real good, okay? I don't want to spend tomorrow cleaning the place up."

Robert grinned and saluted her from across the room, a faux-macho gesture he'd picked up from some movie or other. Jeanette grimaced—she'd always particularly detested it. But Robert didn't notice. He'd already gotten what he wanted.

After he left, she rummaged through her paper files until she found the one she was looking for: the intake report on Ellie Borden, the sole survivor of the first run of trials. The black hooker'd had the lowest body weight of any of the test subjects, and so the dose she'd gotten in the cells had been proportionately higher.

Was that the reason she'd survived? Would a small dose of T-Stroke kill, but a large one liberate the mind from its fetters?

We're going to get a chance to find out, aren't we? Jeanette thought with grim humor. Her headache was worse than it had been all day. See? You're going to do someone else down. And it doesn't hurt at all, does it?

\* \* \*

They had to let her go. God had given her a second chance, and Ellie Borden didn't intend to waste it.

She knew she was in some kind of trouble. Her head was clear for the first time in many, many months, the disease wasn't hanging over her head like a flaming sword, and she knew that wherever this place was, she was not in the hands of the police.

Everyone she'd met here had treated her with distant kindness. A little while after she'd woken up whole and well, alone in that padded cell, a woman wearing a black uniform had come and escorted her to a bathroom with a shower, given her a rolled towel that contained a toothbrush and soap, and told her to wash. When she'd stripped, she found two disks glued to her skin—one under her ribs, another high on her back—but try as she might, she could not pick them free, and the guard had ordered her to get into the shower and stop wasting time. The water was hot, and beneath its stream Ellie had luxuriated in being clean, really clean, for the first time since she'd been turned out onto the streets.

She might still have been in the shower if the woman hadn't told her to come out. When she had, she'd found her clothing was gone, and she'd been given a set of blue surgical scrubs to wear, and a pair of soft

slippers for her feet. The connection between these clothes and those given to prison inmates did not escape her.

"Where am I? Can you tell me that? I know this isn't the Tombs4. . . I need to get out of here. I promise I won't cause any trouble."

But the woman had only stared at her with hard-eyed pity, and refused to answer any of her questions.

After her shower was over, Ellie was taken down a long white corridor to yet a third cell. It was an improvement on the first two: it had a fold-out table, a chair bolted to the floor, a bunk, and a sink and toilet, like an upscale designer version of a prison cell. There were cameras in all four corners of the ceiling, and an overhead fluorescent light protected by a metal grid. The room had no windows, and she heard the heavy sound of multiple locks being thrown as the door closed behind the guard.

That was when she really began to be afraid. Because this place was like a prison, but it wasn't a real, official prison. And that meant that the people running it could just make people . . .

Disappear.

After awhile—not more than an hour, Ellie thought—an Indian man in a white lab coat came in, accompanied by another guard and a trolley full of medical equipment.

"Where am I?" she'd asked them, hating the sound of terror she heard in her own voice. "I know this is . . . could you just tell me what you want? Please?"

"If you'll just cooperate, I'm sure all your questions will be answered later. This is just a routine medical examination, Ellie. We want to know how you're doing," the doctor answered. His voice was soothing, professional, but Ellie had taken a look at the sleepy-eyed guard standing behind the man in white and stopped asking. The guard was a tall bronze-skinned man, in the same black uniform the guard who had taken her to the shower had worn. The nametag on his shirt said Elkanah—a Biblical name, a good name, but she didn't think Elkanah was a good man. He had a full equipment belt—nightstick, walkie-talkie, gun, pepper spray, handcuffs—and there was something about him that made Ellie submit to the doctor's examination in passive silence. It had been very thorough and puzzling to her, though she was dreadingly familiar with medical procedures from the time she'd started getting sick. The doctor removed the two silver disks—spraying the places they were stuck to her with something very cold first—and somehow that frightened her even more, as if she'd suddenly lost whatever value she might possess in these strangers' eyes.

Once the doctor was finished—he'd taken blood samples, hooked her up to an EEG and an EKG, and a few other things—he let her dress again.

"Someone will feed you soon."

The words were meant to be kindly, she knew. He hadn't had to say anything, after all. But they'd only made her feel even more like an animal in a cage. She hadn't been able to look at him when he left.

In a few minutes, another of the hard-faced guards had brought her a sandwich and coffee, obviously from a local deli. She'd taken one sip of the creamed and sweetened coffee but found it gaggingly bitter and poured it into the sink, using the cup for water instead. She'd thought she was too frightened to eat, but instead she was ravenous, finishing the sandwich in only a few bites and wishing there were more.

Then all there was to do was pray, huddled up on her bunk with the blanket wrapped around her shoulders, hoping against hope that what she feared so much wasn't the truth.

\* \* \*

The sound of her cell door opening jarred Ellie awake—somehow, despite everything, she'd fallen asleep. What she saw in the doorway made her cringe back against the far wall. Elkanah was back, this time with a white guard who looked just as intimidating. They were wheeling a hospital gurney with them. Four thick leather straps were laid loosely across it.

"Please . . ." she heard herself whimper.

"Get on the table." The white guard spoke. His voice was harsh and indifferent. Ellie shook her head, too frightened by the sight of the straps to comply. "Do it," he said, a thread of irritation coloring his voice.

"Hey, Angel. You gotta understand people's limitations," Elkanah said. "Now, Miss," he went on, speaking to Ellie for the first time. "Nobody's going to hurt you. We have to take you somewhere. You have to get up here on this gurney. Can you do that?"

To Ellie's horror, she began to weep. She shook her head, trying to explain how afraid she was, how unfair it was that this should happen now, just when a miracle had turned her life around—had given her a life instead of the death she had expected.

Elkanah took no notice of her tears as he approached her. He pulled her gently to her feet and removed the blanket from her shoulders, then led her over to the gurney. Before she could react, he had scooped her up in his arms and laid her down on it, and the man he'd called Angel was buckling the straps across her legs.

She began hopelessly to struggle, but Elkanah held her shoulders down and stared into her eyes. "There is no point to this," he said firmly. "Do you understand?"

She'd turned her head away then, giving up, letting them do what they would. Uncontrollable shudders racked her as all four straps were buckled tight. The leather creaked as she breathed. She knew better than to ask for mercy. The streets had taught her that much.

Once she was strapped down, the two men wheeled her quickly through a disorienting series of corridors, until she arrived at a brightly-lit room that smelled of chill and disinfectant. There were two people there waiting for her.

One was a white man in his forties. He wore an expensive three-piece grey suit and looked to Ellie like a lawyer, one of those irritable important people who had inhabited the fringes of her world in the days when she'd been a good citizen. He was frightening, but his companion scared her even more—a short dumpy woman with mouse-colored hair wearing a rumpled lab coat, sneakers, and jeans. She had the pasty complexion of someone who spent all their time locked away from the sun. The woman's eyes were the flat pale blue of the winter sky, and there was no humanity in them.

"Well, this is an improvement over chimps," the man in the suit said. His companion smiled thinly and ignored him.

"Hello, Ellie," she said. "I'm Jeanette Campbell. Do you know why you're here?"



"Oh, for God's sake, Campbell. You don't need to talk to her," the man snarled.

"Of course I do, Robert. That's the whole point of this, isn't it? Lab rats that can talk? If you want data from her, she's going to need a context."

Campbell turned back to Ellie, coming closer to the side of the gurney. Elkanah and Angel had backed away like respectful servants, going to stand beside the door.

"When you were brought in here, you had cancer, and you were addicted to something. What was it?"

"P-Percodan," Ellie managed to stammer. Her mouth felt dry as salt.

"Okay. Percodan's a good drug. Highly effective, highly addictive. But you haven't had any in about four days. How do you feel now?"

"I feel—oh, *please*, let me go! I haven't done anything!" Ellie pleaded, hating herself for begging when she already knew it would change nothing.

"But you *havedone* something, Ellie. You've contributed to Science. You see, when you were first brought in, you were given an experimental drug. And now you don't have cancer any more. And you don't need Perc. And we want to know what happened to you. So we're going to give you some more of what we gave you before—intravenously this time. And I want you to tell me everything about what happens to you then."

"If I— If I do that, will you let me go? I won't tell anybody about this, I promise, oh, just let me go, please, let me out of here and I'll never tell, *I swear*—"

"Now, Ellie." Campbell's voice was remote, faintly chiding. "You know we aren't going to let you go. But you don't have any place to go anyway. That's why we picked you. If you cooperate you'll be well treated for the rest of your life. That's more than you could expect on the streets."

*But I'm well now! I have my life back!* Helplessly, Ellie began to struggle against the straps. Campbell reached into her pocket and produced a needle and a bottle of milky fluid. She swabbed down Ellie's arm with cool efficiency and began probing for a vein.

"How do you know you'll get the same effect with an injection?" Robert said.

"I don't." Campbell sounded almost amused. "What I do know is that this will work faster and more of the drug will reach the brain. And that's sort of the whole point here, wouldn't you say?"

The needle stabbed into Ellie's arm with a lancing pain that seemed to strike at the roots of her soul. Eyes tight shut, she could only moan in protest as Campbell gently squeezed the plunger home, injecting the drug directly into her bloodstream. She felt a rush of warmth so intense it was as if she'd been lowered into a hot bath, and when she tried to open her eyes again, she couldn't.

\* \* \*

Once Ellie passed out from the drug, Jeanette glued contact pads to her temples. Their wires led to an electro-encephalograph—an EEG—and instantly the displays lit up, displaying the rhythms of deepest sleep, a sleep verging on coma.

"What do we do now?" Robert asked edgily. "Wait six hours for her to wake up?"

Jeanette leaned back against the counter, watching the green waves of Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta roll across the EEG display behind Ellie's head. Something was happening there, down inside where she couldn't see.

"It should go faster this time," she said absently. "And I gave her twice the dose. What I want to know is, what's she going to be able to do when she wakes up?"

Less than fifteen minutes later, Ellie's eyes opened. She stared around herself wildly, as if she'd forgotten where she was.

"Ellie?" Jeanette leaned over her.

She saw Ellie's eyes widen, as if she were seeing things no one else could. Jeanette reached out to touch her forehead, and in that moment *apulse*—Jeanette had no other word for the sensation—passed between them.

Jeanette recoiled, and suddenly realized that the nagging headache she'd been fighting since she got up this morning was gone as if it had never existed. "Robert," she said thoughtfully, "come over here. Touch Ellie."

"Why?" Robert said suspiciously.

"It's an experiment." "Because you've got an ulcer and I want to see what happens."

He did as he was told, clasping her wrist above the strap, then jerking away as if he'd been burned. "What the hell?"

"I bet your ulcer isn't bothering you now," Jeanette said sweetly. Robert shot her a narrow look, not pleased.

"My headache's gone, too. It makes sense. Ellie, what do you feel?"

"Hurt," the woman moaned, in a tranced petulant voice. "It hurts. I can't let it."

"First she heals herself. Now she can heal others," Robert said thoughtfully. His eyes were alight with a dangerous fervor. "We have to test this." He turned to the waiting guards. "Go find Dr. Ramchandra. Bring him here."

\* \* \*

He could not wake himself up—and worse, he'd lost all control over the dream. Helplessly, Eric's dream self pushed on through the forest, surrounded by slinking red-eyed shapes out of nightmare and the Chaos Lands. Where he was going—and what would happen when he got there—were questions he found himself unable to answer, and that powerlessness fed a sort of angry fear.

*This isn't right. I'm dreaming and I know it. Why can't I wake up?*

At last the unchanging forest of stark bonelike trees began to thin. Eric found himself drifting to a halt at the edge of a clearing. The open space ahead was perfectly round, and the bone trees that circled it gave

it the appearance of some sort of temple. The floor of the clearing was carpeted with a silvery moss, as thick and smooth as an expensive carpet, and at one end of the clearing was the first artificial thing Eric had seen in this tully wood—the back of an enormous throne, its high back blocking the occupant (if any) from Eric's sight.

The strange throne was as black as the trees, and seemed at the same time to be both insubstantial and terribly solid, as if perhaps it were forged from something alive that hadn't finished growing yet. Eric knew now that this dream was a message, a warning—but of what? And from whom?

Or was it a trap that had somehow penetrated Guardian House's defenses instead? The fear he'd begun to feel when he lost control of the dream blossomed into outright panic. As he struggled to wake, the throne began to turn, slowly, so that in moments Eric would be brought face to face with its occupant. Somehow, Eric knew that would be a disaster of an even greater magnitude than his present situation, one that he must avert at all costs.

With all his strength he called upon the Bardic Gift within him, setting the bright humanity of his music against this ghostly moribund wood of silver and shadows. He built in his mind an image of his own safe bedroom in Guardian House, its walls garlanded with the invisible wards of familiarity and good wishes.

*You have no power over me! I reject you! I dismiss you! Go AWAY!*

It worked.

Eric struggled upright in his own familiar bed, gasping with relief. Not a trap, not a warning, it had been a particularly vivid nightmare, nothing more after all. He stared around at the walls of the familiar bedroom, imprinting its images on his mind, forcing himself to breathe deeply and slowly, banishing fright. It was still night outside. Despite the fact that he seemed to have spent hours in the dream-wood, he'd probably only been asleep for a few minutes.

*Can't sleep after that.* He flung back the covers and swung his legs out over the side of the bed. His feet sank into the fluffy flokati rug and he wriggled his toes appreciatively. He remembered that sometimes in the old days, Bethie'd had nightmares like this (though nothing, a small voice inside told him, could be quite like this), and when she had, they tended to come in chains that destroyed a whole night's sleep. Elizabeth had always said that the best thing to do was make a clean break with the dreaming state—get up, move around, have a cup of tea, connect with the waking world—before trying to sleep again.

Tea sounded like a good idea right now. He wondered if Greystone were still in the living room. Maybe the gargoyles would like a cup as well.

Eric had left the curtains open when he went to bed, hoping that the morning sun would wake him before he slept the day away. As he headed for the kitchen, he glanced casually back that way, wondering if it was raining outside. There was an odd glow shining in; probably the reflection of one of the skyscrapers off the clouds. . . .

It wasn't.

He ran to the window and stared out, unable to believe what he was seeing. New York was gone.

No, not gone. Worse. Blasted to rubble, the twisted remains of the familiar Upper West Side buildings looking like the Judgment Day aftermath of nuclear war.

And out of their midst, a glowing tower, impossibly tall, rose in evil triumph over the ruined city. He felt a wrenching shock—

And then there was brightness, and Eric was struggling against something that wrapped him in inexorable unbreakable bonds. . . .

Eric awoke again—this time for real. The sun was high in the sky—that was the light—and he was wrapped tightly in the sweat-soaked bedsheets that had wound around him during his nocturnal struggles.

A dream. It had all been a dream, the weirdwood forest and his first awakening. Still gasping with the dream-induced panic, Eric struggled free of his bedclothes and ran to the window. All was as it should be. Everything was normal—wintery trees and pale December sky. No devastation. No dark elven tower raised by Unseleighe power to rule over what was left of the New York skyline.

Unsteady with relief, he staggered back to the bed and sat down heavily, waiting for his heartbeat to slow from its frantic racing. The dream and its aftermath of false waking faded, its insistent nightmare reality becoming less urgent by the moment. He was safe. New York was safe.

*But if Toni and the others saw—felt—anything like my dream, no wonder they're all out running around trying to round up the unusual suspects.*

But had they? Did the dream—vision, premonition, whatever—have anything to do with whatever was alerting the Guardians? Or was it a message meant for him alone?

*Of course, like Freud says, sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.*

The joke fell flat, even in his own mind. Whatever it was that had happened to him, Eric couldn't afford to just shrug it off. In the world of elven magic that he lived in, such things were never just innocent nighttime fantasies ralphed up by the collective unconscious. They were warnings—even if the warning came muddled and coded in symbols he couldn't decipher just yet.

He'd have to pass on Dharinel's warning to one of the Guardians as soon as he could, and do his level best to convince the Guardians this was something really serious. Somehow Eric knew that *that* wasn't going to be a lot of fun.

\* \* \*

The trouble was, the employees of Threshold were a generally healthy bunch. All Dr. Ram could come up with to test Ellie on were some mild allergies, a cold, a few strained muscles.

At Jeanette's insistence, they'd unstrapped Ellie's chest and legs and raised the back of the gurney up into a sitting position: Ellie could hardly escape, and her new powers seemed to have no aggressive capabilities. In the face of human pain—or even mild distress—Ellie could do nothing but react, healing the injured party as quickly as possible. She seemed entirely without the capacity of self-preservation, a totally vulnerable creature.

*It'd be funny if it weren't so flaming annoying. I finally get a lab rat who CAN talk, and she won't say anything!* If Ellie Borden had any insight into the process that had gifted her with these powers, she was doing a good job of keeping it to herself. In fact, the second dose of T-Stroke seemed to have reduced her to little more than an animal . . . an animal who could work miracles.

Robert was insistent that they find something that could really challenge Ellie, and they lucked out with one of the lab techs—Donaldson had spilled industrial solvent all over his arm the previous week. Fortunately he was at his desk, within easy reach, so Jeanette sent the two guards up to escort him down to the Lab. When Dr. Ram unbandaged his arm down there in the lab, the ulcerated skin was purple and weeping, an ugly sight. If Donaldson hadn't been such a Type-A control freak, he'd have been home on medical rest with an injury like that.

As soon as he'd come through the door Ellie had started to whimper and reach for him. Jeanette was fascinated. The girl reacted to the presence of the sufferers as if someone were jabbing her with a red-hot poker—as if, in fact, she felt their pain more keenly than they did.

There was a word for that, Jeanette knew. Empathy. But what Ellie had was light-years beyond healing touch. Whatever was wrong, she fixed it. When they brought Donaldson over to her, all Ellie had to do was touch him, not even near the injury, and within seconds the skin on his arm was pink and healed.

"What's all this?" The tech looked bewildered, staring from Ellie to the healthy new skin on his arm.

"Just an experiment in Healing Touch," Jeanette said quickly. Donaldson was a good soldier. He wouldn't ask questions. "You've been a great help. My department will get in touch with you later about filling out an incident report. It'd be great if you kept this to yourself until then, okay?" With an arm around his shoulders, she urged Donaldson from the lab and back into the arms of the Security who'd walk him back to his own turf. There'd be some gossip, she knew, but it wouldn't go far. Threshold's corporate culture didn't encourage idle gossip about its projects.

"This is great—great," Robert muttered, ignoring the byplay with Donaldson completely. "How much more can she do?"

"Do you want me to shoot someone so you can find out?" Jeanette asked, closing the door behind the tech.

She saw Robert start to agree, then catch himself. Yes, Robert would like that just fine, but Jeanette suspected it would play hell with employee loyalty.

Just then she had an idea.

"Does anybody know where Lawanda is? She ought to be here now. One of you guys," she said to the hovering Security. "Go get her."

\* \* \*

Lawanda Dupre was Jeanette's personal charity case. She had terminal ovarian cancer, and had come to Threshold through one of Robert's other test programs—Jeanette didn't know where he'd found her and had never actually cared enough to ask. When the test had run its course, Robert was going to cut her loose, but something about the woman had struck a spark in the wasteland of Jeanette's soul, and she'd offered to continue running a private test program of her own with Lawanda, strictly under the radar. She was the one who'd come up with the idea of Lawanda working as a cleaning lady in the Black Labs, and Robert had no complaints of the arrangement.

Neither did Lawanda. Without the morphine, heroin, and methamphetamine cocktail Jeanette provided, she'd be lying somewhere in a welfare bed, dying in agony. With the twice-daily injection, she was still

able to work. Robert thought the research might be a way to produce another kind of super-soldier: impervious to pain, oblivious to wounds. Jeanette didn't really care. Treating Lawanda was one of the few things she did at Threshold that made her actually feel good about herself.

There was no denying that the drugs Jeanette gave her shortened the woman's life. But they improved its quality, and let her die with dignity. That was more important, though Jeanette knew the FDA would hardly agree.

After a short wait, Angel appeared, herding Lawanda before him. The woman moved at a painfully slow shuffle. She was in her early forties, and looked sixty. The injections could mask the symptoms, but all the drugs in the world couldn't cure the disease.

Ellie began to moan and keel before Lawanda had even gotten all the way into the room. Interesting. Jeanette knew that the cleaning woman was in very little pain—if any—but Ellie seemed to feel the presence of the cancer itself, not the pain of its victim.

"Did you want me for something, Dr. Campbell? It isn't time for my shot yet. You aren't going to stop those, are you?" Lawanda asked anxiously.

"No, Lawanda. Of course not. We just want to try something new in addition to the shot. It won't hurt, I promise you. I just want you to come over here and let Ellie touch you."

Lawanda Dupre laughed cynically. "You trying faith healing on me now, Doctuh Campbell?"

"Maybe." Jeanette smiled. "Just come over here."

Ellie strained against the restraints that still held her to the bed, reaching out toward Lawanda. The older woman approached her cautiously. "Sistah, what are you doing here?"

"Let me—just let me—please, it hurts so much," Ellie groaned. Her hand darted out, fastening over Lawanda's emaciated wrist like a clamp.

There was a sudden spark where the two women's flesh met, an ozone-like tang in the air. Lawanda's face had gone slack, as if in a sudden rush of ecstasy, while Ellie's was contorted like that of a saint seeing God. Everything but Lawanda had ceased to exist for Ellie. That much was plain. But what did that *mean*?

"Something's happening," Robert said in a low excited voice.

"No force, Sherlock," Jeanette muttered back. Whatever was happening now, it was on a much greater scale than the previous healings. This time, Ellie's struggle was something Jeanette could almost see—a palpable force conjured into the little room.

Jeanette tore her gaze from the tableau of the two women and looked at the clock. The long red second hand swept magisterially around the dial. A minute passed. Ninety seconds. Longer than any of the previous healings.

There was a faint groan from the bed. Ellie fell back, limp, releasing Lawanda's hand. The cleaning woman staggered away from her, blinking in astonishment. Jeanette could see that Lawanda's eyes were clear, the yellow tint gone from the corneas. She looked years younger, and even stood straighter.

"Lord have mercy! I— What did *shedo*, Dr. Campbell?"

"I don't know," Jeanette said slowly. Ellie had healed Lawanda—but how? Cellular degeneration at that level couldn't be reversed. This wasn't like the burn—not a case of speeding up what the body had the power to do anyway.

This was a genuine, bonafide miracle.

Or to put it another way, Jeanette had just seen magic. Real magic.

Robert made an impatient gesture, and Angel stepped forward again to usher Lawanda from the room. She went quietly, glancing back a few times at the woman on the bed.

Ellie still didn't move. Filled with a sudden awful suspicion, Jeanette moved over to the gurney. Gingerly, she reached out to touch the girl.

Ellie's skin was already cold to the touch, and the skin beneath the blue coverall lay slack over withered flesh. There was no pulse.

"She's dead." And oddly, the realization gave Jeanette a faint pang of guilt.

"Well, hell." There was only self-centered regret in Robert's voice.

## **SEVEN: LIGHTNING IN A SIEVE**

Aerune hated the Iron City, hated the World Above, hated the Mortal Kind, even as he planned to bend it and them to his will and his vengeance. His flesh crawled in the presence of the ferrous metal that the humans filled their world with, diminishing his powers considerably and making the use of magic an uncertain thing. But there were some prizes worth any amount of suffering, and the ability to own the Gift of a human Bard was one. Urla had told him that somewhere within this city mortals who lacked the Gift were given it. Now Aerune wanted to see for himself.

The cloak of silk and shadow that concealed him from mortal eyes also gave him some protection from the iron that clogged the very air, but he could not long remain here without dwindling away to a wraith. Some elven gifts, however, were not hampered by the world the mortals had fashioned for themselves. A darker shadow among the shadows, Aerune sifted through the minds within the building known as Threshold Labs.

Once he had the power to open his own Nexus, he could spend as much power as he needed to in shaping this city to his ends, conjure serpents and nightmares to feed upon its populace. At the hem of his cloak, even now, a faceless chattering mob of his servitors waited to do his bidding.

At first he found only deception and fear, which pleased him, though the first minds he touched held only small malice. But though they knew little, they knew there were secrets to find, and so, patiently, Aerune sifted through their witless babble.

At last he found what he sought. A mind dark and fragrant with overreaching ambition and sublime cruelty:*Robertlintel*. Through this mind, Aerune learned of an elixir which could wake the dreaming spark of magic in mortal hearts, raise the Power that Urla had told him of and make mortals into living Nexuses. Aerune learned with approval and delight of *Robertlintel's* adventures in discovery—how the elixir had killed or maddened all but two upon whom it was tried, one of whom had died by his own hand, and yet this mortal lordling still persevered. He meant to spread his drug throughout the streets of this city, and harvest for his own any who displayed the Mage-gift.

*But that cannot be. Such useful mortals are mine.*

Drawing upon his power, Aerune summoned all those creatures of his Dark Court who had the power to walk these streets: the gaunts and boggins, the redcaps and phookas, trolls, goblins, Bane-Sidhe, all the dark fellowship of the Unseleighe Court, those creatures twined closer to mortal man than any lover, for Man was their prey.

"Go," Aerune said to his followers. "Follow those who go from this place with the Mage-elixir. Find those in whom the Power kindles brightly, and bring them to me, for they are mine. Feast as you will, slay whom you will, so long as you succeed in this one thing."

There was a swirling in the air as the infernal host Aerune had gathered about himself vanished to their task. The business of following a handful of men through a city of teeming millions was a simple one to creatures with powers such as they possessed. No one of the human lordling's minions would escape their hunters, nor would any to whom they gave the elixir be overlooked. Aerune turned his attention back to the curdled minds within the building's walls.

*Robertlintel's* alchemist now administered her elixir to the last survivor for the second time, and Aerune relished the victim's despair, as well as the more subtle bouquet of emotions in the mind of the alchemist. The power the elixir had woken was one of healing, and Aerune watched as, ignorant of the necessities of the gifts that had been woken so powerfully into life within her, *Ellieborden* let herself be sent down into death by the mortal lord and his minion.

Aerune smiled, reconciled to the discomfort of the Iron City by the sight of the triumph almost within his grasp. The children had broken their toy. That was good. Because like all children, they would soon want a new one. . . .

\* \* \*

His day having been thoroughly spoiled for him by his unsettling nightmare and the prospect of explaining things to Toni Hernandez, Eric moped around the house until he realized that was what he was doing, then went for a walk. He tried Toni's door on the way out, but she was still out, or else not answering it.

When he hit the street, the cold was a shock, and he slitted his eyes against the light. The raw December day at least gave him something else to focus on besides the assignment still lying undone on his desk. The end of the semester was in two weeks, and the coursework was piling up with all the time he'd been spending on rehearsals. He was going to have a lot to keep him busy over the next fortnight.

And after that? His imagination shied away from the thought of the holidays like a skittish colt. For too many years, Christmas had been a cheap apartment and an expensive bottle: a holiday that everyone else but him seemed to celebrate with their families, whether biological or otherwise. Eric hadn't seen his own parents since the day he'd left home, and for years he hadn't felt any lack there. But the sense of unfinished business that had brought him back to Juilliard was tugging at him there, too, and he knew that



sometime soon he was going to have to work up the courage to face the last of his personal demons. *One way or another.*

He still had the next month to get through first, though. Christmas . . . alone again. For a time, Kory and Beth had changed all that, though neither Christmas in hiding nor Christmas Underhill was anything like a Charles Dickens novel, the Sidhe having no concept of Christmas and very little of seasonal festivals. He *could* go back to Underhill for the holidays, but managing the temporal transitions back and forth from here to Underhill with any degree of temporal accuracy was often difficult; if he went to visit Beth and Kory in Elfhome Misthold over the holidays, he had no guarantee that he'd be back before Groundhog Day.

*And this is something I've got to do on my own, or I might as well just chuck it now and go back to Underhill for good.* That meant Christmas alone once more, and it was surprising how much it hurt. No wonder the suicide rate went up in December.

None of which solved his even more immediate problems. Seeing Ria at the Winter Concert seemed as if it had happened a million years ago, not last night, and somehow, she—or her doppelgänger—didn't seem like quite so urgent a problem in the face of astral sojourns to the Night Lands, an invading elf-lord, and a bunch of wizards on Yellow Alert.

He rambled down familiar streets, past Korean groceries, Italian delis, boutiques and antique stores. The streets were full of his neighbors—as much as any place in New York could be said to be a neighborhood—and if the faces weren't familiar, the dogs were. Everybody in New York seemed to have dogs—he saw the woman with the three enormous German Shepherds (all bouncing around and tangling their leashes together), the professional dog-walker managing two Great Danes and half a dozen little fur-balls with ease and efficiency, and the man in the grey suit who walked his Himalayan cat twice a day. Eric stopped to greet her; she sniffed his fingers with ladylike disdain before continuing on her way.

*New York is really like a village, I guess. A really big village with about twelve million people in it. A few thousand years ago there weren't that many people on the entire planet. There hasn't been a city this big and this complex since the time of Ancient Rome.*

But Rome was long gone, and if he were a pessimist, Eric would think that New York was going the same way. In his dream, there'd been nothing left but ashes . . . and the goblin tower.

*Don't think about that. It was a dream, nothing more.*

The walk cleared his head, and after an hour or so he turned conscientiously back toward Guardian House. He decided to stop along the way to pick up a peace offering—though why he should feel the need to make peace with Toni was something he didn't really understand.

*Maybe I feel guilty for adding one more thing to her workload? I know this Unseleighe Lord isn't my fault, but sometimes it seems that wherever I go, trouble follows.*

He spotted a familiar sign on the street ahead, and turned toward it. Sanctuary. And a chance to warm up—he'd gotten thoroughly chilled on his ramble.

Bread Alone was one of Eric's favorite places in his new neighborhood. It had the look and feel of one of those old Lower East Side neighborhood bakeries from the turn of the century, the kind of place where you could stop in for coffee and a bagel and to catch up on neighborhood gossip, with a painted pressed-tin ceiling, black and white marble floor, and a few antique cast-iron tables and chairs nestled

into the corners.

He'd just walked inside and taken a deep lungful of the warm heady vanilla-and-baking-bread smell when a familiar voice hailed him.

"Well, if it isn't the Pied Piper."

Eric turned toward the voice. Jimmie Youngblood was sitting at one of the tables, a large styrofoam container of coffee in front of her. She was off-duty, dressed casually in jeans and a black leather jacket worn over a plain white T-shirt. She waved him over, smiling.

"Haven't seen you since the party," she said when he'd sat down. "How are you settling in?"

"Some days are better than others," Eric admitted. "I never realized how much time and energy school can take up. It's different when you're a kid, I guess."

She studied him critically. Though her flawless bronze complexion was more forgiving than lighter skin might be, Eric could see that Jimmie was tired—bone tired.

"You're not much more than a kid yourself," she said. "Or are you using a little of that Bardic Magic to shave a few years off?"

"I'm older than I look," Eric admitted cheerfully. "At least inside. And I'm starting to think that's where it counts. If your body's twenty-five and your mind . . . isn't, the mind is what counts, I guess."

"Ain't it the truth," Jimmie admitted with a long sigh. "Double-shifts and all-nighters were a lot easier when I was twenty. Places like this . . . I come here to re-charge. Look around. Have you noticed that everyone's happy here?"

Eric looked around the tiny bakery. Jimmie was right. The girl behind the counter, the older man (probably her father) transferring pastries from the cooling racks to the case, the patrons waiting patiently for their orders to be filled, even the Gothamites seated at the other tables with morning papers and breakfast, all looked contented.

"Maybe it's the Christmas spirit?" he suggested.

Jimmie grimaced. "Christmas spirit is overrated. Take it from someone who's on the streets eight hours a day. No, this place is like this year round. It sounds kind of stupid and New Age, but this is a happy place."

"You're right," Eric said with surprise. He'd found places like this in the human world before, but they'd usually been places touched by at least a hint of Sidhe enchantment. He lowered his shields cautiously and took a peek, but found no trace of elven magic here, only the happy contentment of people honestly enjoying simple pleasures. "I guess that's one of the reasons I ended up here today."

"Rough week?" Jimmie said sympathetically. "I know you had that concert thing last night. How did that go?"

Eric thought back to the hot lights and the watchful audience, remembered the soaring feeling of *rightness* as he wrapped them all up in his music, the joy of playing with an ensemble of talented musicians. There was no way to put those feelings into words. It almost made up for the downer the

reception had been.

"It was okay," he said with a bashful smile. "What really gets me, though, is how people can start out in music because it's something they love, and then forget why they did it. Something they loved just becomes a grind—a duty. It's like they twist all the joy out of it."

"Way of the world, my friend," Jimmie said. "When I started out on the Force— Look, I'm up for another round—let me get you some coffee and something to go on with. You look like you could use it." Before he could answer, she got to her feet and headed over to the counter.

*I wonder what she was going to say?* Eric thought. One thing that Beth—who'd been Wiccan for as long as Eric had known her—and the Elvenmage Dharinel both agreed on was that there were no coincidences, especially for those who were the least bit sensitive to magic. The more you attuned yourself to the invisible currents of Power that underlay everything, the more you moved in harmony with them. *And the more you end up in places like this, having coffee with your fellow magicians.* Though it was hard to remember that Jimmie—practical, down-to-earth, New York street cop that she was—was a magician as powerful as any in Underhill. A line from one of his favorite Gilbert and Sullivan operettas came back to him suddenly: *"Things aren't always what they seem/Skim milk masquerades as cream . . ."*

A few minutes later Jimmie was back, balancing two tall containers of coffee and a couple of Danish wrapped in bakery paper. They were still warm from the oven.

"I got you decaf, because of what you said at the party about not drinking coffee much any more because the Sidhe can't tolerate it."

"You're right there," Eric said. "Before I met Kory, I couldn't even get up in the morning without that first cup, now I hardly ever touch the stuff. Caffeine in any form acts like the worst kind of drug for them—like a combination of cocaine and LSD. If you're ever having problems with a mad elf-lord, just pitch a can of Coke at him."

"I'll remember that," Jimmie said, sounding tiredly amused. "You never know; it might come up. But they roast and grind their own beans here. It's a special blend—you won't miss the caffeine. And Papa Lombardi only makes these pastries at Christmas. It'd be a crime to miss them."

She handed one to Eric. The golden crust was fragrant with almond and cinnamon, and when he bit into it, Eric could taste citrus and currants as well. His stomach awoke with a growl, reminding him he'd missed breakfast by several hours, and he had to restrain himself from wolfing the whole thing in a few bites. He set the pastry down and took a sip of the coffee. As Jimmie had promised, it was rich and fragrant. No sugar, but it didn't really need any.

"Oh, man," Eric said, around another mouthful of pastry. "This is heaven!"

"When you're out on the front lines, it's important to remember the little pleasures. Without them, sometimes we forget who we are," Jimmie said gravely.

"Do you have that problem often?" Eric asked. He hadn't meant to ask such a direct question—it seemed almost hostile—but Jimmie didn't seem to mind. She smiled gently.

"I've lost my way a few times," she said. "Even after I became a Guardian. I've seen too many good people go down into the belly of the beast and not come out again. Out here—on the streets—every day

good people die, and bad people walk away smiling. And sometimes there's nothing you can do about it."

"Is that why you became a Guardian?" Eric asked.

"That's why I became *acop*," Jimmie said, correcting him gently. "Being a Guardian came after—sort of a natural extension of the badge, don't you know? When I was a kid, I always wanted to grow up to be Batman. Well, sometimes I wanted to be the Green Hornet, but usually it was Batman. Fight crime and evil, always come out on top. It didn't hurt that my dad and my—my brother were both cops. I just sort of always knew this was where I'd end up. Not the Guardian part, of course."

"Do your folks still live around here?" Eric asked idly, still thinking about Christmas.

Jimmie sighed and shook her head. "Dad caught a bullet about fifteen years back. El—my brother, well, we kind of lost touch. A long time ago."

Even through his shields, Eric could feel the flare of raw pain when Jimmie talked about her brother. She'd said he'd been a cop, and she hadn't said he was dead. But a lot of things could happen, some of them worse than being dead.

"I'm sorry," Eric said, meaning it.

"Don't be. He made his choice, and I made mine. You can't undo the past. But I didn't mean to bring you down. When you walked in here, you looked like you'd lost your last friend."

"Not quite," Eric said. *More like I remembered how few of them there were.* "I had kind of a rough night, and so I went out for a walk this morning to try to clear my head. And from the look of things, I'm not the only one who had a rough night."

"Can't put anything over on you, can we, Banyon?" Jimmie asked with a rueful smile. "Actually I haven't been to bed yet—Toni and I were chasing around the city all night like Starsky and Hutch because of some stuff, and I'm back on shift in another few hours. I do hate working nights. City gets crazy then. It's like it turns into a whole 'nother place, you know?"

You don't know the half of it . . . or do you? Eric thought.

"What kind of stuff?" he asked aloud. "I got—well, I don't know if you want to talk about it here. But I was going to try to get ahold of Toni. There's some things I need to tell her. But she was out when I came downstairs."

"Probably up in East Harlem, seeing if the *santeros* know anything about what's going down. You don't have to worry about talking here, Eric. I told you. This is one of the Good Places. And nobody's going to overhear our conversation unless I want them to. Sort of one of the fringe benefits of being a Guardian," Jimmie said.

"Okay." He liked Jimmie a lot—and more, he trusted her judgment. When you spent a lot of time on the street and the RenFaire circuit, you got to develop an instinct that helped you tell the good cops from the bad. And Jimmie was definitely one of the good ones.

"So shoot. What's got you walking the streets on a day like this?"

"Well . . . ." He was stalling, and he knew it. But one of the things that Dharinel had drummed into him during his magical training was that words had power, and it almost seemed to Eric that by telling Jimmie the problem he'd be making it more real than it had to be.

"I've already told Greystone most of it. And, well, it's a lot of different things. Some really personal. Some I've been told to stay out of at all costs."

"Too bad that's the kind of advice that nobody ever takes," Jimmie said. She sipped her coffee, and for a moment her eyes were cold and far away, focused on some secret pain. He noticed that whenever she was thinking intently, her black eyes lightened almost to yellow. It was a startling effect. "The good people . . . they always try to help. And sometimes they get killed. But that's what I'm here for. If anybody takes a bullet, it should be me. I chose to put myself on the line, knowing the risks ahead of time." She took a deep breath, consciously shutting away the pain. "But that's old news. Anyway, it's one of the reasons I'm kind of touchy about civilians on the fire-line, if you hadn't noticed already. Good people, who just want to help. But it's my job to protect them—even to take a bullet if I have to. They never asked to be in the kinds of situations I run into. All they want to do is live their lives. And it's my job to make sure they can. I don't want any more deaths on my conscience."

Eric met her gaze squarely, thinking of his own dead. Of the people who hadn't gotten out of the way in time when the magic got loose. Or—worse—had been dragged into situations by people who didn't care who they hurt.

"Understood," Eric said. "I don't like it either." He shook his head.

"Yeah," Jimmie said, with a long sigh. "Looks like you know how it is. I lost a partner once, a long time ago. Because my gun was loaded with silver bullets and his wasn't. Because I knew what we were chasing and I couldn't find any way to tell him that it wasn't his fight. Never again! I guess that's one of the reasons why I never married—though the old joke about being married to my work has some truth in it. What about you, Eric Banyon? Any hostages to fortune?"

"I guess not." The answer sounded wrong, and he examined it. "I have—I mean, I'm going to have—a daughter. But she isn't really mine. She's Beth and Kory's. They just can't have one together, so it's more like—I mean, she'll be theirs, not mine."

"No one else?" Jimmie asked.

*Ria.* "No. At least, not that I know of. I mean, other than everyone. I'm not going to walk away from a problem just because nobody I know is involved."

"Good answer. Or a bad one. Some things you've just got to walk away from, Eric. It hurts, and you feel horrible, but if you got involved all you could do would be to make things worse."

Eric shook his head stubbornly. On one level, he knew what she said was true, but in reality he didn't know if he had the detachment to just walk away from people in trouble.

"I'm not sure I could ever do that," he said slowly.

"Then be glad you're not a cop, because we have to do it every day," Jimmie said fiercely. "But I didn't mean to lecture you. You look just about all in."

"Bad night," Eric said. "One of the worst, actually, but not really relevant to the business at hand." Once

more he hesitated about conveying Dharinel's warning. He'd told Greystone. Surely that was enough?

Thinking like that is what gets people killed, Eric told himself roughly.

"Anyway, here's the deal. I talked to Greystone when I got home last night. He said you were having kind of a situation, but I didn't know about that until I got home from the concert. Before that, I got a warning from my friends that they wanted me to pass on to you."

"A warning?" Jimmie asked, suddenly alert. "For me by name?"

"No. For the Guardians. In general. Dh—my teacher seems to know a lot about you folks. Anyway, he said this was your kind of problem, something that you were equipped to handle. He didn't tell me much, but I'll give you all the help I can. Apparently, Manhattan Island is one of those places that Sidhe just don't go. Only last night I heard that an Unseleighe Lord—that's one of the Dark Sidhe, and pretty much bad juju all the way around—is planning to move in and take over here. They say he's going to try to open a Nexus to Underhill here in New York City. If he can do it, he'll have quite a lot of power to play with, and from everything I've heard the Unseleighe Sidhe tend to play pretty rough. My friends said I should warn the Guardians, let them handle it."

"That's what we're here for," Jimmie said with a sigh. She held her cup near her face, inhaling the steam. "And since you've been so open with me, I'll pass on a little information in return. The reason we were out last night is that a bunch of people are turning up dead—street people. More than usual, even in this weather, and all with something kind of . . . funny about them. Paul thinks it might be a case of serial possession, but it doesn't quite feel right for that. And then there was this kind of . . . blippy thing. Like somebody was powering up and then just . . . stopping. Kind of hard to figure out—not really like anything any of us has seen before, and if Paul can't pull a parallel out of his books or the Internet, it's got to be some kind of really exotic mojo. So we were trying to run down leads half the night, and coming up with nothing. This helps a lot. Now we know one of the things we should be looking for." She finished her coffee with a flourish and tucked the last bite of pastry into her mouth.

"The important thing from your point of view, I guess, is that my guy's going to be trying to get his hands on anyone with Power to draw on them to build the Nexus, and my teacher thinks that means he's going to be going after humans with the Gift, but from what you're saying, what you folks were following doesn't sound like Sidhe work. Even if he does have a way to find the Gifted, he'd have to drain—kill—thousands, maybe millions, of ordinary people to get enough power to open a Gate here, and I know it sounds awful to say, but that's just too much like gruntwork for their tastes. And . . . the other thing is, last night I ran into an old friend. Only I don't know for sure whether she was there or not—and if she *was* there, I'm not sure what she wants—or if she's tied up with him."

Briefly Eric sketched the details of Ria Llewellyn's appearance and disappearance from the concert, explaining that while it wasn't impossible for Ria to have been there—or for her appearance to have been a coincidence—he wasn't completely sure of what it might mean.

"It's just that she's, well—ruthless. And pretty self-involved. She isn't the type to count casualties if you get in her way."

"Sounds like a real executive type," Jimmie commented. "But not like the type who'd want to be a street soldier for someone else from all you've said about her. At least from what you say there isn't already a local Nexus, so she isn't likely to be out there trying to buy it up to bulldoze it. Not that anybody'd notice if she did. This is New York, after all, the land of Donald Trump and combat-strength urban renewal."

"Yeah. I'd kinda figured that out for myself." Eric thought about telling Jimmie about his dream, and hesitated. Just what could he say? He'd had a vision? A premonition? A guided tour of a place that he wasn't sure existed outside his own mind? He knew it had been a warning, but the Guardians were already on alert, and he'd passed on Dharinel's warning. They wouldn't be any more careful just because he told them he'd dreamed of a New York in ruins, presided over by a baleful elvish tower.

And Greystone hadn't sounded any warning when he'd had the dream. That was the main thing. So whatever had been the source of his dream, it hadn't come from outside Guardian House.

Or Greystone hadn't considered it a threat. . . .

"Well, I just thought I'd mention, and to let you know that if there was anything I could do to help out," Eric said hesitantly.

"No!" Jimmie said, too quickly. "I mean, you're a nice guy, Eric, and a helluva magician from what Greystone tells me, but you didn't come to New York to join the Guardians and fight evil. You know what they say about old age and treachery overcoming youth and skill? We've got a few tricks up our sleeve that'll probably come as quite a shock to somebody from the Old Country," she said, sounding just a bit pleased with herself.

"And most of all, if four Guardians need help, Eric, the people of New York are in more trouble than we thought. But I'll pass the word to the others," Jimmie said, smiling at him. "Maybe the two cases'll end up tying in together. Sometimes they do. But I hope not." She glanced down at her watch, and got to her feet in a hurry. "Aiee! Two o'clock already and I'm on duty at four—that leaves me just about enough time to get downtown and get suited up." She held out her hand, and Eric took it, standing as well. "I've enjoyed this, Eric. It isn't that often I can find somebody to talk to. You know how it is."

"Me, too," Eric said. "Meanwhile, I've got a paper to write, and I guess ought to be writing it. Thanks for the coffee. And the conversation."

"We'll do this again," Jimmie promised.

"It's a date," Eric answered warmly.

\* \* \*

He walked the few blocks back to his apartment in a far better mood than he'd been in when he left it. Jimmie Youngblood was definitely a nice lady and a good cop, and Eric hoped he'd be able to see more of her. Not romantically—Jimmie'd made it clear she wasn't looking for anything like that—but as a friend. How many people were there, after all, that he could talk about the magical part of his life with and have them accept it so matter-of-factly? Not many, and you could take that to the bank.

The phone was ringing as he opened the door to his apartment, and Eric dived for it without thought.

"Hello? Hello?" Just my luck this will be someone trying to sell me aluminum siding or The New York Times . . . .

"Eric? This is Ria Llewellyn."

Pure surprise held him speechless for a moment. He had almost managed to convince himself that the Ria he'd seen last night had been a ghost, some kind of illusion, or at the very least a non-recurring

phenomenon. But the rich sultry sound of her contralto was like a blast of concentrated yesterday, whirling him back to his mooncalf idyll—in her home, in her bed—when she had tried to turn him from a knight to a pawn, nothing more than a reservoir of Power to be tapped . . . just as Perenor had meant her to be.

Or maybe into something more?

"Hello, Ria," Eric said, his voice slightly cool.

In her own way she had cared for him, Eric knew. Fought for him, tried to protect him, turned on her father in the end. For him? Or for her own freedom?

"Hello, Ria," she echoed, her voice languidly mocking. "After all this time, that's all you have to say? I admit, I'd expected more."

"I saw you at the concert last night," Eric said flatly, still too rattled to dissemble. He'd managed to pick up a number of the courtly arts with which the Elvenborn wiled away their time Underhill, but the whole business of saying one thing while meaning another—all in the most elliptical fashion—had eluded him completely, to Kory and even Beth's amusement.

"You were very good," Ria said. "That solo piece at the end—your own work?—was most impressive. And all done without magic. That somehow makes it even more exceptional."

"You didn't call me up just to congratulate me," Eric said, sinking down into the chair in front of the stereo with the phone cradled on his lap.

"No. Not really. I called to see if you'd be my guest for dinner this evening."

There was a long silence. When Ria spoke again, her voice in his ear was just a shade less confident.

"Eric?"

"I'm still here." He was thinking fast, trying to figure out what she meant, not just what she was telling him. In all of his experience with Ria, she'd never been absolutely underhanded. She might try to influence him, overshadow his power with her own, but she wouldn't lure him into a blatant trap. "Yeah, sure. I'd love to." *Almost as much as I'd love to know what you're really up to, lady.* "Just let me know the time and place."

\* \* \*

Candlemas was the new hot restaurant in the Triangle District. What had formerly been the Meat-Packing District was gentrifying rapidly, high-priced boutiques and luxury condos driving out the artists, drug dealers, and fetish clubs that had flourished here in low-rent days. The restaurant and its five-star CIA5-trained chef had recently been anointed by Gotham's reigning foodies, and as a result, even on this raw Saturday night there were people lined up halfway down the block waiting for tables.

Eric had dressed carefully for this meeting. Fashion was, after all, just another form of warfare . . . and if this wasn't precisely a war, it bore more than a passing resemblance to that gentle art. Back before he really knew what either Power or Bardcraft were, Ria'd frightened him into lashing out at her—and that had terrified them both. She'd seen him as an enemy and driven him away. He hadn't seen her again until Beth had broken a guitar over her head at the final battle, destroying Perenor's access to her power and



gaining the day for the Sun-Descending elves.

And now she was back, pushing her way into his life once more.

Why?

*Like the man says about the afterlife: sooner or later you will KNOW. So let's see what the lady has to say for herself.*

Ria must have been approaching their "reunion" in much the same spirit—why else pick a place like this to meet? A venue more calculated to put the old Eric nicely off-balance could hardly have been better chosen.

*Too bad I'm not the same guy she used to know.* Eric grinned wolfishly. Beneath his duster-length topcoat he was wearing one of the suits Beth had helped him choose—wild silk, in a shade just this side of true black, paired with a collarless linen shirt in a deep rich cream. Instead of a tie, he wore a small elvenmade brooch at his throat: silver, set with a large, almost transparent opal. A clasp of the same design held his hair back from his face.

Once, Eric would have completely distrusted such an outfit, seeing it as somehow dishonest. Now he wore it as if it were second nature, knowing fashion for what it was: a tool, nothing more.

*Which is great. But how am I going to get past that crowd at the door or find Ria once I do? I could be standing out here for hours.*

As he hesitated on the curb—the weather was bad enough that he'd come in a cab instead of bringing Lady Day—a man in a chauffeur's uniform came up to him.

"Mr. Banyon?"

"That's me," Eric said a little warily.

"Ms. Llewellyn's compliments, sir. She asked me to tell you to go on in. She's already seated."

"Thanks," Eric said. If she wants to overawe me with an ostentatious display of wealth and power . . . well, let's say I appreciate the show.

The chauffeur retreated to the fender of a glorious vintage maroon and cream Rolls Royce Silver Ghost—a stand-out ride even by New York standards—and Eric made his way to the door of Candlemas. Getting inside was a bit like swimming upstream to spawn, but he finally made it. The next obstacle was the official greeter, a slender black man who advanced upon Eric with an openly disdainful expression.

"Good evening, sir. Welcome to Candlemas. Do you have a reservation?"

"I'm joining someone," Eric said. "Ria Llewellyn?"

The man's demeanor changed at once from arrogance to subservience, though the change was so subtle as to qualify as magery in its own right.

"Yes sir. Right this way. May I have someone take your coat?"

Eric handed the garment over, and received a discreet coat-check token in return, before following the maitre'd farther into the restaurant.

The interior of Candlemas made no concessions to currently-voguish Manhattan industrial chic. Whatever this space had been last month, it now gave the impression of being an out-take from a particularly decadent Tuscan chateau. The lighting was fashionably low, and the walls were hung with a pleated amber-colored velvet a few shades lighter than the deep-pile carpet. Gilt medallions anchored the fabric, and light spilled out from behind them in sunburst patterns, drawing a faint shimmer from the deep nap of the fabric. The velvet walls softened the ambient noise to a muted background, like ocean surf. The tables on the service floor were swathed in a creamy brocade and set far enough apart to give the diners at least the illusion of privacy.

Around the edge of the room there were half a dozen recessed alcoves, like the private boxes at the opera. They were even curtained to give the diners more privacy. Somehow Eric wasn't surprised to be escorted toward one of them. Ria always traveled first class.

She was waiting for him at the table. Her eyes widened slightly as she saw him, and Eric smiled to himself. He might have been Underhill, but time hadn't stood still for him . . . though it seemed to have for Ria. She was still the woman he'd first spotted in a crowd in L.A.—pale blond hair, cat-green eyes, ruthless mouth. Whatever injuries she'd suffered from her coma weren't evident tonight, and Eric looked carefully, his shields warily in place against any magic—though the magic Ria was deploying was of a far older and more fascinating sort.

She was wearing a dark-green dress with an old-fashioned portrait neckline, with a necklace of cloudy green stones around her throat—jade?—that only served to accentuate the flawless whiteness of her skin.

Eric felt his throat close in a purely masculine acknowledgement of her beauty. She was as fair and fey as the unfading moonlillies that bloomed in Underhill.

"Satisfied?" she asked, and Eric only just stopped himself from blushing. The maitre'd seated him, giving him a moment to recover.

"You've . . . changed," Ria said, favoring him with a sphinx-like smile.

"This is my cue to say you haven't. But I know you've got a mirror. And I remember that you hate people being obvious," Eric said boldly.

"I'm easily bored," Ria admitted, with a throaty mock-seductive purr in her voice. If you could put what she had in a bottle, Eric decided, there wouldn't be any reason for anybody to ever be lonely again.

"So—without being obvious—it's good to see you. You're obviously well." He was surprised to find that, when he spoke them, the words were true. Seeing Ria again was like . . . was like having the answer to a question he'd been asking for a very long time. "You gave me quite a start when I saw you in the audience last night. If you'd called ahead, I would've gotten you tickets."

"You concealed it admirably. Your performance was wonderful. Shall we order? Or would you like a drink first?"

There was a glass of white wine in front of her, in one of those huge tulip-shaped glasses that restaurants

used for everything from Chardonnay to frozen daiquiris. Eric shook his head.

"Just water for me, thanks. Evian if they have it."

Ria raised an eyebrow, but made no comment. She must have signalled somehow, because a hovering waitperson instantly appeared to take Eric's drink order and bestow upon both of them leather-backed menus only slightly smaller than the surface of a coffee table.

"Have you eaten here before?" he asked, scanning the menu. Candlemas seemed to run to Continental Fusion fare—Eric hesitated over the medallions of venison with kiwi and mango, smirking faintly. But what the heck—if people wanted to put stuff like that in their bodies, at least it was better than drugs.

"No. My assistant suggested the place. These days, my idea of dining out is usually takeout at my desk. And I don't get to New York that often."

*But you're here now, Ria. Why?*

"There are a lot of good restaurants here," Eric said noncommittally. He decided on the chicken in balsamic vinaigrette as being a safe choice, one that wouldn't offer too many surprises. Ria would be surprised enough this evening.

"Oh, I don't deny that New York has its attractions. Some of the best schools in the world are here, for example."

Eric sipped at his water. If this was Ria's opening gambit, it was an awfully mild one. They both already knew he was attending Juilliard.

"Yes. I didn't appreciate it much the last time, but I think formal training has a lot to offer, don't you?"

Her eyes widened slightly as she took his double meaning. When they'd last clashed, Ria was an accomplished sorceress, and Eric barely knew what magic was. Now he was a Bard . . . and Ria had always been a political animal, raised amid Perenor's plotting. He didn't know what contacts with the elves she still had . . . or wanted.

In fact, he decided, they'd both changed a great deal. And suddenly it was very important to Eric to know who Ria had become.

"So. Tell me everything. How are Kayla and Elizabeth?"

"Well, when last I saw them," Ria said, accepting the change of subject smoothly. "Kayla will be going away to school, soon. She won't have to worry about tuition—I'll see to that—but neither Elizabeth nor I feel that the child needs a free ride through life. And she can't earn her living as a Healer. The medical establishment doesn't take kindly to people working miracles without a license. And Healers need a lot of downtime in order to function without burning out, so it isn't likely she's going to go for an M.D."

"Computer programming, maybe? Or web-designer?" Eric suggested, thinking of Paul Kern. If anyone needed a flexible schedule, it was a Guardian. "Those are both professions with a lot of built-in privacy. I've got a friend who could suggest some good places to study."

"We may take you up on that. I know she wants to come to New York. Says the San Fernando Valley's too quiet for her tastes."

Eric laughed, thinking of the scrappy little punkette he'd met at the Dunkin Donuts' the morning of the battle for Elfhome Sun-Descending. A greater contrast with the stately, dignified Elizabeth could hardly be imagined, but Elizabeth's apprentice had the true Healer's gift—as well as more street-smarts than anyone Eric had ever known, and a tongue that could strip paint off a wall at sixty paces.

Now it was Ria's turn to change the subject, and she did, asking Eric about his work at Juilliard. Eric answered readily enough—he had nothing to hide in that regard, at least from Ria, and the two of them continued sparring verbally all through the meal—appetizer, salad, entree, and dessert. Without being evasive, Ria didn't talk about anything that really mattered—Eric gathered that she was essentially making a tour of her holdings, reconsolidating her position as head of LlewellynCo after a long absence. But that hardly explained her appearance at Juilliard . . . or her dinner invitation.

"I was surprised to see you surface after so long," she finally admitted over coffee. Ria's half-human heritage saved her from the poisonous effects of caffeine on her system, and Eric had surprised her once again by ordering coffee himself. The hit of the unaccustomed caffeine made his heart race, giving him a feeling as if he were riding Lady Day down a very long straightaway.

"No reason I shouldn't," Eric said. That much was true: the Feds had always really been after Bethie, not him or Kory, and besides, the Eric Banyon they were looking for would be older than he was by enough years to fool a casual inspection, even if there were anyone working the case who still remembered him.

Not that he was completely convinced they'd been legitimate Feds in the first place. . . . "And as I said, I had some business here."

"The music school."

The next obvious question would have been why Eric, with Bardcraft at his command, would even bother with something so mundane as a Juilliard degree, but Ria didn't ask it. She hadn't asked any hard questions at all over the course of dinner, Eric realized. It was as if it were enough, from her point of view, simply to *be in view*, displaying herself.

And it very nearly was. Eric had almost forgotten how downright *desirable* Ria was, in a way that had nothing (well, almost nothing) to do with sex. It was almost as if she were somehow *realer* than everyone else. She drew the eye to her automatically, like the focus of a painting.

*But what the hell does she WANT?*

If she wanted to kill him, they wouldn't be sitting here discussing mutual friends. If she wanted information, sooner or later she was going to have to ask some questions. If she wanted to *use* him in some way, well, those days were long past, and Eric was pretty sure that she knew it by now. But she hadn't made an excuse and left, so that wasn't it. She was still here, sitting across the table, regarding him with that steady gaze with a hint of challenge in it.

The waiter came with the check, and Ria pulled out her card to pay. Nothing as paltry as a platinum AmEx for Ria Llewellyn: what she placed on the server tray was an indigo-and-black Centurion AmEx. The user fees alone for the card were over ten thousand dollars a year, with all charges due in full at the end of each month.

*Okay. Color me a little impressed. I knew back in L.A. that LlewellynCo had money. I just didn't think it was quite this much. And you know what they say: money will get you through times of no*

*magic better than magic will get you through times of no money. . . .*

"So I'm a corporate expense?" Eric asked, glancing at the card.

"You might be," Ria answered enigmatically. The waiter returned with the charge slip in record time. Ria signed it, tucked her card back out of sight, and rose to her feet.

"I don't feel we've quite said all we have to say to each other, Eric. Why not come back to my hotel and we can continue this conversation? I promise, no harm will come to you."

*That's what you said the last time,* Eric thought, the ghosts of old memory stirring. Just then inspiration struck.

"I've got a better idea. Why don't you come back *to my place*?" he said, standing in his turn. "I'm sure you want to see it. And good burglars don't come cheap these days." *Especially once they got a look at the building's security system.*

If he'd expected to embarrass her, Eric was disappointed. She threw back her head and laughed—a full-throated, *joyous* laugh—and smiled at him, eyes sparkling.

"Quite right. I'm not sure what market price for housebreaking is these days, but I'm sure there isn't a line item in my budget to cover it. Lead on," she added, almost gaily, laying her hand on his arm.

The sensation of the contact sent a thrill of heat up his arm and straight to his groin. He'd better stop kidding himself now: Ria Llewellyn was still an enormously attractive woman, and she used that beauty like a weapon. Once he would have been felled by its effects like a clubbed seal. He still felt its pull, tempting him.

But things, as they'd both said over the course of the evening, had changed.

It was rising eleven when they left the restaurant. Ria's limousine waited patiently at the corner. When he spotted them, the chauffeur jumped out from behind the wheel to open the passenger door for them.

The luxury of Underhill was exotic, often strange beyond his imagination, and certainly beyond his achievement here in the World Above. Bardic magic and Elven magic fit together like gloved hands, touching, but separate. Eric could reweave the fabric of Reality, open gates between worlds. But much of Elven magic was species-specific, far beyond his ability and his understanding.

This was different.

The door of the car closed behind them with the solidity of a bank vault. Eric could smell the leather of the seats, the better-than-new-car scent of the fine materials, the engineering and craftsmanship that had gone into the car's construction. And there was nothing magical about it. All of it was a creation of human hands and minds. It was certainly the most decadent thing he'd experienced since he'd come back to human lands. The inside of the Rolls was almost like walking into a small room: there were fresh flowers in matching crystal vases on the cabin walls, a table, and a sleek bulkhead panelled in mahogany burl, from which jumpseats could be folded down. There was enough floor space for two people to lie full-length—though as he settled into the deep bench seat, Eric thought there was plenty of room here, too, for the kind of things Ria's presence made him think about.

Ria settled into her seat and leaned forward to tap at the black glass partition separating them from the

driver as soon as Eric was settled. They'd picked up their coats at the door, though in Ria's case the coat was a deep-hooded evening cloak, lined in satin the color of the dawn. As she moved, it fell open. The movement did interesting things to that portrait neckline. The car moved off, sleek and powerful. Eric could feel the vibration of the engine in his bones.

"Shall I tell him the address, or would you like to?" Ria asked mischievously. "The intercom button is right there, in the wall."

Eric pressed the button and gave his address. The powerful car swept uptown through the rain-slicked streets.

\* \* \*

The clouds had broken by the time they arrived at Guardian House, and the temperature had dropped several degrees, promising snow before morning, though at this time of year the flurries should melt by noon. Eric shivered as he got out of the car. He watched as Ria looked around, mentally assessing the desirability of the neighborhood with a cold realtor's gaze. Whatever answer she came up with, it seemed to please her.

"You've moved up in the world, Eric."

"Yeah, well, nothing ever stays the same. What about your car?"

She turned back to the chauffeur, still standing alertly beside the car. "He'll wait."

She turned back to Eric. He only hoped Ria wasn't going to be back on the street again in the next ten seconds. He had no real idea of how Guardian House would respond to one of the half-elven, especially one of Ria's ambiguous loyalties.

*But isn't that what you brought her here to find out?*

It was, of course, but it had just now occurred to him that anything that would rouse Greystone would probably land the Guardians in his lap as well, and with all they had to worry about right now, they probably wouldn't be grateful for the interruption. He wasn't looking forward to the explanations he'd have to make if it came to that. *Still, it's always easier to get forgiveness than permission.*

He tapped out the entry code on the front door and ushered Ria through the lobby.

She was silent on the ride up, but it didn't take Bardic magic to see that Ria was thinking furiously. Eric wondered if he'd ever know the real reason she'd wanted to track him down, and thought he wouldn't. They had one new thing in common, though. Each of them was having to adjust to a world they'd been away from for several years. He wondered if the new millennium was as much of a shock to Ria as it sometimes was to him.

"Very nice," Ria said, looking around the hushed and carpeted corridor that led to Eric's apartment. "No wonder Claire thought you must be some kind of Mafia drug lord."

"I like it," Eric said, refusing to take the bait she so temptingly dangled. He punched the keycode to unlock his door. "Enter freely and of your own will."

In the living room, Ria swirled off her cloak with a practiced gesture and laid it over the back of the

couch, making Eric glad he'd gone to the trouble of cleaning the place up before he left. He was really going to have to see about that house-brownie, though.

"Here, let me hang that up for you," Eric said, picking it up. He walked through to the bedroom to hang up her cloak and his coat. The unmade bed, still ruffled from his nightmare, invited his thoughts down pathways he'd rather not take just now, thank you very much. He realized he was tense, waiting for Guardian House to sound an alarm, though surely if it had been going to, it would have done it already. Ria's presence didn't seem to even be a blip on its psychic radar.

*Figures. If I can't figure out what she's up to, what chance does a building have?*

He came back out to find Ria inspecting his CD collection.

"You must have bought out the store," she commented, turning to him.

"Pretty much," Eric agreed. "I've got to say, these things are a lot easier to store than vinyl."

"Cheaper to produce, too," Ria agreed. "And when the cost comes down, a lot of music that was marginal before has the chance to get out there and find its audience."

Trust Ria to find a way to think of everything in economic terms, Eric thought with an inward grin.

"I promised you coffee. Will espresso do? I've got one of those fancy machines. It was a housewarming present. It even works most of the time."

Ria smiled with what seemed like genuine warmth. "Then you're more technologically advanced than I am. If I didn't have Jonathan to make the coffee, I'd go into caffeine withdrawal."

She followed him into the tiny kitchen, where Eric navigated the intricacies of the bright-orange Italian espresso maker Caity had given him without too much difficulty. Ria's presence—her warmth, her perfume—were even more distracting in this small intimate space.

*Is she coming on to me?* Unbidden tactile memories rose up strongly in Eric's mind. He controlled his blush with an effort. *Or is she just trying to get me so aroused I'll stop thinking?* To cover his momentary confusion, he grabbed a tray from the shelf and arranged a box of assorted biscotti on a plate. When the espresso had brewed, he drew off two cups and carried the tray back out into the living room.

"So why don't you tell me what you're really doing here?" Eric said bluntly, once they were both seated. He didn't expect her to tell him, but his question should bring the answers to the surface of her mind for Greystone to read.

"You invited me," Ria pointed out, sipping her espresso. She nibbled delicately at a biscotti with sharp white teeth. "And frankly, isn't that question the least bit insulting? Next you'll be offering to leave the money on the dresser."

Eric grinned in spite of himself at her bold words. *The best defense is always a good attack.* "I don't think it's an unreasonable question, given who we both are," Eric responded. "We didn't part on the best of terms."

"That was my fault, I suppose," Ria said graciously. "I'm not the most trusting person in the world. And

you frightened me. It doesn't hurt to admit that. My father has—had—many powerful enemies. I thought you might be one of them."

"But Perenor's dead."

Ria inclined her head. "But the elvenkind has long memories. I sought you out because I was certain it was only a matter of time before you did the same to me. I have no interest in taking up my late father's feuds . . . but I will defend myself."

Was that a warning or a threat?

"I haven't got any quarrel with you, Ria." As he said the words, Eric knew they were true. "I came back to finish at Juilliard. That's all. So I'm still asking: why are *you* here?"

She wasn't convinced—he could see that in her expression. But would he have been convinced if he was the one who'd been raised amid a Sidhelord's intrigues? Ria's entire existence, her magical training, had been shaped to one end, to make her into a living battery from which Perenor could draw power at will. That didn't make for a trusting nature.

"Tell me who trained you in Bardcraft. Tell me he didn't send you back into the world of Men to kill me," Ria said in a low intense voice.

*"Dharinel?"* Eric said in surprise. Dharinel disliked humans and despised the half-blood, it was true, but his contempt was meted out with a fine evenhandedness. It would be completely beneath his dignity as Magus Major and Elven Bard of Elfhome Mithold to acknowledge any particular human enough to want to destroy them.

Ria was about to reply when there was a scrabbling on the fire escape. She set down her cup quickly, and glanced from Eric to the window behind her.

The sash raised, and Greystone climbed down into the room. Ria got slowly to her feet, staring at the gargoyle.

"She's okay, boyo," Greystone said to Eric. "I admit I had me doubts about you bringing her here an' all, but t'is copacetic. She's levelling with you, laddybuck."

\* \* \*

Ria stared down at the squat, misshapen creature in speechless shock. It had a fanged doglike face and curling horns. Its arms were long and apelike, and its hindquarters like a satyr's, right down to the cloven hooves. Great bat wings lay against its back like furred umbrellas. And despite the fact that it lived and moved and talked, it seemed to be made of solid stone.

"So," she heard it say, "how'd your night out go? Or should I say going? Any o' that high-powered coffee left? It's a cold night out, and no mistake. I could use a wee bit of a jolt."

"Sure," Eric answered easily. "I'll get you a cup. Ria, this is Greystone. Greystone, meet Ria Llewellyn. I've told you about her."

With a distant part of her mind, Ria registered that Eric seemed to be on very good terms with this creature—and that he had brought her to it as a sort of test. She found it hard to be angry with Eric for



showing such caution. She'd been wary herself.

She stood perfectly still as the gargoyle waddled up to her. Though if it could stand completely upright it might be as tall as she was, its crouched position made it several inches shorter.

"You've nothin' to fear from me, Blondie. As for meself, there's more things in heaven an' earth, as I'm sure you know," Greystone said, and winked at her.

"I'm finding that out," Ria said levelly.

Eric returned from the kitchen with a mug of espresso and handed it to Greystone. The gargoyle slurped it down with evident relish, then reached out a long simian arm to grab a handful of biscotti. The talons on its fingertips would have done credit to an eagle with their sharpness, for all that they seemed to be made of stone. It set the empty cup down on the table, and, still clutching the handful of cookies, headed for the window once more.

"Well, I've gotta be going. No rest for the wicked, an' all that. You kids behave yourselves, now." He favored both of them with one last toothy grin and made his exit, closing the window carefully behind him.

Eric was looking at her, obviously waiting for her reaction.

"Well," Ria finally managed. "I see you still have interesting friends."

Eric laughed. "I seem to have a knack for that."

Cautiously they both sat down once more.

"So . . ." Ria said finally, returning to the earlier conversation. "Master Dharinel trained you?"

"Even he had to admit that everybody was better off if I knew how to use what I had. But he didn't send me after you, Ria. I swear it. I don't think most of the elves really care one way or the other about you now that Perenor's dead."

"I hope you're right. But I do know that your friends blame me for a lot of what happened at Sun-Descending and the Fairegrove . . . Beth Kentraine, for example?"

She knew she was fishing now, but if Claire MacLaren's PI report hadn't mentioned talking gargoyles, it was even less likely to have included mention of elves and their friends. Beth Kentraine was not somebody she wanted to have appear unexpectedly in her life. From what Ria remembered, Kentraine had a fiery temper and a wicked right cross.

"Oh, you won't be seeing her. She and Kory mostly live Underhill these days. It's not like they'd be dropping by unexpectedly. We're still close, but it's . . . not like it was."

*When to scratch one of the three of you made the other two bleed*, Ria finished silently. The way Eric spoke of them—as a couple—made Ria cheer inwardly. So little Bethie had thrown her lot in with the elven lover, had she? That was the best news Ria'd had in a long time.

"I suppose I ought to offer my condolences," Ria said politely. "Or . . . not?"

"Not," Eric said cheerfully. "Things just worked out the way they had to. The only thing is . . . I'd like to

be able to think of some way to help them out. Because they want kids, and—with elves and humans—it's hard to arrange. I don't know if I ought to be asking you this, but . . . do you know anything that could help? Some kind of spell or magic, I mean. I mean, *you're* here."

Half-Blood children were incredibly rare occurrences between Sidhe and mortalkin. In most cases the unfortunate children were ostracized by their father's and mother's people both, so perhaps it was a blessing that such half-Blood children rarely inherited the immortality of their elven parent. Immortality had been the bribe Perenor had held out to his half-breed daughter, but lately Ria had come to wonder if he had meant to give it to her as a blessing . . . or as a curse? She shook her head slowly.

"Not in the way you mean, I think. Believe me, Eric. What Perenor did to create me is nothing your friends would ever want any part of," Ria said with quiet intensity. "It nearly killed my mother. *It did* drive her mad. And it cost the lives of several other people—he drained their essences to fuel his magic."

Eric sat back, a look of surprise and, oddly, pity on his face. "That's a helluva thing to have to live with. To know you're here only because a bunch of other people gave their lives—or had them taken away."

"Survivor's guilt, they call it," Ria said with a crooked smile. "It's not the only way, of course, just the quickest and easiest if you have no conscience and no scruples. If you'd like, though, I'll see what I can find about the other methods. *I am* uniquely placed for that kind of research." *And we'll see whether the high and mighty Beth Kentraine is willing to let bygones be bygones if I can offer her her heart's desire on a silver tray.*

"I'd like that," Eric said. "I'm sorry I was so hard on you before. . . ."

"But you didn't trust me. And considering how we parted, you had every right not to. That wasn't one of my best calls, Eric. If I'd been thinking clearly, I would have realized it at the time. I should have trusted what I knew of you. If you were out to get someone, you wouldn't pretend to be their friend first."

She could tell by his expression that he knew she was telling him the truth. Truth-sense was one of the oldest of the Bardic gifts; she supposed she'd just been lucky he hadn't developed it the last time they'd met.

"Is that all we were? Friends?" Eric asked. "Funny, but I remember the relationship as being somewhat . . . warmer."

*This is moving a little too fast for me.* Ria got to her feet. "And it might be again. I won't lie to you, Eric. As a boy you were pretty. As a man you're devastating. But I think that right now it's time for me to go."

He looked disappointed—her pride was grateful for that—but got to his feet without complaint.

"I'll get your cape."

\* \* \*

Eric walked her to the curb and the waiting Rolls. The chauffeur opened the passenger door and stood waiting like a well-oiled automaton.

Eric opened his mouth to speak, and Ria touched him lightly on the lips with her fingers. "I'll be in New York for several more days. There's no hurry. I hope we can see each other again. I'd like to get to

know you."

And before Eric could assemble an answer *to that*, Ria had stepped into the car, and it was moving silently away.

\* \* \*

There was someone standing outside his apartment door when Eric got back upstairs.

"Toni?"

The Latina woman spun around when she heard him. "Blessed saints! Greystone said you were here, but I called and no one answered, so I came up."

*Must be pretty important. She looks kind of worried.*

"I was just walking a friend out. Do you want to come inside?"

"No. I mean, I'd like you to come outside. We've . . . found something, and none of us has seen anything like it before. Jimmie said— So I thought . . . you've had a certain amount of experience in this sort of thing, and I was hoping I could get you to come take a look. Maybe it's . . . what you were talking about."

*Christ, I hope not!* Eric thought fervently.

"Sure," Eric said. "Just let me get my coat and I'll be right with you. Do I have time to change?"

For the first time Toni seemed to notice what he was wearing. A slow smile crossed her face. "Sure. We wouldn't want to scare the Ungodly with your great beauty. Heavy date tonight, eh?"

"You might say," Eric said with a smile.

\* \* \*

He dressed quickly in sweater, jeans, leather jacket and boots. He hesitated, then picked up his flute case and swung it over his shoulder. Toni hadn't said what she wanted him to look at, but if it was capable of spooking a Guardian, he wanted to go loaded for bear.

Toni's Toyota was waiting on the street—a side benefit of Guardianship seemed to be never lacking for a parking space—and in a few moments they were moving. Toni Hernandez drove like a New York cabbie, zipping into spaces almost before they opened, weaving through a deadly dance with the fleet of trucks that took over the New York streets after-hours. The traffic lightened as they headed east, and Eric realized they were going toward Central Park.

"Want to tell me what's going on?" Eric asked, catching his breath after one particularly spectacular maneuver. *She drives the way Bethie does—or did.*

"Not really. I think we'd rather see what you come up with on your own. Paul and Jimmie are already there."

The park was closed to street traffic at this time of night, and the gates were down across the road. Toni

swerved into a parking space right outside and bounced out of the car before Eric had finished unbuckling his seat belt.

"I'm afraid it's a bit of a hike from here," she said. "Good thing you changed your shoes."

\* \* \*

He felt it long before he reached the spot where Jimmie and Paul were standing. Jimmie Youngblood was in her uniform, looking shuttered and forbidding, hand on her gun, though her expression lightened with something like relief when she saw him. Paul looked like an escaped university professor, Norfolk tweed jacket with leather elbow patches and all. Eric almost expected him to pull out a pipe and light it.

The stench of magic was everywhere, a sort of palpable wrongness that made his hair stand on end. Eric's steps slowed as he approached the Guardians. Outside of a few burned patches on the grass there wasn't much to see with normal vision. Eric stopped where he was, closed his eyes, and looked again.

He could see it now. A sketchy shape in the air, as though the night was a different color here. He turned slowly around in a circle, trying to pin it down further. He felt a chill that had nothing to do with winter, and a crawling feeling along his spine.

"You already know this is magic, right?" he said at last, trying for a light tone in the midst of this incredible *wrongness*.

"Ah, but what *kind of* magic?" Paul asked, as if this were just some sort of academic exercise.

"I told you before how a lot of people've gone missing in the last couple of days, Eric," Jimmie said. "People you wouldn't ordinarily miss, except that so damn many of them are just dropping out of sight. Or turning up dead. What we need to know is, is this a part of that?"

Yes, there was death here, and pain, and darkness. Eric thought again of the bonewood and goblin tower of his dream.

"This feels like Unseleighe Sidhe," he said reluctantly. "Mind, I've never had any direct contact with them, but it's Sidhe magic, but twisted, so I suppose that's what it feels like. . . ." He hesitated before saying more. "And there's a lot of death here. Human death. Beyond that . . ." His voice trailed off again.

"So what you told me about really is happening," Jimmie said unhappily. "But why? And how, especially here? Don't the Dark Elves have to follow the same rules as the Light?"

"They've got the same limitations," Eric agreed. The taint of inside-out magic was starting to make his head hurt. "But I kind of think the Unseleighe Sidhe would like the City, if they could stand to be here."

"Can you tell what kind of working this is?" Jimmie asked urgently. "Its purpose?"

"It's a Gateway," Eric answered slowly. "It isn't finished. If nobody messes with it for a few days it'll probably fade away. But someone was here—an elf-mage or another human Bard—trying to open a Gateway between Underhill and the world."

He explained what he could about Nexuses—how they gave elvenkind a way to tap the power of Underhill that was life itself to them, how many of the Elven Court, especially the Lesser Sidhe, could not survive away from a Nexus, and that even the High Elves needed frequent access to one in order to

replenish their magic. And that someone, apparently, was building one here.

"Well, that's something to go on with, anyway," Jimmie said when he was finished talking. She shook her head. "Now we just have to figure out what to do about it. I wonder what you bait Sidhe-traps with?"

"Power," Eric said bleakly. "At least in this case. Not your kind, though. That's at least partly learned, I'm guessing, and pretty well shielded. He isn't really interested in that. He wants the raw stuff, the innate Gift some people are born with and don't know they have."

"Well, that's a relief," Paul said dourly, then forced himself to smile. "At least we know more than we did before. Thanks for coming out on such short notice, Eric."

"Why don't you let me get rid of it for you?" Eric offered, reaching for his flute.

"No!" Paul and Jimmie spoke at once. There was real pain on Jimmie's face—and more. Fear. He remembered their conversation at the bakery: *If anybody takes a bullet, it should be me.*

Was that what she was worrying about? Him?

Paul held up a hand. "No, that's okay. Now that we know what it is, we can keep an eye on it. It's more important to stop who's doing it rather than scare them off."

If you think you can scare off the Unseleighe Sidhe, you haven't met many of them, Eric thought. "I still think I should—"

"C'mon, Eric. I'll drive you home," Toni said briskly, taking charge of the situation before it could degenerate into an argument. "Paul, you want a lift?"

"No," Paul said. "I think I'll stay out here a little while. You two go on ahead. Jimmie can drop me when she heads back to the station house."

"I still think I ought to do something about it," Eric said. Most people wouldn't notice anything out of the ordinary here, but anybody with any amount of Talent would have a natural aversion to the place. Or an attraction to it. . . .

"I'm not bringing any more civilians onto the fire-line. Do what your friends told you, Eric. Stay out of this one, for your own sake," Jimmie said urgently.

There was a world of pain—and bitter self-recrimination—in Jimmie's voice, and Toni was hovering over him as if she were about to pick him up and carry him. Reluctantly, Eric allowed himself to be led back to the car. He couldn't force his help on them if they didn't want to accept it, and Dharinel had all but ordered him to stay uninvolved. He let himself be led out of the park and deposited back on his own doorstep after another hair-raising ride in the Toyota.

But the sense of unfinished business, layered on top of the unsettling evening with Ria, made sleep particularly hard to find that night.

## **EIGHT: THE CITY OF DREADFUL NIGHT**

Chesley Kurland did not believe in miracles, even though he was holding one in his hands right now. Free samples. Hell, he hadn't seen anything like that since the Sixties, and unlike most of the crowd on the streets these days, Chesley had been there for the Summer of Love and retained fond memories of it today. As dark and grey and unfriendly as the world had gotten, there were times when the memories were all that kept him going.

Chesley made his living as a free-lance mechanic. He could repair any kind of engine, the more complicated the better. Anything mechanical just talked to him, always had, the same way some people knew what horses wanted just by looking. He was a man of no fixed address, and currently lived in the back of an old Ford van parked in the back of Ralph's Niteowl Garage up in Inwood. Ralph paid him in cash, and Chesley liked to say that he was taking his retirement in installments, a line from an old book that he'd particularly liked.

Earlier this evening he'd been hanging out down at the old Peacock Coffeehouse on the edge of the Village, and this dude who looked like he'd wandered out of the last *Terminator* movie had made the scene, offering little bundles of joy to anyone with a sense of adventure. And if there was one thing Chesley still had, it was a sense of adventure.

The garage was fairly quiet as he walked across the floor. Despite the optimism of its name, there wasn't often enough work to occupy a full crew 24/7, and tonight was one of those times. He saw no one as he made his way to the van and climbed in through the back.

Most of all, he didn't see the dealer who had been offering free samples, and who now stood concealed in the shadows with another man beside him, both of them watching Chesley as he climbed into his mobile home.

Inside the van was everything Chesley needed in this world: a mattress to sleep on, his toolcase, his stashbox, and a towering blue glass bong. You could buy them on Main Street in the bad old days, Chesley remembered. What had happened to the world since he was a kid? It seemed as if all the joy were slowly draining away from everything, like somebody'd pulled out the plug in the Bathtub of the World. Well, in a few moments they'd see if modern chemistry was there to meet the challenge.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor, he prepared the bong for use with the ease of long practice. He filled the upper half of the pipe with bottled water and packed the bowl with pipe tobacco and slivers shaved from a block of Turkish Blonde. Over that, he sprinkled the contents of the little packet. The powder glistened brightly, like a fresh fall of Vermont snow. "T-Stroke." That was what the guy at the Peacock had called it. Well, the proof was in the smoking, he'd always said. When the mixture was smoldering brightly, Chesley picked up the mouthpiece and took a deep drag.

\* \* \*

The iron all around him made his skin crawl and put him in a foul temper, but Aerune was not to be deterred from his quest. He had chosen to follow the chief of the underlings that bore the Bardmaking elixir himself, and watched as the humans succumbed to its lure one by one. Two so far tonight had not died immediately nor manifested the insensate fury that not even Aerune could shape to his own

purposes. But he had not been quick enough to seize either of them, and so they had both been spirited away by his great enemy.

It had puzzled him for a short while why these men wasted their time giving their elixir to so many who would simply die, until he realized that he could see what they could not—the blue light, so feeble as to be nearly invisible, that crowned those who possessed gifts that could be aroused by the elixir. That faint flame burned above the head of the grey-haired mortal whom he had followed here, and Aerune was determined that the mortal men should not have this prize. To his elf-sight, the corners of the garage were not dark, and he could plainly see the two men lurking there. From Urla's thoughts, he recognized one of them as the man in the black chariot who had first stolen Urla's prey.

"There is your quarry, my fine hunter," Aerune said softly, his fingers brushing the redcap's head. "Take him as you will."

Just then there was a flash of the blue light invisible to mortals from within the van, and the sharp ears of the Unseleighe Sidhe heard a stifled cry.

Urla darted forward, its long arms swinging, lips spread in a toothy grin. It bounced toward its victim, its expression vacuous and innocent.

"What the hell? You— Kid— Get outta heeere—!" one of the men shouted. Aerune turned away. There was a sound of gunfire. The man's words faded into a scream as Urla seized him.

Aerune hesitated at the door of the van. A modern car would not have given him nearly as much trouble, but the old van's panels were of heavy sheet steel, perilous to touch. He would have no more than a moment's grace, he knew, before the surviving mortal minion was upon him.

Aerune grasped the door handle and wrenched it from its hinges with inhuman strength. His gauntlets smoked as they touched Cold Iron, but they were dwarf-forged, and his skin did not burn. Within the fetid kennel lay the prize he sought—a skinny, unlovely mortal man, his face distorted with the ravages of age. The dark lord seized him, lips drawn back in a snarl of distaste, and flung the human over his shoulder. His elvensteed was waiting in the street outside. With one leap, Aerune gained the saddle and galloped away, toward the place he had chosen for his Nexus.

\* \* \*

Michael knew he was in trouble. He and Keith had followed Geezerboy back to this chop shop from the coffeehouse where Keith had been doing his candyman imitation. The two guys who were there—waiting for tonight's shipment of *Gone In Sixty Seconds*, Michael had no doubt—had been easily persuaded to go in the closet and stay there, and the decks were clear for a sweet little snatch-and-grab. They'd been about to make their move when everything went wonky. Some kid wandered in from somewhere and made a beeline toward Keith.

Only it wasn't a kid. It was . . . something else. It'd bitten Keith's throat open with one chomp. It bathed in his blood, and it laughed, a high terrible sound like broken glass on a blackboard. Michael had emptied half his Glock into it with no effect, though he knew the Teflon-coated bullets hit it.

Then he saw the other guy.

Tall. Dark like Darth Vader was dark. Menace radiating off him like chill off a chunk of dry ice. And Michael had made a command decision, right then and there. He'd run for his life. Out the side door, up

the hill onto Riverside, yelping at every shadow.

But he wasn't followed.

His hands shook as he got his Star-Tac open and dialled the private number they'd been given for emergencies.

"Boss? Boss! We've got a situation here—"

\* \* \*

It was not much of a greenwood, but it was all these mortal drones deserved. Aerune reined in and dropped his burden ungently to the ground before vaulting down himself. A moment later he crouched on the turf beside the mortal.

The human creature twitched and muttered, still caught in a web of the elixir's spinning. Aerune could see the nimbus of power grow brighter around him as the tiny guttering spark of the human's innate magic grew and flowered under the effect of the draught he had imbibed.

*Here is power indeed.* Aerune basked in its presence as the mortal might bask in the warmth of a fire. It purged the Sidhe's cold bones of the ache of Cold Iron all around him, and fed Aerune's resolve with the siren song of power ripe for the taking.

It was a simple thing for one of the Dark Court to drain the vital essence of a mortal, though few of them had enough Power to make it worthwhile. This one was different. Aerune bent his head low and sealed the mortal's doom with a kiss. *Spin for me, little Singer. Weave the web of your race's doom.*

The veil between the worlds began to thin, and the lattice that would anchor Aerune's Nexus began to take shape on the midnight air. First the pattern must be completed, then the veil itself pierced, and then Aerune and his Court would be able to call up the power of Elfhome into the World of Iron with no more than a thought. The power poured through him from its mortal wellspring: intoxicating, vast. . . .

And then it stopped.

Aerune roared his displeasure, turning on the mortal in a fury. But the man was dead beneath his hands, his body wasted away, his skin and bones crackling like a handful of autumn leaves in Aerune's grip.

*Dead. And of no more use to me,* Aerune realized, choking back his rage. The mortal alchemist's elixir gave them access to their Power, he realized, but no way to replenish it from Underhill's eternal wellspring, and so they burned out quickly, their bodies feeding on their own life-force.

The ghost of the Gateway, less than a shimmer on the winter air even to Aerune's Sight, mocked him with its incompleteness. But there are others. They are mine of right, and I will have them. Aerete, beloved, soon they will repay your death in the last full measure!

He whistled for his mount and was away again, in a clatter of hoofbeats so swift they sounded like one long drum roll.

\* \* \*

Four of the containment cells in the underground warren at Threshold were full. It had been a busy—and



potentially profitable—Saturday night, and Jeanette felt an excitement that had little to do with Robert's glorious future.

Her drug was working. Not as well as she'd hoped, but working. She'd tweaked the last batch a little, hoping to shorten the time the subjects spent unconscious, and that yielded a kind of sorting mechanism. Ninety percent of those who received T-Stroke still died, two-thirds of them instantly. The thirty percent of the Survivors that were going to manifest berserker rage came up out of the drug within minutes. But the ones who were going to manifest some kind of useful Talent slept for an hour or so, and Jeanette had decided that the deep sleep was necessary to allow the neural pathways for handling the Gift to be reconfigured without the interference of outside stimulus.

*And we have four: telepathy, teleportation, psychokinesis, and I wonder what this one is going to be?*

Intently, she watched the monitors for the containment cells. The telepath, Vicky Moon, had been the first to awaken, screaming at the voices inside her head and begging them to stop. Jeanette had her lightly sedated, and at least the screaming had stopped, though she doubted the voices had. The PK and the teleport—Plummer and Langford—were less trouble. Langford had gotten out of his cell four times before they figured out what he could do, but he hadn't been able to 'port far and the effort had left him exhausted. He was sleeping now; no action there.

Jeanette watched in fascination as Plummer played with the test objects in her cell, a set of child's building blocks. Lost in a world of her own imagination, the PK talent made the brightly-colored cubes swoop and dance through the air like a flock of strange butterflies, perfectly content.

The alarm began to beep as the fourth subject returned to consciousness, and Jeanette waited to see what he'd do, her mind wandering over the evening's harvest. Four, out of how many doses handed out in Soho and the East Village tonight? At least two hundred, and even assuming the sweepers missed half of them, there should be ten bodies down here in the cells, not four. She knew she'd been generalizing from pitifully inadequate data—was her viability rate closer to 5% than 10%?

Or were the others going . . . somewhere else?

Just then a scream riveted her attention on Cell Four, and Jeanette uttered a startled yelp of disbelief at what the monitors showed her.

There werethingsin the cell with Hancock. Coiling, horrible, impossible things. Things that glowed with their own light. Things that dripped blood. Things that moaned and mewed in the voices of tortured children, pressing up against the door and beginning to flow under it as if they had no bones.

Jeanette's heart hammered in terror, and for a moment all she could think of was flight. But wherever she ran, these things would find her, find her and hurt her, hurt her,*hurther*. . . .

Unable to tear her eyes from the screen, Jeanette fumbled for the row of covered buttons, scrabbling blindly to release the safety cover. More of thethingswere sliding under the door now, creeping and slithering down the corridor, drooling blood and pus and other, less nameable fluids. They twittered like birds and mewed like kittens, and some of them were speaking words that in moments she was terrified she would begin to understand.*Please, God, I have to be right about this, please, please, please.* . . .

The guard at the end of the corridor saw them too. His eyes bulged with disbelieving terror, and he dragged at his sidearm, firing wildly and without effect into the mass of nightmare moving toward him as

he screamed for mercy.

She found the button for Cell Four and stabbed down at it hard enough to break a nail. The display above it turned from green to red and began to flash; she could see it pulse out of the corner of her eye.

The guard in the corridor shot himself just before the first of the *things* reached him.

And then the gas with which Jeanette had flooded Hancock's cell did its work. Hancock slumped to the floor, unconscious, and all the nightmares began to fade away.

*I was right. Oh, thank God, I was right.* Jeanette blinked back tears, furious with her own weakness as the crippling terror receded. An illusionist, that was all. Some kind of mental projections, and a really sick mind behind them all.

She turned and picked up a handset on one of the other consoles. She needed to clear her throat several times before it would work. "Housekeeping. This is Campbell. I need you down on Level Three to pick up a body. And send Beirkoff down with some euphorics—strong ones." *I want Hancock thinking about nothing but white fleecy clouds and little pink bunnies until the T-Stroke has worn off.*

"What are you doing here?" Robert demanded abruptly from behind her.

Jeanette spun her chair around with a strangled shriek, her nerves still raw from the brush with Hancock's mind.

"My job, Robert," she said in a harsh voice. "We've got three usables from tonight's trials. Cell Four's no good unless you want to drop him behind enemy lines to drive the bad guys mad. I'm wondering if my original model is off, though. There should be at least a dozen more Talents from tonight's sweep."

Robert grimaced in impatience. "That's what I'm trying to tell you, you stupid bitch. Michael just called in. There's someone—*something*—out there that's stealing our Talents."

His words dovetailed so neatly with her earlier thoughts that Jeanette was startled. "What? How?" I barely know about this project—how can anyone else have figured it out so fast? Not to mention picking off the Survivors with that kind of accuracy.

"I don't know and I don't care," Robert snarled. "What I do know is, we're going to catch the bastard and make him sorer than he's ever been in his life. Come on."

\* \* \*

Having touched one such Empowered life, Aerune knew the scent of his prey now. He whistled up his pack of red-eared, red-eyed hounds, and set them on the hunt. With each of the Crowned Ones he found and took, his wrath increased, for the power in each of them flickered and guttered in moments, its mortal vehicle consumed by the body's own fires before the work of building the Gateway to anchor the Nexus could be well begun. Each desiccated shell Aerune cast aside with the others, filled with a ravening lust for victory, now that victory seemed so close. The night had been long and its rewards meager. It was nearing dawn now, and in his diminished condition, the light of the sun was as much the Unseleighe Sidhe's enemy as Cold Iron was.

But there was time enough to take one more of the Crowned Ones tonight before retiring to plan his assault upon the stronghold from which that power flowed.

His hounds took the scent and began to give tongue. In the sleeping city around him, animals and even insects fled in terror, and the pent-up hounds of the mortals barked and howled in a frenzy of helpless terror at the presence of their ancient enemy. But no mortal could see him as he rode, unless he wished it.

Somewhere ahead, Aerune sensed several of the Crowned Ones gathered together, but saw only one. His prey sat alone upon a bench in one of the city's many open spaces, his head bowed in sleep or submission. Aerune whistled his dogs to his side, and dismounted from his elvensteed, dropping his cloak of confusion and shadow. He stepped forward. . . .

And all the world was filled with blinding light.

"Freeze, bastard! We've got you covered!" a mortal voice ordered.

*Who dares to command the Lord of Death and Pain?*

\* \* \*

*Oh, my God,* Jeanette thought numbly.

Caught in the blaze of the handheld searchlights was something off the cover of one of the books she'd read in high school.

He was tall and slender, with skin as white as an Anne Rice vampire's. He was wearing some kind of medieval costume—black chain mail and plate armor that glinted like hematite, and his long black hair was held back by a silver circlet that plainly revealed a pair of long pointed ears. He looked like Frank Langella done up as a Vulcan in a really bad mood.

"Moon!" She pinched the arm of the handcuffed woman standing at her side. "Read his mind! Now!"

The girl whimpered. Jeanette slapped her, hard.

"Aerune. His name is Aerune. He's—" Moon broke off, moaning. "It hurts!"

"*Do it,* or I'll lock you in Bellevue and give you something to whine about!" Jeanette snarled. Moon cringed away from her anger. "The Lord of Death and Pain," she moaned.

"You!" Robert strode through the ring of armed men toward the . . . elf. Jeanette watched him in horror. Robert had been so convinced that it was the Feds who were hijacking their project that the stranger's exotic appearance didn't even slow him down. "Who are you, and just what the *hell* do you think you're doing here?"

The stranger—Aerune—drew himself up to his full height. His black cloak billowed in the wind.

"I am the Lord Aerune mac Audelaine of the Dark Court, and this man is mine. Contest with me at your peril, mortal lordling."

He turned his back on Robert, and reached for Hancock again.

Jeanette saw the glitter of the .45 in Robert's hand and stifled a cry of warning, though she wasn't completely sure who she wanted to warn. Robert jammed the barrel into Aerune's back, and even from

where she was, Jeanette could see a curl of smoke rise up from Aerune's cloak, as if the pistol barrel were red-hot.

"It burns! It burns!" Moon cried, as Aerune whirled around with a roar, his face twisted in an inhuman mask of fury. He lashed out at Robert with a backhand blow.

"You will pay dearly for that insult!" he snarled in a voice like broken music. Robert jumped back, motioning his troops forward to deal with the intruder.

But Aerune wasn't there.

"Fan out! Find him!" Robert shouted, sounding too furious to be rattled. "I want him alive!"

*You won't find him,* Jeanette thought. "Moon," she said gently. "Moon, what happened? Can you tell me who he is? What he wants?"

The girl looked at her, and now there was something almost serene in her expression. "He's what you think he is, Jeanette. He's a lord of the Unseleighe Court. He wants all the Crowned Ones—us—the ones you call Survivors. He needs us. . . ." She sighed, her head lolling on her shoulders as if exhaustion had suddenly overwhelmed her. "He needs us to kill you all."

Jeanette led her over to the bench and let her sit down beside Hancock. Moon curled up, instantly asleep. Her face looked haggard, and there were dark bruises of exhaustion beneath her eyes.

*This one isn't going to last long either,* Jeanette thought clinically. Something about T-Stroke worked like putting a penny in an old-fashioned fusebox: people could access their hidden potential, but it burned them right out within a matter of minutes. She was glad she'd brought Moon along anyway. This was probably as close to a field trial as they were going to be able to manage with any of the Survivors. Their Gifts made them too unpredictable to let out of their cells.

She glanced warily at Hancock, but the projective telepath was still in the Land of Nod, happily quiescent under the influence of the euphorics Beirkoff had given him. That was one good thing out of this whole mess. They didn't need any Monsters From The Id cluttering up the place.

She sighed, running a hand through her hair. An elf. She'd never believed she'd see one. She'd stopped believing in them years ago—forced herself to stop believing, because it just hurt too damned much. But looking into Aerune's fallen-angel eyes, skepticism was impossible. He'd been here. He was real. He burned at the touch of Cold Iron, just like all the books said.

And boy, was he mad. Madder than Jeanette had ever seen anyone get, in a serious career devoted to shining people on.

No, she had no problem believing in his reality. She had another problem entirely. Elves were supposed to be magic, and she'd certainly seen Aerune do magic, just now.

So what did an elf want with her retread junkies?

She blinked, blinded by the headlights of the big truck that pulled up, driving across the grass of the park. Robert jumped out of the passenger seat.

"Come on! We've got to get back to the lab—and hire some decent help," Robert added, his voice

hoarse with disappointment. "These losers couldn't find a pig in a one-room schoolhouse. The target gave them all the slip." For the first time, he seemed to notice Moon. "What did she get? Did she read his mind?" he demanded eagerly.

"Yes, she got something," Jeanette answered, busy unlocking Hancock's handcuffs. "And no, you're not going to like it." She glanced up at the sky. It was already turning light. She glared back at Robert. "What do you want me to do, carry them? Get me some help here. And once we get back, you and I have got to talk."

\* \* \*

"An elf. Jesus, Campbell, you been sampling your own stuff? Elves! Next you're going to be telling me the Smurfs are after us."

Robert paced back and forth in front of Jeanette's desk in her office down in Threshold's Black Labs. It was a little after six a.m. Saturday morning. The Talents—the four they'd managed to keep—were all back in their cells sleeping off the last of their T-Stroke, and everything was tidied away before the city was fairly awake. And now Robert was looking for someone to blame for tonight's fiasco.

"An elf," Jeanette repeated patiently. "That's what Vicky Moon said. That's what Aerune is." Somehow she thought it was very important to convince Robert of that fact. She'd read a lot about elves when she was a kid. They weren't the twee little Disneyfied things that Robert seemed to be thinking of. When mankind was still living in caves, they'd ruled the world, until Cold Iron had driven them Underhill. Even then, they were still formidable enemies.

"Or thinks he is," Robert said, still unconvinced. "Campbell, there's no such thing as elves, so this guy can't be one. Q.E.D." He smiled at her patronizingly. Jeanette sighed.

"Well, *hethinks* he is. You want to argue with him? What else fits the facts? You burned him. With your gun barrel, because it was steel. Didn't you see the smoke?"

"It was . . . it could be some kind of psychosomatic reaction. Or an allergy of some kind," Robert said, floundering just a little.

"The only thing with an allergy to iron is an elf," Jeanette repeated in a dull voice. "And besides, he vanished right in front of us. So either we've got ourselves an elf, or David Copperfield is looking for outside work."

"Yeah, okay, this Aerune's an elf," Robert said hastily, unwilling to bother continuing the argument. "If he's allergic to iron, that's good. It'll give us some way of handling him. The important thing is to get him back. He's obviously found some way to use his psi powers without burning out the way your test subjects keep doing. Do you think there are more of them? There has to be. If we can get our hands on them we could stop wasting our time with these trials and go right to the source."

Jeanette stared at him blankly. Did Robert actually think Threshold had the faintest chance of controlling someone like Aerune? His voice echoed again through her mind: "*I am the Lord Aerune mac Audelaine of the Dark Court—contest with me at your peril.*"

The Lord of Death and Pain, Moon had said. Oh, yeah, definitely somebody I want mad at ME.

"And how are you planning to do that, Robert?" she asked, just to be asking.

"We'll set another trap for him tonight," Robert said in a crisp managerial style. "If he's after our Talents, you can shoot them up again so they'll attract him, and this time we'll be ready for him. No pointy-eared mutant is going to thumb his nose at me!"

Great. I'm now living in an X-Files LARP. Mutants are so much more realistic than elves, right? Jeanette thought. She made one more attempt to get through to him.

"But we've got something he wants, Robert—and he has something we want. We could summon him, yes, but then we could talk to him, strike a bargain. . . ." *Elves were always making bargains*, Jeanette remembered. It could work. And he could teach them so much. . . .

"We don't have to bargain. We hold all the high cards, and after tonight, we'll have this Aerune mac Whasis too. This *Highlander* reject won't be so high and mighty once he's got an iron collar around his neck. In fact, I think he'll tell me everything I want to know," Robert gloated.

"Uh-huh." Robert's refusal to negotiate frustrated her. Aerune was pure power—and Robert was talking like he was some kind of special effect that could be captured between commercial breaks. All Robert could see was what he *wanted* to see—not what was there.

This was not going to end well. It was time to cut her losses.

"Look, I've got to finish up some reports on our lab rats and tweak the T-Stroke mix before I go home and grab some Z's. What time should I meet you back here tonight?" she asked brightly.

Robert smiled, sure he'd won his point. "Be back here around nine. We'll set things up in the Park this time—after midnight there's nobody there but the muggers. We'll have plenty of elbow room and plenty of peace and quiet. And a few surprises for our mutie friend."

"Sounds good." Jeanette forced another smile. "See you then."

\* \* \*

After Robert left, Jeanette spent a long time staring at her reflection in the black mirror of her office wall, making up her mind for sure. She'd always known that someday it would be time to leave this little party Robert was throwing, and actually, she'd been here longer than she thought she'd be. But she could smell disaster ahead, and with her own survivor instincts, Jeanette decided she didn't want to be here when it hit.

Aerune haunted her thoughts. Power. Promise. Danger. She felt the temptation to stay just to see him again beckon to her, and quashed it firmly. *It's time to go.*

She'd always known that someday it'd be time, and planned accordingly. Jeanette opened her guitar case and felt around in the lining until she found what she was looking for—a red plastic diskette with a smiley-face sticker on it. She loaded its contents to her computer and hesitated for a moment before pressing "Send."

*Has to be done.* She pressed the button. The virus began working its way through the system, erasing every hint of her presence—and her work.

Next she went through her desk, pulling all her paper files and shredding them. She took the bags to the

incinerator herself—in her outlaw days, Jeanette had never relied on anyone else to cover her tracks: when you wanted something done right, you did it yourself.

When that was done, she took a last look around. The office where she'd spent so much of her time was completely sanitized. No trace of her presence remained, except for her guitar and sound system, a rack of CDs, and a few posters on the walls. She wasn't going to take anything but the guitar with her, but she couldn't leave the other stuff down here. This place wasn't supposed to exist.

Because it was Saturday, most of the day staff wouldn't be coming in at all. She commandeered a cart from the laundry and loaded the rest of her personal gear into it, and took it upstairs where it belonged.

Her "official" office cubicle looked strangely virginal, since she was almost never there. She took a few minutes to set up the stereo, scatter the personal things she was abandoning around it, and hang her posters on the walls. She took the cart back down to the laundry (details were important when you were planning to vanish) and came back up to the office to turn on her computer.

She tested her worm by logging in with her Black Projects user code, and was relieved to see the message "No Such User." She reset the time on her computer to a date last week and logged in under her rarely-used official, abovestairs account. Then she spent a few minutes writing memos that would "prove" she'd gone on vacation a week ago, and wouldn't be back for two more.

*Let Robert start a war with Faerie. I hope Lord Aerune makes hash of him. And either way, I'm covered, and he's left holding the bag. Bye-bye, Lintel. I can't say it's been fun, because it hasn't.*

When everything was arranged to her satisfaction, she took her guitar and went home. Her apartment had always been just a place to store her stuff, and Jeanette wasn't the kind of person who accumulated a lot of stuff she really cared about—she'd learned that lesson early and too well. She threw a couple of pairs of jeans and some T-shirts on the bed, and pulled her studded leather jacket and engineer boots out of the back of the closet. She took a moment to strip the vest with the Sinner Saints colors off the jacket—it'd been years since she'd worn her colors, and she didn't want to run into any old friends now—before diving back into the closet for her saddlebags. She packed quickly—clothes, music, and cash, lots of that—before putting on her boots and jacket.

*Time to go. If that idiot wants to commit suicide, he can do it without me—and if he manages to survive, he'll still need me and maybe we'll do the dance. But I'm not taking any falls for him. Survival of the fittest. I'm sure Robert would agree.*

\* \* \*

Her Harley was waiting for her in the garage below—a cream and maroon touring beauty she'd named Mystery, on which she'd blown most of her first paychecks when she'd come to Threshold. She stripped off the protective cover and slung her saddlebags over Mystery's back, buckling them into place before lashing her guitar down to the pillion seat. It would make an awkward load, and she might have been willing to leave the instrument behind if she'd been sure she was coming back.

But she wasn't.

She wheeled slowly out of the underground garage, blinking owlishly at the winter sunlight even through the tinted face-shield of her full-coverage helmet. She debated where to go for a moment, but given her mode of transport, it was pretty much a no-brainer.

*South. Somewhere warm, with no snow and fewer questions.*

\* \* \*

Campbell didn't show up at the lab at nine o'clock. At nine-thirty Robert checked her downstairs office, found it stripped, and called her house. At nine-forty-five he let himself into her apartment with a passkey he didn't think she knew he had, and looked around. The place looked like a hotel room that had been trashed by gypsies.

God, how can anyone live like this? You can take the girl off the street, but you can't take the street out of the girl, he thought in disgust.

She wasn't here either. He looked around. There were signs of hasty packing, and the ice-cream carton in the back of the fridge where Campbell kept her stash of ready cash was empty. He felt a wave of smug disdain. *So she's bolted. Da widdle girly got scared and ran. Jesus, isn't that just like a woman?*

But did this really change anything? Robert thought about that for a moment, making up his mind. It wasn't like she'd be going to the police, not with what he had on her. Actually, Campbell's bailout wasn't entirely a bad thing. Ever since the drug trials had started panning out, Campbell had been acting pretty skittish, and that mutant-guy from last night showing up had obviously been more than she could handle. *After all, Robert Lintel thought sagely, it's one thing to read about psychic powers in a fiction book and another altogether to see them in front of your face.*

He'd probably scared her into running by talking about setting a trap for the guy tonight. Women just weren't any good in military situations. Oh, she faked it better than most, but Robert had seen the flash of fear in her eyes when the guy in the cloak had showed up. She'd just lost her head and panicked. How typical. Women were all like that.

*But I don't need her anymore. I've got more than enough T-Stroke to turn a sample over to a good research chemist and find out the proportions—and more than enough to finish the trials without her.*

And once he'd done that, he could write his own ticket anywhere in the world and kiss Threshold good-bye.

*In fact, maybe it's better to wait a day or two before trying to trap this Aerune again. He'll be sweating, and I'll have time to rope in a few more pieces of bait.*

Pleased with his conclusions, Robert Lintel left the apartment.

*Everything's going to work out just fine. . . .*

## **NINE: A GAME OF CHESS**

Though his dreams were only dreams, they were haunted by the Unseleighe taint Eric had felt in Central



Park and the nagging sense that there was something he was missing. He woke up late on Sunday morning, ruffled and disgruntled and aware that somehow he'd blown most of the weekend without getting his coursework done. His mind felt fuzzy—the mental equivalent of indigestion—and he badly wanted someone to talk it out with. But Greystone wasn't available—when he looked, the gargoyle wasn't even on its perch outside his window—and Toni and Jimmie had both made it pretty clear last night that the Guardians wouldn't welcome his involvement in the situation.

But the more he thought about it, the more Eric was convinced there was something back there in the Park that they'd all missed. Something important.

*Well, if they won't talk to me about it, I know someone who'll at least listen.*

\* \* \*

Even the most avaricious capitalists took Sundays off, and Ria Llewellyn knew from long experience that you got better work out of people if you didn't ask them to give 110 percent all the time. She'd been on everybody's back most of the week, getting a feel for her New York companies and finishing up with dinner with Eric last night—which, while fun, could not by any stretch of the imagination be called restful—and today Ria was looking forward to a leisurely day of shopping and sightseeing. Maybe she'd even succumb to the impulse to go down and see the giant Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center. She'd forgotten how much she liked New York—it was such a human city, so un-elvish, that she actually found herself preferring it to L.A., where not even the special effects were real, let alone the people. Too many bad associations there: tragedy and betrayal and her long painful climb back to life.

*Besides, Eric will be here for at least another year. . . .*

That was certainly one of the attractions. They'd made a good start last night. He wasn't as indifferent to her as he'd tried to pretend. And he wasn't out to kill her, either on his own behalf or someone else's. In Ria's opinion, both of those things made a good start to a relationship.

The windows of her sitting room at the top of the Sherry gave her a magnificent view over the Park, an unexpected oasis of green in the steel and concrete forest of the City. The trees were winter-bare, the grass a faded brown-green, but at night the lights shining down into the park gave it an air of mystery—a man-made fairyland, in sharp contrast to the inhuman beauty of Underhill. Ria preferred it.

She was lingering over a last cup of coffee, a legal pad on her lap, when her phone rang. Few enough people knew where she was that she had no hesitation about picking up the phone instead of letting the front desk take the call.

"Hello?"

"Ria? It's Eric!"

*Eric!* She allowed herself a small smile of triumph. The first one to pick up the phone lost. *And your loss is my gain.*

"Eric," she purred. "How wonderful to hear from you so soon. Did you sleep well?" she asked, layering a double meaning into the innocent phrase.

She heard a rueful chuckle on the other end of the line. "Not really. I'd like to talk to you."

*And do more than talk, I'll wager.* Should she lead him on for awhile to demonstrate her power? Or would immediately giving him what he wanted be more effective? *Decisions, decisions.*

"Of course. Why don't you come over here? I'm at the Sherry-Netherland. The view of the Park is spectacular. I'll order a fresh pot of coffee. Or would you prefer tea?"

"Central Park?" For a moment Eric sounded completely nonplussed. Then: "Sure. Give me about forty minutes."

"I'll be waiting." And to hell with the coffee.

\* \* \*

Eric hung up the phone, staring at it as if it were about to do something strange and unusual. He didn't know what he'd expected when he decided to call Ria, but it wasn't this, well, *blatant* invitation. What was she up to this time? *Other than the obvious, and if there's one thing you can say about Ria, it's that she isn't.* Anyway, he was committed now. And there couldn't be any harm in going up to her place to talk, now, could there? Besides, if he went there, he wouldn't have to risk stirring up the Guardians by poking his nose into their business. He thought the best thing might be to stay out of their way if they'd stay out of his.

Time to get dressed, but in something a little less warlike than what he'd worn to their last encounter.

He pulled out a chunky oatmeal-colored fisherman's sweater, and hesitated for a moment between slacks and jeans. Ria wasn't a jeans kind of person, he decided, and went for a pair of dark grey slacks. He grabbed the leather jacket he'd worn last night, and dumped the contents of his messenger bag out on his bed to make room for the flute. He gave the books and notebooks a resigned glance. Rector wouldn't cut him any slack; he'd better get his paper—or at least, *some* kind of paper—done before 2 p.m. tomorrow.

Somehow.

\* \* \*

He'd been past the Sherry-Netherland a few times in his rambles, but he'd never been inside. It was an imposing structure, like something out of an Edith Wharton novel: very repressed, very Old New York. He almost expected the gaudily uniformed doorman to refuse to let him in.

He made his way across the lobby to the elevators, found the one that serviced Ria's floor, and got in. The elevator was an express, and took off with a *woosh!* that left Eric's stomach far behind, though it mercifully released him a few moments later. The corridor outside its doors was painted a tasteful rose-beige that reminded Eric of something you might find at a mortician's. Ria's penthouse suite was at the end of the hallway, and as he approached it, Ria opened the door.

She was wearing a man-tailored blouse of heavy white silk that she'd wrapped, kimono-style, instead of buttoning, and it was pretty obvious that there was nothing under it. It was tucked into the waistband of a pair of wide-legged cuffed and pleated pants of bronze hammered silk, and on her feet she wore a pair of high-heeled gold mules. Eric could see that her toenails were painted Jungle Red. With her blond hair hanging loose in a Veronica Lake sweep, Ria looked like the Bad Girl from every film noir ever made.

"Nice to see you again," she said briskly. Spoiling the illusion? Or breaking a deliberate spell? With any

other woman, he'd know. "Come on in."

Eric followed her into the main room of the suite. Her perfume hung in the air, the same subtle understated floral she'd worn last night at dinner. He tried to ignore it. He'd come here to talk over a problem, not be a slave to his raging hormones.

There was a coffee service set out on a low table bordered on three sides by loveseats in a pale shadow stripe. As Ria had said, there was also a splendid view of Central Park. Eric tried to locate the spot where he'd stood last night and failed. It wouldn't be hard to find again, though.

"Coffee?" Ria asked, and when Eric nodded she poured. He still found something deliciously perverse about drinking coffee, since what was harmless to him was so deadly to Kory and his other elven friends.

"I didn't mean to interrupt your day," Eric began, "but something pretty weird happened last night, and, well, I wanted to talk about it to someone who'd understand. You see—well, to begin with, the place I live isn't an ordinary apartment building." *Lame, Banyon, really lame!*

But Ria didn't zing him on it, the way Beth or some of the Sidhe would have.

"So I gathered, after I met your stony friend," she commented, sipping her own coffee. She regarded him over the rim of the cup with steady emerald-green eyes, their vivid color one of the many legacies of her mixed blood.

"Well, Greystone's just the tip of the iceberg," Eric said glumly, belatedly realizing how much he'd have to explain before he got to the Unseleighe Nexus, and how little Ria was probably going to like any of it. "You see, there are these folks called Guardians. . . ."

Quickly he sketched out as much as he knew of the Guardians and their mission to protect the average run of humankind from the Dark Powers. He told her about Dharinel and Kory's warning of Unseleighe activity in the city, and of his own strange, possibly prophetic, dream about the goblin tower overshadowing Central Park amid the ruins of Manhattan.

"I told Jimmie about it, but with the Sidhe you never know *when*. Right now? Next year? Next century? But last night after you left, Toni came to see me because the Guardians had run into something funky out in the Park that they wanted my opinion on. When I took a look, I found that the whole place is lousy with Unseleighe magic—and something else I couldn't quite put my finger on—and it looked to me like somebody was trying to open a Nexus."

"In Central Park?" Ria's voice was rich with disbelief. "Using what for a Bard? And leaving aside the question of what kind of Sidhe maniac would want to open up a Nexus in the middle of one of the biggest cities in the world? Sidhe magic would be almost worthless with all the iron and steel—and man-made electro-magnetic fields—around, even if they lived long enough to use it. Even a human sorcerer has trouble in a big city, with all those minds around clogging up the Etherial Plane."

"Seleighe magic wouldn't work here," Eric admitted. "At least not consistently. But Unseleighe power runs a little differently, doesn't it?" He knew Perenor had been acting pretty much as a lone wolf in his vendetta against Terenil, but someone that ruthless must have made overtures to the Dark Court at some point.

Ria considered, worrying at her lower lip with her teeth as she thought. "I don't know that much about the Dark Court, but I'd have to say that most of the power they use isn't that different. Not in kind,

anyway, or ultimate source. But in degree, yes—the Dark Court isn't squeamish about feeding off other peoples' life-force. And in a city this size, I'd have to say there'd be enough prey available to take the edge off any discomfort Cold Iron would give them. Enough deaths would allow them to punch through any kind of interference, at least for a short time. But whoever it is that's trying to put up a Nexus here, he'd have to know he couldn't just maraud around and not expect to be stopped—by your Guardians, or the police at the very least. And for all that either of us knows, there's some alphabet agency out there like the Men In Black to save the world from the scum of Faerie. This isn't the Stone Age!"

Eric grinned slightly, savoring the mental image of a posse of sunglasses-wearing Feds in Lincoln Green Armani suits armed with high-tech wizard's staves and magnetized steel sword-phones. *It's almost weird enough to happen.* . . . Then he turned serious again.

"Maybe whoever it is doesn't realize what he's actually up against. If you're Sidhe—and practically immortal—and living Underhill anyway—you might not really have noticed the last two or three centuries go by, even though it's made a helluva lot of difference here in the world. Meanwhile, you can't deny he could do a lot of damage before someone stopped him—and what would happen if the Feds got real concrete proof that the Sidhe existed? I tried to warn Jimmie and the others, but those Guardians are way in over their heads—and they won't even consider the possibility that this is something they can't handle. Quietly, I mean." *Or at all. Guardians die as easily as anyone else, and the Dark Court can put a lot of resources into the field.*

But Ria's attitude had changed while he was making his point. She looked almost disapproving, now.

"I'm flattered that you'd want to use me as a sounding board," Ria said, sitting back in her seat and regarding him with an unreadable expression. "But frankly, Eric, I don't see what this has to do with you or me, other than meaning we ought to get out of here before the fireworks start."

Eric stared at Ria in disbelief. He'd just naturally assumed that once he'd told her what the problem was, she'd immediately have some suggestions for what to do next to take care of it.

"If a Sidhe Great Lord starts a war with the United States, we're going to be drawn into it no matter what," he finally pointed out. "This is entirely leaving out the people who'll get killed, or hurt, or sucked dry before he's stopped."

"The Guardians think they can handle it. You said yourself they'll probably stop him eventually. And you're the one who's living here, not me," Ria said. "Besides, there's a faint possibility you've misread the situation. Maybe a few disappointments will change your Nexus-builder's mind about moving here before he throws down for a full-scale war. So why not let these Guardians do what they're here for? You said it was their full-time job. They probably have lots of experience."

"Not with this," Eric said stubbornly. "They don't get many Sidhe here in the city. They've never seen this kind of magic before. You have, and so have I. You know what kind of damage a situation like this can do." He leaned forward, willing her to understand how important this was. But even before she spoke, he knew he'd failed.

"Eric, people are dying horribly every day, all over the world. Even if I devoted my every waking moment to making things better for them, it'd be a drop in the bucket compared to what they're doing to themselves. I have responsibilities closer to home—to my employees, to my staff, to the people who depend on me personally to be there, and not go haring off on some kind of damnfool idealistic crusade designed to get someone close to me out of a midterm exam."

"*Isthat* what you think this is about?" Eric demanded, recoiling in hurt. Ria of all people knew how much trouble a Nexus in the wrong hands could be. He'd been sure that the moment he explained things to her she'd be ready to help.

Ria smiled gently. "No, Eric, not entirely. But I think it is part of the reason you're trying so hard to push yourself into someplace you're obviously not wanted. Dharinel told you to stay out of it. These Guardians told you the same thing. Why not listen to somebody for a change?"

*I've already been doing too much of that!* Eric felt a stubborn anger rising inside him, and tried to push it aside. He'd been open and honest with Ria, and she seemed to be treating this as if it were all some sort of meaningless game!

"Okay. All right. I guess I deserve some of that. But at least come and look at the place in the Park with me. Make up your own mind about how bad this could be. And if you don't want to get involved then, I'll respect that."

He leaned forward, willing her to say yes. To that much, at least.

Ria sighed. "Okay, Eric, you've won me over. I'll come and look. But I can't do it today, and Monday's looking pretty full, too. I have companies to run; give me a few days. I'll clear a space in my schedule."

*A few days could be too late!* Eric took a deep breath and regained control of himself with an effort. He felt oddly disappointed—in Ria, in himself—as if a door that might lead to something wonderful had just been unexpectedly slammed in his face. He'd thought—well, maybe he hadn't actually *thought*. He'd been upset about what happened at the Park last night, he'd wanted to see Ria again, and he guessed he'd let his hormones do at least some of the thinking.

"Okay," he said grudgingly, hating how hurt, how *betrayed* he felt. "I guess that's fair. Why don't you give me a call when you've got some free time?" He got to his feet. "I won't bother you any more. I'm sure we've both got a lot of things to do."

Ria rose gracefully, her face a cool social mask of politeness. Bard or not, Truth-sense or not, he couldn't get a peek at anything behind her shields to judge her feelings. "I'll see you later, then, Eric."

With as much dignity as he felt he could muster under the circumstances, Eric left.

\* \* \*

Out on the street again, Eric took a few moments to catch his mental breath. Those mis-cues just now had been at least partly his fault—and more than partly, if he were being totally honest with himself. He realized that he'd been thinking of Ria as a sort of natural ally against the Guardians who'd fall in with anything he proposed—well, she'd disabused him of that notion pretty quick.

*Then I'll do it myself, said the Little Red Hen.*

He managed a smile. It would have been nice to have company and a little backup, but he was a Bard, after all. He could do his own investigating. *And I'm right here, and the Park is pretty safe during the day. All the muggers are probably out Christmas shopping, too.*

And it wasn't really going against Dharinel's advice. Not yet. Whoever'd put up the Nexus didn't seem to be around during the day, and Eric would be sure not to leave any trail that could lead an Unfriendly

back to his doorstep. The guy was after Talents, and Eric didn't fool himself about the fact that his own power made him a pretty enticing mouthful. And he wasn't interested in being anybody's lunch, thank you ma'am.

But a little looking around wouldn't hurt. And Ria was right about one thing. With a quick glance in the dark and a bunch of other people around, he might have misjudged how serious the situation was. He waited for a break in the traffic and crossed the street, heading into the Park.

\* \* \*

From the window high above, Ria watched him go. She felt an irritated mixture of anger and regret over what had just happened.

Just who the hell did Eric Banyon think he was, anyway? The Lone Ranger?

*Not the old Eric Banyon, that's for sure.* The old Eric, the one she'd kept as an intriguing pet, wouldn't have thrown himself into things this way. That Eric had waited to be led, or told what to do. This one made his own choices, and his own rules.

*But I'm not going to play by them. He can be the Lone Ranger if he wants, but he'll have to find another faithful Indian companion!*

She respected him enough to send him away today, rather than teasing him into bed. It would have been a sweet sort of triumph to distract him that thoroughly—Eric had always been a generous lover, and this new maturity made him even more interesting as a potential bed partner—but she wanted him as an equal, not a conquest. And that meant equality on both sides. If she didn't want Eric as a submissive follower, then he was going to have to learn that he wasn't automatically the leader, either. Living in the real world meant negotiating for what you wanted—and if Eric wanted her as much as she wanted him, he was going to have to learn that little lesson. *And hope it doesn't kill either of us.*

That didn't mean she was going to hang him out to dry, either. He'd been right about one thing: she knew this enemy better than he did. She hesitated a moment, coming to a decision, and then picked up the phone.

"Jonathan? Ria. Look, I've run into a little something out here that needs looking into, and I'm going to need some backup. Yes. Armed and *very* discreet. Who do we use in New York? Call me back when you have the number. I want to make the call myself."

\* \* \*

About an hour later there was a knock on her door. She checked through the peephole, and then opened the door.

"Gotham Security," the man said, holding open a photo ID for her to look at. *Raine Logan*, read the name below the photo.

He was only a few inches taller than she was, but he carried himself as if he were six feet tall. He wore a dark blue nylon bomber jacket and jeans, with an army surplus duffle slung over his shoulder. His black hair was brushed straight back from a deep widow's peak, there was a day's worth of black stubble on his jaw, and beneath his bulky clothing, he had the trim, sculpted body of someone who worked out with weights for more than show. When she'd called the service, she'd specified needing someone who could

keep her safe anywhere in New York—and blend in on the street. The man they'd sent more than fit the bill. You wouldn't give him a second glance anywhere from Spanish Harlem to Crown Point.

"Come in, Mr. Logan," she said, closing the door behind him.

"Just Logan. And you're Ria," he said. "These are for you." He held out the bag. "The service has your size and your profile; you've used our West Coast service in the past."

She opened the duffel and pulled out the contents. Worn jeans with the extra gusset at the crotch that would give them as much flexibility as a pair of dance tights, a tight black T-shirt, and a jacket. It looked like a cheap vinyl imitation of a black leather jacket, but when she lifted it, it was heavier than she expected. She checked the lining, and found it was lined in Kevlar—enough to stop anything up to a Black Talon cop-killer.

"The dispatcher said you'd be going into some rough neighborhoods. You don't want to go looking like money," Logan said.

"Thanks," Ria said, meaning it. Gotham Security was the best. They turned down more clients than they accepted, and the reason they still accepted her commissions was because she never argued with their decisions once she'd set the parameters. Ria respected competence in any field. When you hired an expert to keep you safe, there was no point in telling him how to do his job.

"Help yourself to some coffee. I'll go change."

She'd worn running shoes on the plane, but they weren't some expensive brand someone would try to kill her for. She stripped off the seduction outfit she'd worn for Eric and changed into the street clothes the bodyguard had brought, then braided her hair severely back and pinned it into a tight bun. She looked in the mirror, frowned, and then went into the bathroom to scrub off every trace of makeup. There were thin gloves in the pocket of the jacket, and she put them on. Satisfied at last, she came back into the sitting room of the suite.

Logan was standing where he could watch both the doors and the windows, a cup of coffee in his hand. He regarded her impassively, and then gave a short nod of approval.

"Let's go." He held out a black watch cap. "Wear this. Blondes aren't that common in some parts of town."

\* \* \*

Eric hadn't told Ria exactly where the unfinished Nexus was, but once she got into the Park, the trail of Unseleighe taint was fairly obvious. Logan followed her like a silent shadow as she cast around, working her way into the center of the magic.

*Here.*

The partial Nexus shimmered in the dry winter air, invisible unless you were Gifted and knew what you were looking for. Its twisted magic made even Ria shudder inwardly. This was Unseleighe work, fuelled by death, *humand* death. She could still see the faint smudges of levin bolts on the grass where the Sidhe Lord had destroyed the bodies of his victims.

The surrounding trees looked faintly haunted. If the Nexus came fully into being, this would become a

bonewood, the trees taking on a malicious life of their own in imitation of their dark master.

*So he—whoever he is—was here. But where did he come from, and where did he go?* In and out of Underhill, of course. She wouldn't be able to track his movements Underhill from here, and even if she'd had the power to force an entry into Underhill from a standing start, she knew too little about her foe to make it a good idea. She turned her attention to another part of the problem. Eric had been here as well, and recently. Had he seen what she saw, she wondered? And if he had, where was he now?

*Not chasing the Unseleighe, that's for sure. There's nothing to track.*

She circled the area, frowning faintly. This wasn't Unseleighe Sidhe work alone. There was something else here as well.

Her hands wove small patterns through the air as she called upon her magic—not the Gift that was the birthright of the Sidhe, but sorcery that she'd learned painstakingly over the years. She worked slowly and carefully, and at last she had banished everything that was wholly of Underhill from her perceptions.

But something remained, the human taint she had noticed at first.

And *that* left a trail she could follow.

\* \* \*

An hour before Ria left her hotel room with Logan, Eric headed into Central Park. He stopped just inside the grounds to dig his flute out of his bag and put it together. He blew a soft note into the mouthpiece to warm the cold silver, and seemed to feel the trees around him shiver in response. More proof, not that he needed it, that someone had been using major magic here—enough magic to wake the trees, let alone the dead.

Carrying his flute in his hand, Eric walked deeper into the park, back to the place Toni had brought him to last night. The scorch marks were still there, and in the daylight he saw something he'd missed the night before—the deep cuts of horses' hooves in the frozen turf.

*And sure, there are bridle paths through the park, but they're clearly marked and the riders stick to them. And these tracks sure weren't made by any New York Rent-a-Nag. Where were you going, Mister Dark Lord of the Sidhe? And who were you after?*

*Let's see just how you've been spending your time. . . .*

He lifted his flute to his lips and began to play. A few trills and runs first, just to warm up, and then he segued into "Sidhe Beg, Sidhe Mor," letting the plaintive demand of the music speak for him.

The light seemed to shift, some colors growing brighter, others vanishing entirely. The hard brightness of the afternoon sun became muted, fading almost into the unchanging silvery light of Underhill, while the latticework of the unfinished Nexus burned bright and clear, like a sculpture of purest purple-black neon. The constant background noise of New York—sirens, traffic, and the hum of a thousand conversations all taking place at once—faded to silence. Now Eric could see the magic plainly, yet he himself was as invisible to mortal eyes as magic normally was. Cloaked in his music, Eric could pass through the city unseen, even by his quarry. He turned, casting about.

The whole park was dotted with hoofprints that glowed with a deep scarlet light—the Unseleighe Lord,



whoever he was, had been making himself right at home, him and his elvensteed. The creature's glowing scarlet trail crisscrossed the grass from a dozen directions, giving the dry winter grass a spuriously festive look.

*I can't follow all of these!* Eric shifted his bag higher on his shoulder. He had to pick one—but which?

At last he saw one set of hoofprints of a slightly different color than the rest—almost maroon, instead of the bright vermilion of the others. As he stepped into them, he caught a faint whiff of something . . . something almost raw and primitive next to the ancient malice of the Unseleighe Sidhe.

*As good a way to make a choice as any,* Eric decided, and began to follow the dark track.

The track quickly took him across town and out of the high-priced spread. He could see splashes of magic along the way—as if someone had been carrying it in a bucket that kept slopping over, staining the sidewalks and buildings. When he got further downtown, a fine red mist seemed to hang in the air like a fog of magic—too thin to really have any effect, but more evidence that its source—or even many sources—had passed through here, all leaking magic like a sieve.

What is this? A mage's convention? And if so, why wasn't I invited? he thought whimsically.

The odd thing was, the "splashes"—for lack of a better word—seemed to be concentrated around the street people. None of them seemed to be the source, but somehow they'd been *near* the source, and not very long ago. Eric guessed the Nexus point in the Park hadn't been started more than a day or so—the timing of its building coincided perfectly with his dream—and the traces he was following would fade away completely in another day or so.

*Cold weather to be on the streets,* Eric thought, watching an old man pushing along a grocery cart full of bits and pieces of unnameable junk. *A Sidhe Lord down here. Now THAT's culture clash.*

The contrast between the busy, purposeful shoppers—all of whom had homes to go to—and the shabby homeless that cowered back from them like hungry ghosts was jarring. He didn't remember there being so many street people the last time he'd been in New York—hell, he didn't remember there being any, but the Upper East Side tended to run them out of the area pretty rigorously. He'd gotten used to seeing them in the last few weeks—as used as you could get, anyway—but as he headed east, he realized that the ones in his neighborhood were just the tip of the iceberg. As he left Yuppiland and entered the area of clinics, flophouses, and SROs the tribe of the disenfranchised seemed to multiply, and for the first time Eric realized how very many people in this city had no other home than the streets. Not hundreds. *Thousands.*

And not just people living in slums or in welfare housing, but people who didn't have any place to go at night at all. He walked past a man in a tattered overcoat who might have been any age from forty to seventy and was carrying on an angry, animated conversation with the empty air. His hands were covered with small unhealed sores, and there were flecks of spittle on his cheeks. Greyish stubble covered his cheeks, and even in the cold he stank of urine, unwashed body, and illness.

*Isn't anybody helping these people? That guy shouldn't be out on the street.* But even as he wondered, Eric knew the answer. These were the "borderline" people, the ones who'd been dumped out onto the streets from the institutions where many of them had spent their entire lives to make their way as best they could in the world. The idea was that they'd have caseworkers and live in supervised housing, but there weren't enough beds or caseworkers to go around, and so most of these walking wounded ended up alone on the streets. Add to that the junkies who stayed away from social services for fear

they'd be jailed, the street kids damaged by predators or the homes they'd run from, and you had thousands and tens of thousands of people living on the streets—the population of an entire shadow city living invisibly in the cracks of the city most people saw.

A bright flare caught his attention out of the corner of his eye. Magic—the same magic he'd been following. It ended at a brick wall, the glare of it so bright it nearly hurt his eyes. He touched the flaking brickwork, and recoiled when his fingers came away sticky and dark. He rubbed his fingers together. It was blood. Old, but not that old.

This wasn't Unseleighe magic he'd been following, but human magic. Eric blinked, bringing up the image of the human city to overlay his mage-sight, and bent over to inspect the wall and the sidewalk. Now he could see that there were bloody handprints on the concrete. The wall itself was covered with blood, great arcing gouts of blood, as if somebody had tried to batter his way through the bricks with his body.

*And I'm betting that's exactly what happened*, Eric thought grimly, straightening up. He felt nauseated. Echoing through his mind, preserved in the stone, were ghostly screams of fury, as if the raging spirit were still trapped here. He scrubbed his hand on his jeans and raised the flute to his lips, playing the first tune that came to mind, an old folk tune called "She Moved Through The Fair," the sweet wistful lament seemed to soothe the energies here, sending the spirit on its way in peace, washing away the death-fury that had happened here.

"Mister? Hey, mister?"

Eric lowered his flute. He'd put so much of himself into the music that he'd lost his cloak of magic, and with it, his invisibility. He turned in the direction of the voice. There was a man watching him, a man only a few years older than Eric with haunted, lost eyes. *That could be me*, Eric realized in pitying horror. *A little more bad luck, a few more missed chances . . . not meeting Beth, or Kory. Missing out on the Faire-circuit. That could be me.*

"That's pretty music," the man said, when he had Eric's attention. "I'm Gary."

"Hello, Gary," Eric said quietly, so as not to startle his new friend. Though his body was full grown, it was clear that the mind behind the eyes was much younger. "Do you know what happened here?"

Gary's face turned sad, as transparently as a child's. "Fury died. We always used to call him that. He got sick and yelled at everybody, and then he started to fight with the wall." Easy tears glistened in Gary's eyes. "Nobody fights a wall," he said sadly.

*Not with any chance of winning*, Eric thought, glancing at the bloodstains. He was tempted to slip back into his magic and leave, but he'd already seen enough to know that he had a lot of urgent questions without answers. Maybe Gary had some of the answers.

"Have a lot of people died lately? In just the last couple days? People like Fury?"

Gary stared at him blankly, a sudden sourceless fear growing in his haunted eyes. "The angels take them—the night angels. I have to go," he said suddenly.

"Hey—wait! I didn't mean to—"

Gary turned away and scuttled quickly down an alleyway, vanishing from sight.

"—scare you," Eric finished, gazing at the empty street.

He could run after the homeless man, but he didn't think Gary had any more to tell him. Fury's death hadn't fed the Nexus—those deaths had occurred back in the Park. And what were the night angels? Unseleighe Sidhe? If the Dark Court was using Manhattan as a hunting ground, there should be unadulterated traces of their magic all over, but the only thing he'd found here was the magic he'd followed.

Nothing was adding up. It was as if he had all the puzzle pieces—and they all turned out to be from different puzzles. He sighed and looked around. At the end of the block a blue neon cross shone into the night. Eric raised his flute to his lips again, gathering his cloak of invisibility around him once more. The light at the wall was gone now, thanks to Eric's music, but somehow the neon cross shone even brighter in his Shifted sight. It was a sign for a mission, one of the places that tried to feed and shelter New York's rising tide of homeless. Reluctantly, Eric turned toward it. He didn't want to see any more horrors, any more forgotten men and women, but he needed to find out why Sidhe magic was tangled up with the homeless here.

The inside of the mission was warm and welcoming. Tables were set up where men—and women, some with children—sat spooning up soup. At the kitchen in the back, volunteer workers doled out more soup, sandwiches, and chunks of bread to a long line of those patiently waiting. They were talking among themselves in low voices where the diners couldn't hear. Eric crept closer.

"Not a lot of people here tonight," a woman said. Her companion sighed, rolling his shoulders to take the kinks out.

"There's something bad out there on the streets. A lot of our regulars are afraid to come in. I heard Johnnie Rags talking to Lindy earlier. They think we might be poisoning them."

"*Poisoning* them?" The woman recoiled in shock.

The man shook his head grimly. "I've heard from some of the other soup kitchens and flops. A lot of people are dead. And more have just . . . vanished. All in the last seventy-two hours. I thought at first that a shipment of bad drugs might have reached the street—but where would our guys get the money for drugs? They can't even afford beds, most of them."

"Unless the dealers have started handing out free samples like the tobacco companies." The two of them laughed together in disbelief, sharing the bitter joke.

"And what are the cops going to do? A lot of people die down here every day," the woman went on.

"Not like this," the man said grimly, shaking his head. "Not like this."

Eric turned away. The answers he wanted weren't here, but he couldn't escape the feeling that he'd just been handed another clue . . . if he could only understand it.

Even Shielded as he was, Eric was reluctant to leave the light and warmth of the mission for the cold gloom outside, but he knew he had to move on, see if he could follow this trail to where it began . . . or ended.

As he turned to go, a young woman sitting at one of the tables got to her feet, heading for the door. She was skeleton-thin, but she'd made some attempt at looking pretty. She wore a down jacket a dozen

seasons out of date and a thin bright summery dress. Her legs were bare.

"Where you going, Annie?" the man behind the soup cauldron called.

"Got me a date," Annie said belligerently. Eric could see they wanted to stop her, to call her back, but before they could do anything she was outside, hurrying up the street.

Eric followed her. She didn't go far. There was an alleyway a few doors down from the mission. Annie ducked into it with an ease borne of long familiarity. There was a crude shelter there, made of flattened cardboard boxes, and Annie scuttled inside, squatting down and digging into her jacket.

"Got me a free sample, got me a free sample," she sing-songed under her breath. Eric could see the glitter of a small packet of white powder in her hands. It radiated a kind of non-magical malignity that made Eric blink.

"Hey—don't do that," he protested, making himself visible again. He dug in his pocket for his wallet. "Don't take that. Here—I'll buy it from you. Okay?"

Seeing him, Annie crouched back with a feral cry of alarm. Before Eric could react, she'd torn open the packet and poured the contents into her mouth.

Its effect was immediate and drastic. Her eyes rolled up in her head and she slumped down, unconscious.

*Oh . . . God.* Eric stared at her, sure for a moment that she was dead. *I've got to help her.*

He pulled out his flute. The people at the mission knew her. They'd know what to do. But their help wouldn't be any good to Annie if she was dead.

He let the magic flow down into him, reaching out to the flicker of magic—Eric experienced it as music—that every living thing had. Her song was faint, the contents of the envelope poisoning her nearly to death. It was as if two songs were playing at once, creating a jangling discord. Imposing a third one wouldn't help much.

He listened as hard as he could for the original tune, there in the cold alleyway, and slowly began improvising a counterpoint around it, strengthening it without overwhelming it. The music became stronger—he could almost identify the tune—when suddenly he was knocked off balance by a blast of . . . music?

It reverberated through his head, soundless yet loud enough to make his teeth ache, overwhelming all other sounds. The music wanted him to follow—it was a call, a command, dark and powerful and magical. Resisting it was like trying to stand still in the path of a cyclone. Annie still needed help, but Eric couldn't "hear" his own magic against the howl of the magestorm. He ran toward the mission. He could at least summon worldly aid. The pull of the Summoning grew stronger by the moment; he pushed open the door to the mission and half staggered, half fell inside.

"Hey," Eric croaked, half-deafened by the buffeting he was receiving. "Annie's out there in the alley. She's sick."

The woman who'd been talking as she served the soup ran over to him. Dizzy and battered by the dark undertow of the magical Summoning, Eric clung to her for support.

"Are you hurt? Can you tell me your name? Come over here. Sit down—"

"No," Eric gasped. "I've got to—I've got to go. Help her. She's in an alley up the street, in a box. She took something. Something bad." It was hard to get any words out against the call of the Unseleighe magic, and finally Eric abandoned the effort. He pushed the woman away and thrust himself out into the night once more, turning in the direction of the summons.

As soon as he was moving with the pull of the magic, his head cleared enough for him to throw up some stronger shields. The power of the assault had taken him off-guard, but he had his bearings now. It would be a simple thing to isolate himself from its pull entirely, but Eric wasn't sure he wanted to do that. He'd come down here looking for the source of the magic that had befouled the city—and now, it seemed, the magic was looking for *him*.

*Sorry Master Dharinel. I know you wanted me to stay out of this one, but a Bard's gotta do what a Bard's gotta do. I just hope I'm around afterward to get yelled at for it.*

*And I think I'm glad after all that I didn't get Ria to come with me. . . .*

\* \* \*

The only way Ria could follow the magical trail was on foot, and that was a slow process. The trace was faint, and easily confused, but Ria always managed to find it again. It led her south and east, down into some of the worst neighborhoods in New York. She was glad more than once to have Logan at her back. Most folks who saw him just tended to veer off from whatever mischief they were contemplating.

Night came early in the winter, and by the time they finally crossed Houston Street it was already getting dark. Ria was footsore and hungry, but unwilling to give up the hunt just yet. She felt more alive than she had any time yet since her recovery. Ria was a born hunter, and if more of her stalks were in the world of finance than on the city streets, well, the instinct was the same.

On the Lower East Side a lot of the buildings were red brick dating back a century and more. New York had moved slowly uptown from the foot of the island since its founding, leaving behind outgrown neighborhoods to fall into decay. With taxes rising astronomically, many landlords found it more economical to let buildings rot where they stood rather than invest the money to make them livable again. The ever-growing population of those who had slipped between the cracks of what had once been touted as the Great Society had taken over the abandoned buildings, forming new tribes outside of the protection of society. As Ria and her shadow had moved downtown, out of the affluent neighborhoods, the number of homeless had increased. They huddled in doorways or crouched on the steam vents that led down into the subways, watching Ria's progress with empty eyes.

With Logan behind her, Ria headed eastward, across the Bowery. More than a hundred years ago, this had been the northernmost boundary of Manhattan, its then-cobbled streets filled with gracious ladies, fine gentlemen, and horse-drawn carriages. Of that era, only a few landmarked buildings still remained.

The trail she followed was stronger here, but her puzzlement was growing. What would a mage, human or Sidhe, be doing here, in the middle of such poverty and despair? There was nothing down here but crack houses, squats, and a few brave homesteading yuppies. Soon enough urban development would sweep through here, just as it had elsewhere, leaving a litter of Starbucks and Barnes & Nobles in its wake, but for now, the area looked like a bombed-out city in the aftermath of a war it had lost.

Yet here was where the trail began—or ended. Ria stopped in front of the old building her stalk had led her to. It didn't look particularly promising. Even in the cold, she could smell the pervasive fug of rotting garbage and old urine. She cast around, looking for some hint that the trail continued, but there was nothing. She would have been more reassured to find a Nexus here than what she *had* found. A blank wall.

*What the hell is this? Some kind of magical roach motel? "Mages check in, but they don't check out?"*

It was impossible.

It was the truth.

"Lady. Hey, lady. Gimme dollar?"

A man—a boy, really, younger than Eric—came shuffling out of the alleyway to her left. He had the look so many of the homeless had, as if he'd been sucked dry of some vital component; prematurely haggard, but no less dangerous for that. There were two more behind him, obviously there to follow his lead and share in any bounty he acquired.

She held her ground. To back away would only encourage them. Most predators—including the human predator—would chase anything that ran.

"You one a' them angels. You come down here, you gotta gimme dollar. Whaddya say, angel? Gimme dollar?"

He was close enough for her to smell him now. His hands were stuck in his pockets, clutching a knife, a club, or even a gun. She knew he didn't plan to hurt her, only to take what she had, but when did life ever go according to plan?

And why had he called her an angel? The incongruity of it made her smile. Almost.

"You don't want to do that." Logan appeared between her and the would-be predator like a drift of smoke. She couldn't see his face, but he held his hands out, open-palmed, defusing the situation with his presence and his will. The man stopped.

"She come down here, she gotta give me money," he whined, focussing on Logan. But he was hesitating now, uncertain. "She an angel. Angels take, they gotta give."

"No." Logan's voice was gentle and final. "You need to get on and take care of business somewhere else. Go on."

"Bitch. Uptown bitch." His companions had already melted back into the alleyway, discovering that Ria wasn't an easy mark. Their leader glared at Ria in frustrated disappointment. "Bitch! Angel bitch!"

"Go on," Logan said, still in the same calm voice. *As if he were dealing with a child or a lunatic*, Ria thought. *And I suppose these people qualify on both counts.* He dropped one hand to his side and flicked his fingers at her. Obedient to his signal, Ria backed away, stepping off the curb into the street. She crossed to the other side, turning her back on them reluctantly. Behind her, Ria heard a faint scuffle, and a cry, and when she turned back, the man was lying on his back on the sidewalk, and Logan was turning away.

"Let's go," he said when he reached her. "Unless you need me to take him all the way down."

"No. I'm finished here. Let's go find a cab."

A few blocks took them back to Broadway. It was like crossing into another world. Broadway was one of the city's main arteries, running all the way from the Battery at the southernmost tip of the city, all the way into Upstate New York. It was fairly safe even at midnight, lined with boutiques, shops, and all-"nite" delis. Ria did a small Summoning magic, and a few moments later, a cruising cab turned the corner and stopped.

The ride uptown covered in minutes the blocks it had taken her hours to walk. On Sixth the trees were strung with fairy lights. The bright shops and well-dressed shoppers were a universe away from the war zone she'd just left.

And Ria had more questions than she had answers to.

*A human drug addict doesn't just suddenly turn into a magician without a cause. And an Unseleighe lord doesn't just start building a Nexus in the middle of one of the most densely populated human cities on Earth without some expectation of being able to finish it. There's a connection there, somewhere.*

*So . . . find it. Find the root cause.*

*I think I need to do some more research.*

\* \* \*

Aerune had been patient, and now his patience was to be rewarded. After his last defeat, he realized he had violated the first rule of war. Always make the enemy come to you. No longer would he follow the human cattle into their puny traps to gain what he needed. His prey would come to him. And so he had woven a dark spell, a calling-on, that would bring every creature with the wit to hear it to a place of his own choosing. The Crowned Ones would hear it . . . and so, he had no doubt, would those who sought to keep his rightful prey from him.

And then he had waited with Sidhe patience, his dark piper playing, until the prey should walk into his snare. At last he'd caught the scent he sought—the scent of raw untrained Power bleeding flagrantly into the air. This one was more powerful than any he had taken before, and Aerune needed that power to build his Gate.

*And if the mortals should think to set a trap for me, then I will lesson these human upstarts well in the ways of Hunting. . . .*

Drawing his horn, Aerune blew a long, deep note. It blended with the Calling-on Song, making that melody a part of itself, grew and reverberated against the buildings of the city streets, taking on a power and a life of its own, growing until it filled the world.

*Come, my children! Come to your master!*

The hounds came first, and then his hunters on night-black steeds of their own—the lesser Unseleighe lords who did him homage, the Lesser Sidhe to whom his magic was life itself.

Aerune lowered the horn from his lips, but its call continued to sound, filling the air. He drew his elvensilver sword and swung it in a circle over his head. "We ride!" he roared, spurring his mount.

Behind him the Hunt followed.

\* \* \*

They'd had to work damned hard to do it in less than a day, but this time his men had prepared the perfect trap, and Robert had the perfect bait. There was no reason to wait any longer. He'd instructed the men thoroughly about what they were to do, and sent Beirkoff and Hancock out with them. When everything was in place, Beirkoff was to give Hancock a second dose of T-Stroke—a bigger dose this time. This Aerune would come after Hancock again as soon as he smelled him. Robert was sure of it. Whatever the guy was, he wanted these Talents as much as Robert did, and Robert was making sure he had a tight grip on the only source. He'd pulled in his field-test operation. There wasn't any more T-Stroke out on the streets, so little chance of any other random Talents appearing for Aerune to poach. If he wanted what Robert had, Hancock would be his only source.

*Let the games begin. . . .*

\* \* \*

"What're we doing out here?" Angel asked Elkanah.

"Waiting," Elkanah answered, out of the boundless well of patience that was (in Angel's opinion) the senior Threshold operative's singlemost irritating quality.

"Yeah, I know we're waiting," Angel echoed sarcastically. "Waiting for some nutcase on a horse to come kidnap our geek. But what's with the chain mail? The spears? Just because this guy thinks he's King Arthur doesn't mean we have to go along with it."

Angel twirled the six-foot spear with the steel head back and forth between his fingers as if it were a quarterstaff. When he shifted position, his chain mail jingled slightly. God only knew where the boss had come up with this stuff on such short notice. But he'd worn weirder things in his time.

"We've got orders. This guy shows up, we throw a net over him and switch on the generators," Elkanah answered. Like Angel, he wore a silvery shirt of chain mail beneath a dark sweater. Even if they were seen, there wasn't anything to ring warning bells in any civilian mind. And this deep in the Park, this late at night, there was little chance of them being seen at all.

"Like he's going to back off because of a steel and copper net and a little electricity," Angel grumbled, but fell silent.

There were twenty-four men—all of Threshold's Black-level security operatives—gathered here, though only eight of them had chain mail shirts. Four of the others were carrying longbows with quivers full of steel-tipped arrows. Most of the men and the trucks they'd come in on were concealed now by heavy camouflage netting. They'd been in place for hours, waiting, told to stay out of sight in case any stray tourists wandered past.

The bait had come in an hour ago in an unmarked car. The technician with him had shackled him to an iron stake driven deep into the frozen ground. The bait was wearing a straitjacket and a gag, and heavily



sedated besides, but he didn't look like he could be much trouble. A catheter port had been inserted into his neck, and Angel watched as the lab geek stuck a needle full of something into it and rammed the plunger home. Angel was glad he wasn't the bait.

A few moments later the night began to shimmer, and Angel looked away from the bait, resting his eyes. Your eyes played funny tricks on you at night, and because of the searchlights mounted on the trucks, they hadn't been issued night goggles. There'd be plenty of light to see by once the balloon went up. They'd be as visible as a frog on a birthday cake, but Mr. Lintel had been very clear on the fact that this operation wasn't supposed to take long. They were going after the guy who'd made trouble for Mr. Lintel before, and this time he, whoever he was, was going to be way outgunned. Angel smiled. The hard men were the most fun to crack.

"Move up! Get into position!" Elkanah whispered urgently.

"Why? I don't—" Angel said.

And chaos came.

One moment the clearing was empty. The next, it was filled with men on horseback, men with dogs, shouting and screaming and blowing horns. Angel didn't waste any effort wondering how they'd gotten here. He rushed forward, his spear raised, looking for a target. If they wanted to come in like the U.S. Cavalry, he'd make sure they went out like General Custer.

A dog leapt at him, and Angel smashed it down with a Kevlar-reinforced glove. It backed off with a yelp and he hefted his spear, looking for a target. There. One of the horses.

He thrust his spear into its flank, pushing hard. There was a scream—horses screamed just like people—a flash of light, and the horse was rearing and dancing away uncontrollably, its rider shouting and flailing as he fought for control. Angel grinned, and thrust again, no longer caring who these people were or why they were here. He got to hurt them. That was all that mattered. Another rider tried to rush him. He got his spear into the horse's belly, twisted, and jerked back. Its guts spilled out onto the grass and it screamed and thrashed, adding to the noise of the battle.

Suddenly the searchlights came up, flooding the clearing with harsh white light. He could see his opponents clearly—men in fantastic armor, carrying shields and wearing swords.

The man on the horse he'd killed jumped free, dragging at his sword. He was wearing an ornate helmet, like something out of a Conan movie, and beneath it, his eyes glowed red in a bone-white face. So what? All the fancy makeup and special effects in the world wouldn't save him once Angel got close enough. All around him there were cries and screams, flashes of light when the steel drove home, and a smell in the air like ozone. Angel stepped back, momentarily worried. A heavy sword could slice his spear-haft in two, and it would take him moments he didn't have to get to his Uzi. But just then there was a hiss, and three arrows appeared in the attacker's chest. Angel had thought that archers were a dumb idea, but now, seeing the smoke billowing from the screaming man's chest, he changed his mind. Mr. Lintel had been right as usual. Iron turned these guys into wimps.

Something struck him full in the chest, burning away his shirt, but the steel mail beneath glittered unharmed. Angel laughed, and moved forward, searching for fresh targets.

As swiftly as they'd attacked, the riders pulled back. Now he and the other pikemen were between the bait and the horsemen, and the backup troops in the trucks were moving up. In the blinding light of the

headlights, Angel could see fantastic armored shapes on horseback, like something out of a bad movie, and around them the turf seemed to flow like water. A mist was rising, making it difficult to see clearly. There was a scream from behind him—one of theirs—and he turned to see someone go down beneath the jaws of a dog the size of a small pony. There was another volley from the archers, and more screams. Hefting his spear, Angel ran to help.

\* \* \*

Elkanah saw Angel run past him, shirt still smoking from one of the lightning-blasts the Bad Guys were using. As the Boss had promised, their chain mail protected them, but God help them the moment these guys figured out how few mail shirts they had. A couple of the men were already down, and there were *things* out there he didn't even want to look at. He'd seen the briefing tapes about what Hancock could do. The Boss had said he'd be on their side. Elkanah wasn't sure about that.

A dog leapt at him, taking Elkanah's spear full in the chest. It howled, smoking like it had just scarfed a doggy-treat full of napalm, no longer a threat. But the force of its attack knocked him to the ground, and its death-agonies jerked the spear out of his hands. He rolled away, fighting to clear his street-sweeper from its harness. Still supine, he yanked it up and fired. It caught one of the armored warriors full in the chest, blowing away armor and flesh with impossible force. For a moment, Elkanah could see the heart beating in the enemy's chest before he burst into flame, burning with a pale blue light. In the momentary breathing space Elkanah rolled to his feet, looking for his own lines.

*"No order of battle ever survives first contact with the enemy." Got to hand it to old Clausewitz. The man knew what he was talking about.*

\* \* \*

Aerune roared his disapproval, his injured mount dancing and shying beneath him, half-blinded by the harsh white light. Try as he might, the Unseleighe Lord could not break through the ring of steel that surrounded his prey, and his magic seemed to have little effect on the humans who sought to protect it. He'd already lost too many men. There were archers at their back, their death-metal arrows taking a fearsome toll of his Hunt—and worse, the human Mage who had been the bait in the trap was summoning creatures of madness, creatures who preyed on mortal and Sidhe alike. But his attackers were few, and there were other ways to win this battle. He could make the mortals pay for their impertinence.

And he would.

"Flank them!" he shouted over the roar of battle. "Let none escape!" *In the name of Aerete the Golden, kill them all!*

**TEN:  
FOR ALL THE MARBLES**

"Well, what do you know?" Eric muttered under his breath.

The summons was coming from within the Park.

He'd had the brainstorm to summon Lady Day as he jogged uptown, and so had managed the rest of the trip quickly. At the edge of the park he'd dismounted.

"Go home," Eric said firmly.

The elvensteed quivered, her lights flashing in disapproval. She wanted to go with him. "Home!" Eric repeated firmly. "I'll call you when I need you."

It had taken a moment to force his will on the elvensteed, but at last she'd submitted, turning in the direction of home. The good thing about elvensteeds was that they followed orders, most of the time. And at least he wouldn't have to worry about anything happening to her.

*Hostages to fortune.* . . . Something Jimmie had said, about keeping innocents off the fire-line, came back to him now, and he smiled grimly. Now more than ever, he understood what she meant. He was prepared to risk his own life, but not anyone else's.

He turned back to the park. It was fully dark now, and the streetlights in the park cast faint cones of illumination around themselves. He wasn't sure what time it was, but the streets had fewer people on them than before, and the park itself was deserted.

And something was waiting for him there.

Eric thought again about turning back, catching a cab and just going home, but sheer stubbornness egged him on. The Guardians didn't want his help. Ria didn't want to help him. Underhill didn't want to get into a fight. Dharinel had told him to stay clear. But Annie's face was fresh in his mind. Whatever it was that was out there on the streets, he had to stop it.

*So I'll do it myself, said the Little Red Hen.*

Inside the low stone wall that bordered the Park the call was stronger, and Eric was willing to bet that it was coming from somewhere near the unfinished Nexus point. He headed toward it, more slowly now, wary of ambush from something else that might have answered this Call.

Suddenly there was a flash of light ahead of him, bright continuous light, and a sudden blast of sound as though someone had suddenly turned the volume on a television all the way up. Eric ran toward it.

*:Man. Mortal man . . . :*

The voice in his head stopped him halfway to the clearing. It sounded like World War Three was going on there, but Eric didn't dare go on leaving this at his back. He turned toward it.

A pool of shadow at the base of one of the trees rose up. Eric had the fleeting impression that it wanted to be a woman but didn't quite know how. It reached out for him yearningly, and Eric felt his teeth begin to chatter at the sudden sub-arctic cold as the creature sucked the last mote of warmth out of the winter air. He raised his flute to his lips, blowing a long steady low note. He let the magic flow up into the sound, caging the creature's power and letting it drain away.

She—it—vanished with a thin despairing cry. But there were more like it, heading toward him. Half-finished things that crawled and slithered and flopped along the ground, radiating fear and pain and a kind of magic he'd never sensed before. The woods were alive with them, just like the woods in his vision—filled with gibbering shadowy shapes that were all red eyes and hunger seeking his magic, his soul, and his blood. They weren't Nightflyers—thank all the odd gods for small favors—but there were more of them than he could count.

And they all wanted *him*. Eric summoned his shields, just in time as something like a wolf but six times bigger slung into the clearing, growling. The creature crouched on its haunches, unwilling to attack alone, but still far from foiled. Eric raised his flute to his lips again and blew a quick waterfall of notes. The wolf-thing sprang up onto its hind legs, twisting and howling as the magic tore it into fragments that drifted away on the air like a skirl of autumn leaves.

But there were more to take its place, an army of darkness seeping up like water out of the ground of this suddenly accursed place.

*I need something to get rid of all of them at once. What?* The magic creating them had a source; he could feel it, like cold and deadly sunlight. Slowly Eric began backing toward it, dropping his shields enough to lure them in. He had to stop whoever was making these things, and hope it stopped the creatures as well. They might be a part of whatever fight was going on, but plainly they had no interest in it.

Inspiration struck. He began playing the slow opening notes of a Bach cantata as the monsters gathered in a ring around him. *Come to papa, babies. It's lunchtime!* Bach was cerebral, mathematical, human—the antithesis of the nightmare Unseleighe power that he faced. Eric focused on the music, letting it fill him completely. He had time for one last coherent thought—*if any of these gets past me into the City, there's going to be a bloodbath even the Guardians can't stop*—before he let the music take him, shutting out everything but the battle before him.

\* \* \*

As Aerune's Hunt eddied about the edges of the human warriors seeking an opening, the Unseleighe Lord suddenly heard a bright waterfall of music—Human magic, Bard magic, a thousand times more powerful than the pitiful flickering about the Crowned One before him. He turned toward the source and saw . . . a Bard.

The man walked slowly toward the tangle of human and elven warriors as if he saw neither, destroying the nightmares that had taken a heavy toll this night on mortals and Hunt alike. Here in full measure was the power Aerune sought, power to build a thousand Gates. Not crippled and half-complete like the others he'd harvested—no, here was power enough to play all of Aerune's dark dreams into reality.

The crazed Crowned One he'd sought was only an annoyance in the face of this greater prize. Raising his hand, Aerune slew him with a gesture. The levin bolt sparked and crackled through the iron the Crowned One wore, arcing and spitting in great wasteful fountains as it seared his flesh into bubbling ruin, consuming him utterly.

"Take him!" Aerune roared, gesturing toward the Bard. He blew his horn, summoning back his Hounds and lesser creatures.

\* \* \*

The monsters he'd been fighting melted away like ice in a blast furnace and Eric stopped playing, feeling the magic he'd been following simply . . . stop. For the first time he became aware of his surroundings.

Searchlights. Gunfire. Elves on horses. Men with guns.

*What the hell have I stumbled into?*

\* \* \*

The bait went up like a roman candle, dead in an instant. When Aerune turned, Elkanah took the break in the stalemate as an opportunity to move his men back toward the trucks. Their iron bodies should provide some cover, and he was still holding in mind the Eleventh Commandment: Don't Get Caught. They'd lost the bait, they'd lost half a dozen men, but if they could get the net over the guy on the horse, they still might be able to salvage something out of this mess.

The horsemen were ignoring his guys for the moment, and Elkanah was thankful for small favors. He yanked the net out of the back of one of the trucks, gesturing for those still on their feet to help him. The net hissed along the grass behind him like a metal serpent.

Then he saw what it was that had made Aerune pull back. An ordinary guy wearing street clothes, with what looked like a flute in his hand. The searchlights made the silver radiate like a chunk of burning phosphorus, but even in the brightness, the guy *glowed*, a bright blue as deep as the October sky. Instantly, Elkanah made up his mind.

*If Aerune wants this guy, then so do we.*

"Get him!" Elkanah shouted, gesturing toward the flute-player.

\* \* \*

Eric heard sounds behind him and risked looking away from the Unseleighe Lord on the horse. Behind him were half a dozen guys in commando suits. Some of them were wearing chain mail and carrying spears. All of them had guns.

"Sir? Step this way, please. You're going to have to come with us," their leader said with surreal politeness.

Eric backed away again, trying to keep both sides in sight. He couldn't imagine why the commandos hadn't run screaming—he'd never seen elves like these, but he knew what he was seeing—a Wild Hunt.

"Choose quickly, Bard!" the leader of the Hunt called to him, holding out his hand. "You will have no second chance, and I think your shields will not hold against their weaponry! Choose! Them—or us!"

*The hell I will!*

He had to get out of here, and knew he'd only have one shot at escape. He reached inside himself, to where the music ran like a deep underground river and pulled up a melody for which there were no earthly terms. As it filled him, he reached out for the half-created Nexus, twisting it around him as a stage magician might swirl a cape.

And he vanished.

\* \* \*

The Bard was gone! Aerune snarled his displeasure, his breath coming in a serpent's hiss. So close! And yet the Bard had dared to defy him! He would have liked to slay all those witnesses to his humiliation, but without a Nexus to draw from, he dared not waste the power. His vengeance must wait, and be all the sweeter for being so long denied. He wheeled his steed, slashing a Portal to Underhill open in the very air. His mount staggered beneath him, energy bled from every pore—he could hold this gate for seconds only, but it would have to be enough. Wielding his sword as if it were a whip, he drove the Hunt through the Portal ahead of him, letting it seal itself behind him.

\* \* \*

Angel stared at Elkanah for a long moment in the sudden surreal silence. The guy with the flute, the guys on horses, had all gone pop like a soap bubble. The Threshold operatives were alone in Central Park, and in the distance Angel could hear the sound of sirens. Their little excursion here hadn't quite gone unnoticed.

"Does anyone have an explanation for what just happened here?" he finally asked.

"We can worry about that later," Elkanah said. There was a livid burn along the side of his face, and he looked like he'd been through the wringer. "Right now we've got to sanitize this place and get out of here before the cops show up. Get out the flamethrowers—and get the wounded into the trucks!"

Those still on their feet hurried to obey, hosing down the dry grass to eliminate bloodstains, grabbing dropped equipment as fast as they could. Someone scattered a carefully prepared litter of expended fire-crackers and beer cans to dress the site for the police. In less than five minutes they were on their way, running dark through the Park to one of its northern exits.

He was not looking forward to the report he was going to have to make.

\* \* \*

At six o'clock this evening, Robert Lintel had been a man well-pleased with himself and the world. It was midnight now.

Things had changed.

His men had vacated Central Park moments ahead of an army of cops. They'd lost Hancock. Beirkoff was a gibbering wreck. They hadn't caught Aerune. And when another wild card had turned up—someone Aerune wanted more than he'd wanted Hancock, by all reports—they'd lost him, too. Half his men were dead—burned by lasers or hacked to death by swords—and all the survivors could tell him were a lot of confused tales about armored men on horseback, giant wolves, and monsters.

*Monsters.* He'd thought better of them than that. They were supposed to be elite troops, the best soldiers of fortune that money could buy. And they ran away like a pack of frightened schoolgirls.

Robert shook his head, pacing the expensive carpet of his top-floor office. He knew they were good. They'd never failed him before. So what had *really* happened out there?

Before Campbell took off, she'd been babbling about elves and the hordes of faerie, but those things that

had been in the park tonight certainly didn't act like anything Robert had ever seen in a cartoon. Still, maybe she and her stupid telepath hadn't been as crazy as he'd thought. Maybe there was something in what she'd been saying—maybe there were some kind of space aliens living here on earth, space aliens that had been the source for a bunch of legends about gods and elves and things, like that von Daniken guy said.

Robert relaxed, pleased to have thought his way through to the truth. That had to be it. Not elves. Space aliens. He'd have Dr. Ram turn Vickie Moon inside out to find out what else she knew.

*Because whoever they are, they're poking their pointy noses in where they're not wanted, and if they can appear and disappear the way they've been doing, it won't be long before they come here.*

He sat down in the cushioned leather chair behind his desk and pushed a button. "Find Beirkoff and get him up here. Bring Moon. I don't care what time it is. That's what I pay you for."

He sat back, thinking furiously. He was on the right track with T-Stroke, he knew it. That young guy who'd wandered into the middle of things—Elkanah said that this Aerune had spoken to him. If Aerune wanted him that badly, then so did Bob Lintel. The guy could obviously do everything the Survivors could do, and he didn't seem to be in any danger of shrivelling up and dying either.

*If I get him and can find out how he does it, I can make more. And then I can write my own ticket. I don't know where he's gone, but he's got to come back some time. And when I've got a stable of psychic assassins who can kill with a thought, I'm not going to have to worry about the Justice Department or the SEC anymore. I'll be able to write my own ticket anywhere on the planet . . . and I think the U.S. Government would be more than interested in getting in on the bidding.*

But why wait? Nobody ever made a profit sitting on their hands. It was time to take the war to the enemy. . . .

\* \* \*

Fortunately Logan was still with Ria when all hell broke loose. She'd ordered up dinner from room service for both of them while she'd made some calls to the Coast. If junkies were turning into mages, somebody, somewhere was making the drugs that were turning them. And Ria wanted to find out who. It wasn't impossible that this was some Unseleighe plot. Some of them positively doted on working through human pawns, using long convoluted plots like something out of a James Bond novel when a simple bullet to the head would be a lot more cost-effective.

She was standing by the window, looking out over the city, when she saw the flash of light deep in the park. Seconds later the riptide of unexpected magic washed over her—Bardic, Unseleighe, and every shading in between. Ria staggered back, caught off balance by the sudden assault on her shields, and went down.

She woke up as Logan was lifting her onto a couch. His dark face was impassive and wary. "Are you all right?"

"Yes." She didn't elaborate. Her shields had gone to full strength in the second after the assault, but she could already tell that whatever it had been was gone now.

Waving Logan away, she got to her feet again and walked carefully back to the window. There were four police cars pulled up on the street outside the park, lights flashing.

"My," Ria said coolly, eyebrows raised.

Logan was already on the phone, calling his office. She heard him give his location and ask for a weather report. He listened for a moment, then hung up.

"There's been a report of shots fired inside the park and a lot of bright lights," he said tersely.

*And more than shots*, Ria thought. "I want to go down there. But I don't want to get involved with the police."

He glanced at her, and she saw him think the problem over.

"Let's give it a while. I'll check back with my office in a few minutes and see what the cops are reporting," Logan said.

\* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later the police cars were gone. According to the frequencies Gotham Security monitored, the NYPD figured the disturbance was caused by some kids setting off fireworks. Ria knew better. The only question remaining was: what exactly *had* it been?

She entered the park cautiously, Logan taking point. He was wonderfully incurious about what was going on . . . but then Ria was paying good money for that. She only hoped his perfect manners weren't going to get either of them killed.

By the time they reached the spot Ria had marked from her window, there was nobody in sight. She wasn't particularly surprised to find it was the place Eric had been so interested in, but now the half-built Nexus was gone as if it had never been.

Suddenly there was a shadow above her—something big coming in for a landing. A pistol appeared in Logan's hand—a Desert Eagle .60, capable of taking down a moose with one shot or punching right through a car's engine-block.

"Wait," Ria said, raising her hand.

The creature landed, and bounded toward her, talking all the way. It was Greystone, the talking gargoyle from Eric's apartment.

"Blondie, we got trouble, big trouble—Eric just went 'poof' on us, and somebody was holding a real brawl here when he went!"

Running up behind him were a fortyish Latina woman and an exotic dark-skinned woman in a patrolman's uniform. Neither of them looked surprised to see Greystone. *So these must be the Guardians Eric told me about, showing up a day late and a dollar short. So much for the safety of the Free World.* Ria glanced toward Logan, but his Desert Eagle had vanished as if it'd never been there. His face was impassive. Like a good bodyguard, he faded back behind her, where he could watch what happened without intruding.



"Greystone, who is this? What's she doing here?" the Latina asked.

"She's Eric's ladyfriend, Ms. Hernandez," Greystone answered. "She's okay. Her name's Ria."

"What's happening? Where's Eric?" Ria demanded.

"Gone," Greystone repeated, sounding as rattled as a gargoyle ever got.

"We're friends of Eric's, too," Hernandez said. "We, um, heard he was having trouble up here, but when we got here it was all over. And what brings you here?"

"My hotel room overlooks the Park," Ria said. It didn't count as an answer, but at least it was a response. She knew what Eric had told her about the Guardians, and wondered what he'd told them about her. And, of course, how much of it they believed. . . .

"I'm going to take another sweep around," the patrolwoman said. "Nobody's done a real search of the area. Maybe there's a clue."

*You certainly look like you could use one*, Ria thought, but didn't say anything out loud. If this was Toni Hernandez, then her friend the cop must be Jimmie Youngblood, another of the Guardians. But even if Youngblood was no ordinary cop, it never paid to antagonize the police. When Youngblood walked away, Ria returned her attention to Hernandez. It wouldn't hurt to be sociable, especially since she wanted something from them.

"Hello," she said, holding out her hand, and smiling. "I'm Ria. Eric's told me so much about you."

"I'm Toni," the other woman said, smiling faintly at the inane exchange of social pleasantries. Ria took the proffered hand. Toni's grip was dry and warm. "Jimmie and I are trying to figure out what happened here. And just now, we wouldn't turn down any help." She studied Ria consideringly.

"I'll do what I can," Ria said, looking around. *Whether I'll tell you about it remains to be seen.* "Maybe you could start by telling me what you *do* know? I know that Eric was very interested in this . . . location."

Toni sighed. "We asked him to take a look at it last night. Let's just say there's been some weird stuff happening, and this spot seems to be the eye of the hurricane. Eric said there were Dark Elves involved, building some kind of doorway . . . would you know anything about that?"

From the look on her face, it was clear that Toni Hernandez would rather have cut off her hand than asked, but it was equally clear that she knew she was in over her head.

"Less than you'd think, but some," Ria said. "*I can't tell you right now that the doorway you're worrying about is no longer a problem. It's gone. And Eric's gone with it, damn the man.*" Let me look around a little, okay?"

"Sure," Toni said, taking a step back. "But you won't mind if Greystone keeps an eye on you, will you?"

"As long as he doesn't step on my feet," Ria said, composing her face into another pleasant but totally unmeant smile. She turned away from Toni and began walking in a slow circle around the area where the Nexus had been, frowning in concentration. Both the other women had brought flashlights, but Ria could see clearly in dimmer light than this.

The ground was cut up and torn in a wide area, almost as if someone had been trying to plow it, or to dig something up, and there were wide burn-scars defacing the grass that remained. Ria blinked, summoning up her mage-sight. Now she could see that a lot of magic had been thrown around here. There were the scars of levin bolts on the grass and the trees, and the entire place reeked of Unseleighe magics and human death.

And as if that weren't trouble enough, the Wild Hunt had been here as well. Perenor had sometimes spoken of the Unseleigherade—he'd had the right to call one, but had never done so, dismissing the Hunt as too flashy and undisciplined for his needs. More to the point, Ria thought now, it would have motivated the drowsing Court of Elfhome Sun-Descending as nothing else could have, creating an opposition that Perenor hadn't wanted to face. Every Elfhome within a thousand miles must know about this one—she was only surprised that the park wasn't crawling with Highborn.

*But Central Park is in the middle of New York City. No elf would come here without a damned good reason. And you walked right into the middle of it, didn't you, Eric?*

The Wild Magic she'd followed down into the slums was everywhere, stronger than she'd ever seen it before. Someone with Power had died here, in addition to humans and Sidhe. Ria could still see the dead wizard's ghost, hovering like a plume of red smoke in the air. Dead, and recently, and slain by the levin bolt whose backlash she'd been hit with.

But it wasn't Eric, which was some small relief.

Once she'd sorted out the Wild Talent and the Hunt, the remaining traces were easy to read. The lingering effects of very neatly done magic, all wrapped up with no loose ends, spelled Eric as plainly to her Second Sight as if it were a neon sign twelve feet high. He'd been throwing Bard-magic around as if he'd been trying to put out a fire, but even in the middle of a fight, his work was neat, disciplined, careful, the work of a fully trained Bard, confident in his skill. He hadn't killed the Wild Talent—that wasn't his style—so it had to have been the Unseleigherade. But from what she'd seen before, the Wild Talent and the Unseleighe were allies of some kind.

She glanced over her shoulder. Both Toni and Logan were giving her a lot of elbow room.

Someone else wasn't.

"You gonna do a spell, Blondie?" Greystone asked hopefully.

Ria shot him a deadly look. "I haven't seen everything that's here to see, yet—something else was here besides your Dark Lord and Eric, but it wasn't magical, so it isn't leaving traces."

"Does this help?" On its stony palm, the gargoyle held out an expended shell casing. "I found it on the ground."

Ria took it from him with a gratitude she was unwilling to show. "It might." She held it in the palm of her hand, gazing intently down at the small piece of brass.: *Speak to me, smith-wrought forging. Who has touched you? Where have you been?:*

The shell casing was too small to retain much information, but Ria gained a blurry impression of men with guns—many guns—all holding shells like this one.

"There were soldiers here," she said slowly for Greystone's benefit. "Some kind of paramilitary group,

anyway." She handed the casing back to Greystone.

She frowned, trying to piece the puzzle together. Eric, the Hunt, and a wild Talent had been here. So had a team of purely human mercenaries. Since she couldn't imagine Eric allying himself with either group, the best guess was that Eric had been caught between the two and needed to get out of the way fast. The half-built Nexus would have been the weakest point in local reality, so he must have used it to escape to Underhill, which would explain why it had vanished so neatly. . . .

Ria relaxed slightly. He was alive. Eric had a lot of allies in Underhill, and even enemies would treat a Bard with respect and probably be willing to ransom him back to his own people. So if he was in trouble at the moment, it wasn't urgent trouble, and she could call in a few favors to make things easier for him if it wasn't possible for her to track him down herself.

She walked back over to where Hernandez stood. She wasn't interested in the situation here any further, but she supposed she owed Toni a hint of what the Guardians were dealing with.

"Do you know what a Wild Hunt is?" Ria asked.

Toni blinked, as if she were taken off-guard by the question. "Some kind of a . . . it's when the dead ride out to hunt down the living, isn't it?"

"Close enough," Ria answered. "Except that it's usually the Unseleighe Sidhe riding, not human dead. Bottom line: a Hunt has ridden through here recently. It looks to me like they clashed with some men with guns—the police had a report of gunfire here in the park about half an hour ago, didn't they?"

"Yeah. They checked it out and didn't find anything. Decided it was kids with cherry bombs. But why would elves be fighting humans here? Or maybe that question should be asked the other way around: how did the men know the elves would be here?"

*That's your problem, not mine,* Ria thought. *You're the ones who didn't want Eric's help when he offered it, and I'm not a public utility.* "I don't know. But apparently Eric didn't think you were taking his warning seriously enough and decided to look into things for himself. I know he came back here today around noon, but I wasn't with him so I don't know where he went from here." *Not that I can't find out if I have to.*

Toni Hernandez looked as though she were going to press Ria for more details, and Ria was debating how much more to give her, when the other woman—Jimmie—came running back.

"Look!" she said with excited self-mockery, "a genuine clue. Somebody's been moving trucks—big trucks, heavy enough to leave tracks even with the ground being frozen—through the park. I found this near one of the sets of tracks. Someone must have dropped it while they were bailing." She held it out to Toni. Toni took it, and held it up so Ria could see it.

"It looks like one of those magnetic hotel-room keys," Toni said, turning it over in her fingers. "But there's no name on it. Just a logo."

"May I see it?" Ria said, keeping her voice even with an effort.

She schooled her face to blankness, inspecting the card. It was grey, easy to miss in the dark on a quick inspection, and anyway, the police that'd been here earlier had been looking for perpetrators, not evidence. The card had a gold logo stamped on it . . . a logo Ria had become very familiar with over the

past few days.

*Threshold Labs. That's a LlewellynCo subsidiary!*

*Someone is going to pay for this. Dearly.*

"No, I'm sorry," she said, smiling sweetly as she handed the key-card back to Toni. "I travel a lot on business, and I thought I might recognize it, but I don't. Sorry." And with her shields at full strength, not even a telepathic gargoyle could get through them to see that she was lying through her teeth.

"Oh." Toni sounded disappointed. "Can't you tell anything else? You're one of them, aren't you? An elf?"

Ria winced slightly. "No, sorry." *Just a mongrel that neither side wants to claim.* "I'm sorry I can't be of more help, but I'm afraid I'm not on the Unseleighe Sidhe's Christmas card list, and this isn't really something I've got much experience with." She tried to keep her impatience from showing. Threshold was *her* problem, *her* responsibility. She intended to deal with it without any kind of New Age Occult Police help.

"You've been a lot of help already," Toni said meditatively. "I just wish we knew where Eric was."

Ria raised her eyebrows in surprise. "I thought I'd explained that. He took the Gate into Underhill with him. But I'm sure he'll be back as soon as he can."

"I guess you're right." Toni looked as if she had more questions to ask, so Ria spoke quickly to forestall them.

"If there's anything else you need, Eric has my number." She turned and walked quickly away, leaving the two Guardians and Greystone staring after her.

\* \* \*

All of a sudden, everything was quiet.

Eric straightened out of his half-crouch, lowering the flute to his side and blinking in the deafening silence. The elves and the soldiers were gone, it was "day" instead of night, and it was warm enough that he was perspiring in his sweater and leather jacket. Eric was alone, somewhere Underhill. He looked around cautiously.

He stood in the middle of a primeval forest, one lit by the sourceless silvery light of Underhill. Trees that had grown unmolested since the beginning of Time rose high into the sky, and the ground beneath his feet was carpeted with a thick pale moss filled with tiny glowing blue flowers, making it look as if the earth beneath his feet were carpeted with stars. Despite its beauty, the forest had the faintly unloved air of a theater between performances; a stage without actors. None of the High Elves were in residence here, then—only the Lesser Sidhe, the Low Court, those which could not survive except in Underhill or near a Nexus grove. The low elves were scatterbrained at best; he could expect no help there.

As if the thought had summoned them back, he began to hear faint far-off birdcalls, and slowly, the forest filled with sound once more. An enormous purple butterfly, silver crescent moons upon its wings, wafted regally past, and at Eric's feet, something small and grey and furry exploded into action, zipping into hiding before Eric could quite see it. He grinned in spite of himself.

He was better off than he'd been a moment before, and even if the terrain was unfamiliar, there was plenty of magic here to play with. Unless he ran into a High Magus in a real bad mood, Eric could handle anything this stretch of Underhill had to throw at him.

*But since I'm not going to be staying, the situation isn't going to come up.*

He could open a Gate right here and step back into the mortal world, but without a Nexus to anchor him—and with no idea of where "here" was—he might find himself appearing on Earth centuries in the past—or the future, or thousands of miles from where he went in. It would be better to have an experienced conductor for this little trip, and Eric knew just where to find one. Elvensteeds were created for situations like this.

But first, he had to change his clothes before he fried.

That was a lot easier here than it would have been back in New York. Here there was so much magic in the air that it was like breathing pure oxygen. Eric concentrated for a moment, considering what he should wear, and settled on just getting rid of the heavy sweater and turning his wool slacks into a pair of jeans that wouldn't get ruined so easily by a walk through the woods. He might need the jacket if he Gated to someplace colder, and besides, he was more attached to it than he was to either sweater or slacks. There was no guarantee that having once banished them, he'd ever get them back; magic was funny that way.

Having switched to cooler clothes, Eric breathed a deep sigh of relief. He rolled his shoulders, easing out the kinks.

Now to get out of here. Maestro, a little traveling music. . . .

He raised his flute to his lips and began to play. First a few trills to reassure the forest that he meant it no harm, then he segued into his Calling. The forest around him shivered, half-wakened by Eric's magic, and, as if from far in the distance, he heard Lady Day's faint acknowledgement inside his head. The elvensteed would find him wherever he was, and reach him as soon as she could.

Now all he had left to do was wait—which was just as well, as he had a lot of thinking to do about recent events. Eric looked around, walking through the forest a bit until he found a comfortable place to sit. One of the great trees had fallen (or more likely, a fallen tree had been created by one of the Sidhe at just this spot the way the Victorians used to build "ancient ruins" in their gardens), and its trunk provided a pleasant seat from which to think matters over—and if he got hungry waiting, he could just conjure up whatever he wanted to eat or drink from the magic in the air. While Eric hadn't mastered *kenning*, the ability to create exact duplicates of anything he knew well out of pure magic, he could certainly summon up anything within a reasonable distance to come to him.

*So it's a great place to visit, but I don't think I'd actually want to live here.* All things considered, Eric preferred the "real world," even though New York didn't seem to be a healthy place to be at the moment, at least for elven-trained Bards.

He'd blundered into something big and nasty back there in the Park—something even worse than Dharinel's gloomy warnings about conquest-mad Unseleighe—and if he didn't want to have his head handed to him the next time he ran into the Guys With Guns, he'd better stop and think things through now, while he had a breathing space. Dharinel always said that a moment of thought could save a year on the battlefield.

*The Guardians said there was trouble in Central Park, and I found out that the Dark Sidhe was trying to put up a Nexus about where I dreamed of the goblin tower, but when I followed the trail of the magic he was using, it seemed to be all tangled up with the homeless folks downtown. At the Park, I think there was some kind of a mage with the soldiers that the Wild Hunt was trying to get at, but when the Unseleighe Lord saw me, he killed the mage, and that got rid of the monsters I was trying to take out. And I beat it out of there, but the Sidhe's already seen me. And EVERYBODY loves a Bard.*

*So . . . could things be any more of a mess? Maybe, Eric decided with a sigh. But not easily. Guns and Sidhe don't mix.* He kicked at the moss beneath his sneakers. Tiny beetles glowing in a rainbow of colors scurried out of sight, and Eric watched them for a moment, fascinated. The air was filled with birdsong now, making his fingers itch for a notebook so he could try to get some of it down on paper. Whatever he wrote would be a poor copy of the original, though. Still, it might be fun to try.

At least his responsibilities in this mess were clear. He had to get back to his own time and place, and once he did, he needed to contact Elfhome Everforest and tell them about the Wild Hunt showing up in Central Park. That should be enough reason for the Seleighe Sidhe to break the truce and settle this particular Unseleighe's hash, but that wasn't the only problem. There was still the matter of all those guys playing soldier . . . the ones with the now-dead mage.

Back in San Francisco, the Feds who were chasing him and Bethie had been tangled up with a project that was trying to tap into natural psi powers. But most people didn't have much in the way of either easily tapped psi or innate Power: the Gift usually ran deep in humans, most of the time needing magic or training to bring it to the fore.

He flashed back to the packet of white powder he'd seen in Annie's hand in the alley outside the soup kitchen downtown. What if somebody had figured out a way around needing magic or years of training to make a wizard? What if they'd come up with some kind of drug that forced Talent to the surface? That would explain the twisted mage he'd been fighting, and if the bad guys had been testing their stuff on the streets, it might also explain all those deaths that the Guardians—and the people at the kitchen—had been talking about. *Magery while you wait. No wonder that nut on the horse was so interested. If that stuff can crank up a human into a mage, just imagine what it would do for an elf?*

Eric shuddered. That was something he'd just as soon not find out about. But if the soldier-boys meant that the Feds were mixed up in things again, he was in even more trouble than he'd thought. Because if they were looking for Bethie, they were looking for him as well . . . and his cover would be blown the moment anyone looked really closely.

*Well, this is another fine mess you've gotten us into, Banyon. Master Dharinel was right, not that his being right would have kept me from meddling. But it doesn't really look like I've improved the situation once, and now both sides are after ME. Gee, Brain, what do we do now? Well, Pinky . . .*

He needed help and advice, and from someone who was as comfortable with high-level human politics as Eric was with Bardic magic. The trouble was, he didn't know anyone who fit that particular bill but Ria. After what he could tell her about today, he was pretty sure she'd help him if she could, but that help might come at a higher price than he was comfortable with paying.

*Well, we can burn that bridge when we come to it, as Mason said to Dixon.*

All of a sudden the forest fell silent. The birds stopped singing, and the creatures scuttling through the fallen leaves froze where they were. Eric looked around quickly.

*Trouble.*

Nothing in sight, but his shoulders crawled. There was someone behind him. He could feel it. Eric got to his feet, turning around slowly, shields at full, to see what had startled the forest.

He stared. It looked like a giant lawn gnome brought to hideous life. Upright, it would probably stand almost four feet high, but it was bent over so far it was hard for Eric to judge its size, balancing on grimy bare feet and the knuckles of its long, apelike arms. It was wearing human clothes centuries out of date—calf-length leather pants and a long grimy smock that might have been white once but was now soiled to a grimy brown. Its face was a caricature of a human face—almost noseless, with tiny piggy eyes. On its head it wore a crusty brownish-red cap that it had dipped in some thick liquid that was flaking away now as it dried. The creature stank of undefinable things.

When it saw Eric's face, it smiled, the grin splitting its nightmare face impossibly wide. Its mouth was filled with long yellow teeth.

*Sharpyellow teeth.*

## **ELEVEN: LORD OF THE HOLLOW HILLS**

Robert Lintel regarded his temporary headquarters with disgust. Even in December, the smell was incredible. It was filthy beyond anything he'd imagined possible—interior walls torn down, some covered in graffiti, whole rooms used as toilets, people sleeping anywhere, on torn mattresses or just piles of rags. This abandoned building was a haven for runaways. That was why he'd picked it.

He stared at the terrified band of feral children huddled together in the middle of the room. He was doing these kids a favor, he realized. They should be grateful to him for putting an end to their whole trivial sordid existence. For once in their useless lives, they'd get the chance to do something that mattered, something that would benefit people more important than they could ever be.

As far as he had been able to tell from Jeanette's notes and what he'd gotten from the Survivors back at Threshold before he'd used them up, the younger you were, the higher the initial dose, the better chance you had of surviving exposure to T-Stroke and developing the Talents that Robert Lintel needed. He didn't have any more time to mess around handing out free samples to dozens of people to get one or two Survivors. He needed broad-based success—and fast.

"Okay, you! Sabatini! Is this everyone?" he barked.

"Everyone in the building, sir," Sabatini said. Robert had brought the cream of his surviving security troops here with him. The eight of them were loyal—and smart enough to know that they were implicated

in everything Threshold had done so far. They needed Robert's protection—and Robert needed what these children could provide.

"We've got all the exits sealed. Nobody goes in or out," Sabatini said.

"Good." Street hookers and runaways were no match for trained professionals. His men had taken the place over before half of them realized they were being invaded, and within minutes his operatives had searched the whole building and rounded all of the squatters up and brought them here.

The funny thing was, not one of them had fought back. Robert had seen this kind of behavior before. Most people took a certain amount of time to work themselves up to physical resistance in a traumatic situation. Often the difference between the amateur and the professional was their quickness off the starting blocks, not their martial arts skill. The amateur might be just as proficient as the professional, but it took him longer to make up his mind that the situation required violence. And that was the difference between success and failure. So to keep any would-be heroes off balance, Robert'd had his prisoners slapped around a little once he'd gained control of the squat, just to drive home who was boss now. The children huddled together like a pack of orphaned kittens, wearing lace and leather, lipstick and sequins, the tawdry finery of a pack of Lost Boys and Girls who would never live to reach Neverland. They'd seen the uniforms and the guns, collected a few bruises, and now not one of them was willing to do so much as complain, no matter what he did to them.

They might get their spunk back in a few hours, but by then it would be far too late. In fact, it was too late right about . . .

"Now. Start dosing them."

Angel and Sabatini shouldered through the circle of huddled children. Of the twenty-four men who'd been in Central Park last night, only these eight remained, but that was more than enough for his purposes. In fact, when he got what he wanted here, they'd be disposable, too.

Robert had brought one of those pressure injectors with him from the lab, and all the T-6/157 he could find. Even after the random doses they'd put out on the streets over the last two days, there were several kilos left—more than enough to build an army with. As Angel held a gun to their heads, Sabatini injected the street kids one by one with a double dose of T-Stroke. Most of them didn't even make it into a sitting position before passing out.

Robert smiled his approval as the last of the street kids dropped unconscious to the ground.

"Sir?" Elkanah asked. "What do we do with the ones that go crazy? If we put them out on the street, they might lead someone back here."

"Put them down in the basement." On his earlier reconnoitre of the building, Robert had seen that the steps to the cellar were gone. Anyone thrown down there—assuming they survived the eighteen-foot drop—would have no way of getting back out again. "Put the dead ones down there, too. They might as well have some company."

Sabatini was sorting the limp bodies now. Two thirds of the kids were still alive. So I was right about younger subjects surviving better. All to the good. There'll be no lack of subjects. Thousands of kids vanish every year, Robert thought.

Almost as soon as the dead bodies were cleared away, the Screamers started to awaken. They were



harder to dispose of than he'd expected; supernatural strength seemed to go hand-in-hand with violent psychosis, and his operatives had to play rough. Fortunately only five of the surviving subjects needed that treatment, and with the doors between the kitchen and the front room shut, he couldn't even hear them screaming once they'd been dumped in the basement.

And if their presence lured that pointy-eared claim-jumper Aerune back again, that was all to the good. A steel knife through the gut should settle him down and make him see reason.

Soon, the Survivors started to rouse, staring around themselves with wide, disbelieving eyes. There was a skinny blonde brat who seemed to be their leader. She glared at Lintel in terrified defiance, her mascara running down her painted cheeks in thick black streaks.

*It doesn't get any better than this*, Robert thought gloatingly. This was always the best part, watching someone who was too terrified of him to run away. Campbell had been an exemplary employee in many respects, but she'd never been properly afraid of him. Maybe he'd look her up and change that, once he had this situation squared away to his liking. He looked around for some place to sit, found nothing, and resigned himself to standing. He wouldn't be here for more than a few hours, anyway.

After that, he'd be taking the war to the enemy.

"Now—" he said, smiling predatorially at the Survivors. "This is what I want you to do. . . ."

\* \* \*

Ria hadn't slept all night, and neither had a lot of people in the West Coast offices. She'd dragged Jonathan out of bed with her midnight phone call, but Ria was too angry about her discovery to care: she wanted action and she wanted it now.

Jonathan delivered, gods bless him. It hadn't taken him long to get the first of the answers she wanted, and the more she found out about Threshold Labs, the worse things sounded. The company had been draining even more money from LlewelCo than she'd realized at first glance, its depredations carefully camouflaged by the bright boys and girls in Oversight and Accounting.

And as for what Threshold had done with all that LlewelCo cash . . .

"Since when does a pharmaceutical company need a private army?" she demanded into the telephone. "These invoices are ludicrous! We've been shovelling money at them for *five years* and all we've gotten have been glowing promises—I want to know *exactly* what Threshold's been doing with its time and my money and I want to know *yesterday*."

Baker and Hardesty were behind this. Only someone high up in LlewelCo could have covered things up for this long. Well, the two of them were going to be looking for new jobs by the time the sun set in California, Ria vowed.

As for Threshold's CEO, Robert Lintel . . .

Jonathan's people in Computer Security had gotten into the Threshold computers without trouble—no surprise, as most of them were former outlaw hackers, working for LlewelCo as an alternative to jail. According to what they'd pulled out of the files so far—the data would take weeks to sift thoroughly—Lintel had been running a black books research program for almost as long as he'd been running Threshold, something about triggering psychic powers in humans through the use of psychotropic

drug cocktails.

*And it looks like he got far enough with it to go to field trials. I am going to crucify him for this—and anyone else I can get my hands on!*

She paced furiously, but she knew there was no point in coming down on Threshold until she had absolute proof. It would be too easy for them to start dumping records at the first sign of discovery—although, to Ria's fury, someone seemed to have anticipated her there as well.

Lintel certainly hadn't been doing the research himself—not with nothing more than a Harvard MBA—but whoever the production-end brains of the outfit had been, he or she seemed to have jumped ship, because there was no evidence of him or his research notes anywhere in the Threshold mainframe. If Mr. X had gone to that much trouble to remove all trace of his former employment, it was probably because he was on the run. Which meant that he was out of the picture for the moment, and out of reach.

*But I'll find you, wherever you are. And when I do, you'll wish you'd gone down with Threshold!*

She glanced at her watch, then over at the man sitting silently on the couch. Logan looked like some kind of hyperrealistic sculpture of a sleeping man, not that he was asleep. From time to time she surprised him watching her, as if he were quietly assessing the situation. She wasn't sure why she'd kept him with her, but now she was glad she had.

"I'm going downtown to break into a lab," she said. "I own it, but that probably won't count for much just at the moment. I'll need some serious backup."

"How serious?" Logan asked. He got to his feet and stretched, working out the kinks of a long sleepless night.

"They won't have tanks," she thought, thinking back to the scene in the Park. "Aside from that, assume the worst."

While the team was assembled, Ria went off to change. This assault would require armor of a different sort.

\* \* \*

They arrived at Threshold just after the morning shift. The Guardians still had the key-card someone had dropped in Central Park, but Ria didn't need it. She went in through the front door.

"Good morning. I'm Ria Llewellyn. I own this company. If you want to have a job by tonight, you'll keep your hands off that phone and buzz us through," she said, her voice dangerous.

The receptionist took one look at Ria and the five men with her and pressed the button. Ria went directly to the top floor, and forced her way past a second receptionist and Lintel's private secretary.

But all for nothing. Lintel wasn't there. And from the look of the place, he wasn't coming back.

Ria swore feelingly. She'd been sure she'd get here in time to nail the slimy bastard. Lintel had too much invested in Threshold to just go slinking off leaving his turf undefended!

"Ma'am?"

The bodyguard she'd posted outside the door to watch the secretary came inside, dragging someone by the scruff of the neck. The victim was wearing a white lab coat, and looked absolutely terrified.

"I caught him coming out of the elevator, heading for Lintel's office. When he saw me he tried to bolt."

"Bring him over here," Ria said, leaning back against Lintel's desk. Because she thought she'd be facing a corporate raider this morning, she'd dressed to match: a dark green Dior skirted suit with matching pumps. Dagger optional.

It didn't take much in the way of Talent to read the man's mind. His name was Beirkoff, and he'd been one of the group in Central Park last night. He'd also been Lintel's inside man on the black budget op that Lintel had been running, and now that he realized Lintel was gone, Beirkoff knew he'd been cut off and left to twist in the wind. He'd be willing to do anything to save his skin.

"Lose something?" Ria asked mockingly. "Your safety net, perhaps?" Beirkoff's face went grey, and for a moment, the bodyguard's fist in his collar was the only thing holding him up. The details of the project flashed through his mind—an underground testing lab, some cells, too many people dead. . . .

"Mr. Beirkoff, you have exactly one chance to save your life and your freedom," Ria said, getting to her feet and leaning toward him. "Take me down to the Black Labs and tell me everything you know about T-6/157."

\* \* \*

There was a slot for a key-card on the inside wall of the Executive Elevator, and three unmarked buttons below it. Ria'd found the card in Lintel's desk, once she'd broken the lock. Beirkoff slid it into place and pressed the third button.

Beirkoff hadn't been good at forming coherent sentences, but Ria'd had no trouble getting most of the story by skimming the surface of his thoughts. Unfortunately, he had no idea what had happened after Eric had vanished from the Park, nor what Lintel might be up to right now. Lintel had sent him home for the night, and when he'd come back this morning, he'd walked straight into Ria.

The level the elevator opened onto showed every sign of having been hastily vacated. Doors stood open, files lay on the floor.

"Search it," Ria said crisply. Sorcerous telepathy wasn't admissible in court, and even direct testimony wouldn't really hold up well against a high-priced lawyer. She needed hard evidence to hang Lintel with.

She got it when Beirkoff took her down to the holding cells. A man in a white lab coat—Beirkoff's thoughts identified him as Dr. Ramchandra, the only other on-the-books Threshold employee with Black Level clearance—lay dead in the hallway, shot neatly through the chest. Beirkoff was horrified, and Ria suspected that he'd never seen anyone freshly dead before. Like so many yuppies, his only encounters with death were via the media, or perhaps the sanitized and beautified body of a friend or relative after the mortuary professionals had made it acceptable. Ria thought back to the battle in Griffith Park. She'd seen violent death in every possible aspect. Bored with his horror, she moved on.

All of the cells were full, and all of the occupants were dead as well. They looked like the mummies from the Egyptian wing of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It was hard to believe they'd ever been human.

"They were the ones who survived," Beirkoff said from behind her in a shaken voice. "If the stuff didn't kill them on the first shot and you gave them a second dose, it was like they just . . . burned out."

"There's no one here," Logan said, coming back down the hall. He glanced at Ramchandra's body and then back at Ria, his expression unchanging. "But there's a lab back there that looks like somebody used it to cook up a major batch of something that isn't there now."

"Campbell did the cooking," Beirkoff said, recovering more by the minute. "She got the stuff as far as field trials and then she took off. But Mr. Lintel made sure she made up a big batch before she split."

And Campbell was the only one who knew the recipe, though any competent chemist could probably reconstruct it from a large enough sample, Ria read in his mind. Campbell. Jeanette Campbell. I'll remember that name. Someday soon, Jeanette Campbell, you and I are going to have a short but interesting talk.

It was time to call the cops and bust this situation wide open. A part of her couldn't help noting that this whole thing was going to be a media bonus for LlewelCo—valiant chairwoman discovers illegal research going on in one of her subsidiaries, does a Bernstein and Woodward, and turns the results over to the cops. She'd be a Movie of the Week for sure. She'd also be tied up in red tape and meetings for the next year, and Ria had other things to do just at the moment. She turned to Lintel's flunky.

"Listen to me, Beirkoff. You'd like to stay out of prison, right?"

Beirkoff nodded, obviously more terrified right now of Ria than of the dead body lying on the floor or the wrath of the absent Robert Lintel.

"You have exactly one hope of doing that. You are going to call the cops and report what you found here, and tell them the following story: You came to me with your suspicions. I sent you down here with a security team and orders to notify the authorities if you found anything. I wasn't here today. In fact, I've never been here at all. There will be a lawyer here in an hour to handle LlewelCo's involvement, but you won't wait for him. You're going to give the police full cooperation.

"Play it this way and you come out smelling like a rose. Cross me, and I guarantee that LlewelCo—and I personally—will do everything in our power to make the brief remainder of your sordid existence a living hell."

"Yes, sir! Yes, ma'am! I mean—yes. I can do that," Beirkoff babbled.

"Good. I'm out of here. The rest of you, stay here and keep Mr. Beirkoff honest."

\* \* \*

When she stepped out on the street again, the contrast was as great as if she'd stepped through a Portal into Underhill. It was one of those bright winter days that sometimes came in December, the kind that made you think that New York was a nice place to be after all.

But right now it wasn't a nice place for somebody. Because somewhere out there right now, Robert Lintel was trying to turn ordinary humans into mages using a drug that had a one hundred percent net fatality rate.

And he and Eric were on a collision course.

\* \* \*

Eric drew himself up and did his level best to channel Dharinel in a bad mood. The elven mage didn't suffer fools gladly at the best of times, and that damn-your-eyes arrogance was the only thing that would save Eric now.

"It took you long enough to get here!" he snarled at the gnomish Unseleighe lackey in his best imitation of a pissed-off elven noble, leaking a little magic past his shields to reinforce the effect. "Take me to your Lord—at once, do you hear!"

*And they said spending all that time at RenFaires would never be good for anything. . . .*

"Yes, High Lord. Urla hears and obeys. At once, High Lord!" The creature knelt, pulling the cap from its head and kneading it between enormous gnarled hands. Its wetness left brownish smears on Urla's skin. Eric had a sick feeling that he knew what it had been soaked with. Blood.

*Not one of the good guys. That's for sure.*

But for once Faire shtick wasn't just a way of amusing travelers and filling his pockets. This time he was playing for his life. His bluff had worked so far—it was a safe bet that any of the Lesser creatures he encountered would owe fealty to some High Lord or another, and even the Unseleighe Lords followed certain rules—which was more than Eric could say for this Urla. He knew that Lady Day would find him eventually, no matter where he went in Underhill. But until she did, Eric was more or less trapped here, though rather less than more.

"Get up—get up!" he said haughtily, waving the hand that didn't hold his flute. "I don't have time for this nonsense!"

The redcap crawled backward submissively before springing to its feet. Bowing and gesturing, it began to lead Eric through the forest. He took the time to take his flute apart and put it back in its case in his messenger bag before following. He didn't know what he might encounter along the way, and he didn't want to lose the instrument.

Urla led him onward through the empty forest until they came to an enormous tree. Its trunk was easily thirty feet around, and like many trees this old and large, its lower trunk was hollow. Eric followed Urla through the gap in the trunk, and when they came out the other side, the forest was gone.

The place Eric found himself in now wasn't nearly as nice. For one thing, it stank. He and Urla were standing on a hummock of grass in what seemed to be the center of a large swamp. Between the hummocks, the swamp water glowed a faint toxic green, simmering languidly as bubbles of gas worked their way to the surface and popped with an evil smacking sound. The illumination here was dimmer than the light of the forest and had a reddish cast. Thick mist hung from trees festooned with fleshy pale blossoms that gave off a nauseatingly sweet scent, as if they were rotting instead of blooming. Eric's skin crawled; he was in Unseleighe territory now, and no mistake about it. He could see large bat-winged things flying slowly through the distance, and as he stood gazing around himself, a terrible scream split the air—whether of predator or prey, he didn't know.

Urla looked up at him to see his reaction, beady eyes glittering. Eric glared back as arrogantly as he could manage, and the bluff seemed to work. The redcap hurried off, bounding from island to island of dry land. The islands were yards apart, distances Eric couldn't jump, and he'd have to be crazy to step

down into the water. This was obviously some kind of test.

He summoned his power—he didn't need his flute here, or even music, but unbidden, a few bars of an old Simon and Garfunkel song skirled through his brain as he wove the magic. *Like a bridge over VERY troubled waters.* . . .

Silvery mist rose out of the swamp and coalesced, following the redcap's trail. Eric stepped out onto it cautiously. It gave slightly beneath his feet, like the surface of a waterbed, but it held him comfortably far above the surface of the swamp. He stepped out onto the bridge and followed Urla dry-footed across the bog.

The exit Portal here was in a bank of mist. Eric knew enough about Underhill geography to know that the shortest distance between two points wasn't necessarily in a straight line. Navigating Underhill was more like solving a maze, one where every turn could take you half a dozen different places. The Unseleighe were a paranoid lot, defending their territories by making them hard to find, and even harder to enter.

Urla walked into the mist and Eric followed cautiously. He didn't trust the redcap at all, and Urla would certainly think it was a great joke to lead Eric into danger, but he didn't think the creature was trying to lead him into a trap. Not yet, anyway.

This time Eric found himself in utter darkness on the far side of the Portal, and quickly summoned a ball of elf-light. By its pale bluish illumination he could see that there was grass beneath his feet, short and trampled as if herds of animals had been running across it. A chill monotonous wind blew steadily, making him shudder more than shiver as he looked around. He was in the middle of a broad and featureless plain that seemed to stretch a thousand miles in every direction. When he looked up, there were no stars.

"I'm losing patience," Eric warned, in what he hoped was the approved Unseleighe style. It seemed to be what Urla expected, because the redcap grovelled again, swearing to the Great Lord that they were almost there, indeed, their destination was mere instants away. The redcap turned away and began to trot across the plain, picking up speed until Eric was hard-pressed to keep up with it. Without the elf-light he'd summoned, he would have been unable to follow at all.

A couple of times the ground shook silently as if something huge and heavy were running across it—though Eric saw nothing—and a couple of times he almost thought he'd heard something over the droning of the ceaseless wind, but he didn't dare stop to listen for fear of losing his guide. Bard or not, he had a notion that it would not be a good idea to be lost in this particular realm at the mercy of whatever it was that lived here. The swamp had been bad, but there was something almost honest about its malignity. This was a lot creepier.

At last they came to a henge: two black rough-hewn standing stones supporting a third laid across their tops. The three stones were the size of Greyhound buses, and seemed to be made out of some fine-grained stone. *Basalt*, Eric dredged up from a dark corner of memory. *Like in H. P. Lovecraft. I just hope whoever lives here isn't a fan of the classics.*

Urla trotted between the menhirs and vanished. Having no other real choice, Eric followed. As he'd expected, the landscape changed again. Now there was light. He stopped, blinking as his eyes adjusted.

*Wait. I know this place.*

He stood now in the wood that he'd dreamed of before—the black and silver wood where the winter-bare trees looked as if they were made of black and polished bone, and the ground was covered with a thick treacherous white mist. Urla was obviously on familiar ground now, for he moved more slowly than before—as if he didn't relish getting to his destination. Neither did Eric. Such a direct route to his destination indicated that whoever lived here felt he had little to fear from invaders, and that much confidence meant something old, powerful . . . and dangerous.

*Dangerous enough to think invading New York would be a cakewalk. Oh, boy, Banyon. You sure know how to pick your enemies. . . .*

In the distance, shining through the trees like a baleful moth-green moon, was the goblin tower of Eric's vision, but oddly, instead of worrying him further, he found himself with a treacherous desire to laugh.

*Whoa! Who does the decorating here? Skeletor? That place looks more like Castle Greyskull than any place has a right to. This place was beyond over-the-top: it was just too grim and too gothic for him to be able to take it seriously—as if a Hollywood set designer had done a makeover on Hell.*

*You'd better take it seriously, Banyon. Because THEY sure are, and I bet Unseleighe Sidhe don't have much of a sense of humor. . . .*

As they approached, Eric saw that the front gate of the castle was guarded by a pair of armed knights in full ornate elvish armor that glowed like tarnished silver. Both of them were holding long and wickedly barbed pikes, in addition to wearing swords. Their eyes glowed red in the cavern of their helmets, but it was plain to see that Eric's arrival—at least on his own two feet—was unexpected enough to disconcert them. More bad news: that meant they were Sidhe, not some kind of created servitors, things little better than those white-armored guys in Star Wars. If this lord could compel actual Sidhe to do gruntwork like this, well . . .

*Let's just say I've got a bad feeling about this.*

Urla hesitated, obviously expecting some kind of formal challenge from the guards, but Eric was pretty sure it wouldn't be a good idea to stop for one. He pushed past the redcap and strode through the castle gates as if he had every right to be there. He passed beneath the portcullis into the outer bailey. There was a second set of guards standing before the inner doors, as silent and rigid as the first.

The inner door swung open as he approached, and Eric strode through, Urla scurrying along behind him. Now he was in the outermost interior room, a space as vast as a performance hall. It was bare and empty, its black stone walls polished to mirror brightness and long narrow windows high upon the walls. An open gateway beckoned Eric onward.

If he hadn't already spent so much time in various parts of Underhill, he would have been lost immediately. But by now he knew enough of the interior layout of Sidhe castles—and castles in general—to have a good idea of where the throne room was. He moved quickly through the maze of corridors and chambers, working his way upward. He saw several guards, all armored the way the first sets had been, but no one challenged him. *They probably think that if I've gotten this far, I have a right to be here. One good thing about a really evil overlord is that his underlings don't tend to do a lot of thinking for themselves. . . .*

Urla seemed to have deserted him somewhere along the way, and Eric wasn't sure whether this was a good omen or not. At last he arrived at the outer chamber of the throne room, and unlike the other rooms, this one was inhabited. Fops in jewelled armor meant strictly for display lounged languidly, most

holding leashes that led to doglike and less nameable things. Ladies of the court whispered and smiled, inspecting him over spread fans or beneath embroidered veils. One of them looked more like a leopardess than anything on two legs had a right to—she caught Eric staring and laughed, exposing a mouth filled with sharp carnivore fangs. Beautiful they might be, but no one who'd ever seen one of the Sidhe would mistake a member of the Dark Court for one of the Bright.

Word of his arrival had preceded him—he could tell by the whispers and glances exchanged by the elegantly dressed lords and ladies who filled the outer hall. He thought someone might try to stop him—to curry favor with their liege-lord, if nothing else—but no one did. Eric skirted the edge of the silent group, carefully keeping his back to the wall. At the far end of the outer hall, three steps led up to another set of massive doors of enamelled silver that depicted a battle between two groups of mounted elves. The red enamel drops of blood in the picture glistened as if they were backlit, as if somehow light was shining *through* the doors. It was a startling effect. *Whoever this Unseleighe Lord is*, Eric thought, *he had a helluva special effects budget.*

He skipped up the three wide steps—turning his back on the courtiers reluctantly—and gestured at the door, summoning up a simple knock-spell. For a moment he was afraid it wouldn't open, but like the first, it yielded to his power. A collective gasp went up from the watching Unseleighe Sidhe, and Eric heard the babble of conversation begin behind him as he stepped through the doors. As soon as he'd passed through them, the doors to the throne room closed behind him with the soft finality of the doors of a bank vault. Not a good sign. He bet they wouldn't open again as easily.

Still, he'd come too far to back out now. He looked around.

The throne room was enormous—far too big to have fit into the castle Eric had seen as he approached. For a moment he thought he was back outside in the bonewood, but then he realized that the walls were only carved in the semblance of a forest. The carven tree limbs spread to form a canopy far above, making the vault of the ceiling look like a blackened crown of thorns.

*Nice image, Banyon.*

The floor looked as if it had been poured from a single drop of liquid mercury, but Eric didn't dare break his momentum or show a moment's indecision, and to his relief, it was solid beneath his feet. At the far end of the chamber stood the same high throne he had seen in his dream. Only this time it was facing him, and occupied by the Unseleighe Eric had seen leading the Wild Hunt in Central Park. Refusing to think about what might happen next, Eric strode boldly toward the foot of the black throne and its darkling occupant.

Like his guard knights, the Unseleighe Lord wore full ornate field plate armor of a silver so dark it seemed black. On his head was a black crown set with cabochon rubies that glowed as brightly as the blood drops in the door had. Eric stopped at the foot of the throne and stared up at its occupant. He forced himself to smile nonchalantly.

"Hi. We need to talk. Now."

\* \* \*

When Ria got back from Threshold, the package she'd asked Jonathan to send was waiting for her at the hotel desk. She was just as glad she'd left Logan with the others back at Threshold. What she had in mind now wasn't something a bodyguard could help her with, no matter how good a bodyguard he was.



She signed for the package, and carried it upstairs to her suite to open it. Bless Jonathan! Her own personal .38 snubnose revolver and a lightweight chain mail vest—steel rings as supple and flexible as heavy silk—lay inside. There was a box of steel-jacketed hollow points beside the gun, a load that would bring serious grief to anyone—Sidhe or mortal—that it hit.

There were two speed-loaders in the package with the gun. She loaded them both as well as loading the gun, but left the rest of the box where it was—any problem that eighteen bullets couldn't solve, magic probably couldn't solve either.

A distant part of her mind was amused by her preparations. Who would ever have thought that there would come a day when she'd come riding to Eric's rescue Underhill? He knew more about the Sidhe than she did, but it was equally true that he had no idea of what people like Robert Lintel were capable of in their sublime self-obsession. Lintel wouldn't give up now that he'd seen the kind of power Eric had and thought he saw a way to get it for himself. And if Lintel caught up with him, Eric would be as helpless as a child, no matter how gifted a Bard he was. Down deep, Eric was a nice guy, and that would always put him at a disadvantage when dealing with people like Lintel—or the Dark Court.

Fortunately, Ria thought, she wasn't nice.

She stripped off her executive power suit and dressed again in the outfit Logan had brought her to go slum-crawling in. She pulled on her tightest T-shirt and slid the vest over it before slipping on the Kevlar-lined jacket and zipping it up to her throat. The combination should stop anything she might have to face, Sidhe or human. She slid the gun into her pocket and inspected herself in the mirror. Neither gun nor vest showed.

She was ready to go to war. Now all she had to do was find the battlefield.

\* \* \*

Guardian House looked serene and untouched by recent events. In order to track Eric, Ria needed something that was his—something attuned to his personal energy that she could use as a link to him, and his apartment was the best place to look. Ria wasn't sure it'd let her in without a fight, but fortunately she didn't have to try. As she stood in the little courtyard of the apartment building, she heard the frantic racing of a motorcycle engine coming from behind the building, and over it Greystone's gravel voice pleading with someone.

"Aw, c'mon, sweetheart! Just—could you wait a minute here! Hey! Here now, *mo chidr*—"

She ran around to the tiny private parking lot in the back of the building and found Greystone standing in front of Eric's bike. The elvensteed was making frantic dashes at the gate—all by itself—but Greystone kept blocking them, wings outstretched. The bike flashed its—*her*—lights in frustration, and her attempts to get around the gargoyle grew more frantic.

"Hey! Blondie!" Greystone called when he saw Ria. "This thing can talk. Why ain't she talkin' to me, then?"

"It's an elvensteed," Ria answered. "She won't listen to you or let anyone ride her but Eric. But elvensteeds can travel anywhere without Gates or Portals, and if he's called for her—"

"We can follow?" Greystone said, brightening.

"Exactly. Just get out of her way before she decides to bite you."

Greystone stepped aside and folded back his wings. Lady Day zipped around him like a bull avoiding the matador's cape. By the time she was halfway up the block, she was gone from sight.

*But if I can follow Eric, I can certainly follow you, my dear.*

"She's gone! Hey, Blondie! What do we do now?"

"We follow. And Greystone . . . ?"

The gargoyle looked at her hopefully.

"Don't call me 'Blondie.' "

\* \* \*

Aerune stared down at the bold interloper. It had never occurred to him that the mortal Bard might dare to beard him in his stronghold.

"Kneel to me, mortal," he thundered, mantling himself with Power and stretching out his hand. A massive ring gleamed, blood-red, on his outstretched forefinger.

"I don't think so," the Bard said. "We don't do much kneeling in the World Above these days. Or hadn't you noticed? Things have changed since the last time you led a Wild Hunt there. More iron, for one thing—but that's just the tip of the iceberg. Magic's really impressive, but Cold Iron will stop it dead, and we've got a lot of that in the World Above. We've also got machines that can do things you've never even dreamed of, machines that magic can't stop. If you want a bunch of mortals to pay homage to you, you're going to have to have a lot more in your bag of tricks than a little flashy magic and some big dogs. And I don't think you do."

Infuriated by the Bard's arrogance as he was, Aerune was an honest enough tactician to see that there was much merit in what the mortal stripling had to say. The mortal *Robert Intel* had been quick to defend himself with Cold Iron when Aerune had attacked him, nor had his servants cowered at the sight of the Wild Hunt as Aerune had expected. Fear and magic were the Unseleighe's two main weapons against the mortal kind, and if those proved ineffective . . .

"And the fact that you can't take us over isn't the worst of what I've got to tell you. Those guys in the park? The ones with the chain mail and the iron spears? They're playing you, Dark Lord. I don't know who sent them after you, but I do know the kind of person he is. I've met people like him before. He's got hundreds of 'warriors' at his command, and he wants your magic. He's already killed I-don't-know-how-many innocent people to get a handle on it, and he's getting closer to figuring you out every minute.

"And once he does, he's going to be coming after you—here. If humans figure out a way into Underhill, your intramural feuds won't matter anymore. Dark Court and Light—you'll both be history."

Such audacity and ruthlessness as the Bard described was worthy of Aerune himself, but the notion of a mortal having the temerity—and the weapons—to conquer Elven Lands was a sickening thought. Aerune considered the mad wizard he'd faced in the Park, the crude-but-effective weapons that had accounted for the lives of so many of his Hunt.

No. It is not possible. They were lucky, nothing more, he decided. Now that I have taken their measure, I will cow them utterly. For Aerete.

But the Bard was still talking, impervious to his own immediate peril.

"So you're going to have to choose. Work with me to take this guy out and bury what he knows. Or end up serving him with an iron collar around your neck."

"You have gone too far, Bard!" Aerune shouted, rising to his feet in a swirl of black cloak. "I am the Great Lord Aerune mac Audelaine of the Unseleighe Sidhe, and before I am done with you, you will beg me for death, as will any of your kindred who dare to raise their banners against me. *Guards!* Attend me!"

He would blast this mortal where he stood, hang his body on the castle gates as a warning to other impertinent trespassers! Aerune drew back his hand, preparing to strike.

And the throne room . . . *rippled* . . . as the fabric of Aerune's realm twisted sideways with a sickening and disorienting lurch. Mage-quake! Aerune staggered, fighting for balance in the aftermath of the disruption, as his tiny kingdom was destroyed and remade itself again in obedience to his will and his magics. But the Bard who taunted him here could not claim such power. . . .

"Told you so," said the Bard sadly.

Six of Aerune's guardsmen now stood within the doorway, obedient to his summons, but they were not the only ones within Aerune's throne room, nor was the Bard now the only human interloper.

A human man wearing the ugly grey clothing Aerune had seen in the World Above stood in the middle of his throne room, staring about himself with undisguised greed. With him were four human warriors wearing black and bearing weapons of Cold Iron that glowed and smoked in the magic of Aerune's Underhill realm. At their feet lay half a dozen dead humans, their bodies withered in the fashion of those Crowned Ones who had given up their power to Aerune's needs before.

"I will deal with you after I destroy them," Aerune growled to the Bard. He gestured to his guardsmen. "Take them!"

\* \* \*

*This is not good*, Eric thought, hoping his shields would hold against stray bullets as well as spells, knowing that if the bullets were steel-jacketed they probably wouldn't after the first one or two. He'd been right, not that he was very happy about it at the moment. With humans and their Cold Iron weapons down here in Underhill, Seleighe and Unseleighe kingdoms alike would go under like wheat under a harvester. And with elven magery running wild in the World Above, the outlook for humanity wasn't very good either.

The Unseleighe guardsmen started forward, seeing only spears raised to stop them. One of the black-clad goons the Suit had brought with him raised a pistol and fired, and one of Aerune's guards staggered and fell to the ground, screaming. In moments elven-fire had consumed his entire body as the steel-jacketed bullet did its work.

Unfortunately, the Dark Lord Aerune didn't seem to be sufficiently impressed by this display to call off his men. More guardsmen poured into the room, swords drawn, red eyes gleaming. The human

mercenaries turned outward, putting a ring of steel around the Suit. There was a chatter of machine-pistol fire, the bright flare of disrupted shielding, and the guardsmen moved in for close-quarters work. The mercenaries lowered their spears, obviously ready for them. There was a sudden clatter of engagement.

Eric wasn't sure what elvish swords were made of, but whatever it was, in the magic-charged air of Underhill, it sizzled like an ice cube tossed into hot grease when it met the iron blades of the spears the humans were carrying. After the first time a parry sliced one of the elven swords clear through, the guardsmen were more cautious about rushing their prey. A couple of the Suit's henchmen kept firing, covering the spearmen and choosing their targets with care. The throne room echoed with the sound of gunfire, and the faint acrid scent of gunsmoke filled the air. Elves fell beneath the onslaught of Cold Iron until the silvery mirror floor of the throne room was littered with elvish bodies, and the Suit and his hardboys were still standing. Aerune sat watching the carnage as if it were a play staged for his amusement.

Because soon enough they're going to run out of bullets, and I don't think they've got any way out of here now that they've used up their "batteries." Aerune hasn't even called up the heavy artillery yet, and he's not a very happy camper at the moment. . . .Eric didn't want to be here when Aerune decided to take out his frustrations on the interlopers—and he wasn't sure he could stop the Unseleighe Lord either. He could issue a formal Challenge—that might slow Aerune down—but the Dark Lord was on his home ground here, and magical duels had not been a major part of Eric's education.

He'd let his mind wander for a fatal instant. Suddenly there was a lull in the fighting, and Eric found himself staring down the barrel of a pistol.

"Work with me, big man, or the hippie gets it right here!" the man in the suit called cheerfully. "You've seen what our weapons can do to your people, so back off before it happens to you!"

Aerune waved a hand, and his guardsmen pulled back, forming a ring around the interlopers. The room had grown darker in just the last few moments: Eric could no longer see the walls of the throne room clearly, and it seemed to him that there were *things* lurking in the shadows outside the ring of Unseleighe knights. But despite that, the Suit was smiling, as if things were going just the way he'd planned.

"Allow me to introduce myself, Mr. mac Audelaine. My name's Bob Lintel, Threshold Labs. You've got something I want, and I believe we can work together to our mutual advantage. I have no problem with dividing territory. You help me back home, I'll help you here. If it's psi you want, I can provide you with a permanent supply. Let's pool our forces."

Whatever else Aerune mac Audelaine was, he was a realist. He leaned forward on his dark throne, fixing Lintel with a burning gaze.

"You have an odd way of asking for favors, mortal man," Aerune rumbled, "but your arguments are . . . compelling. Come here to me, and I will hear your petition. Perhaps you are right." Aerune gestured in welcome, smiling chillingly. The man in the suit smiled back, but didn't move from the safety of his mercenaries.

Aerune and Lintel stood frozen, each testing the other's resolve in a high-stakes game of "Chicken" as Eric watched in unconcealed horror. This was the last thing he wanted—two killer sharks dividing up Underhill and the World Above like an extra-large pizza, no anchovies. *What am I going to do now?*

The Unseleighe guardsmen and the human commandos watched each other intently, neither side moving. For a moment, the room was utterly silent. And in the distance, Eric heard a faint sound that had no place

in Underhill.

The sound of an engine.

A motorcycle engine.

Lady Day barreled through the open doorway to the throne room, vaulting the dead and scattering the living as she headed for Eric. Here in Underhill the elvensteed seemed to flicker back and forth between bike and horse, the strobe effect making Eric's eyes hurt. Headache or not, she was the most welcome sight he'd seen in a long time. Eric started toward her—

And Aerune froze her in place with a gesture, trapping her within a cage of flickering blue light. The elvensteed, fully in horse-form now, stamped her foot, eyes flashing dangerously as she tossed her head in frustration.

"Move, hippie, and I drill you right now!" Lintel barked, oblivious to the byplay. "You aren't getting away this easily. Aerune wants you, and so do I."

"Too bad neither of you gets him," a new voice said coolly. "I'd put that down if I were you, Mr. Lintel."

Eric felt like cheering. Ria Llewellyn strode through the door, followed by Greystone. If Ria experienced any surprise at her surroundings—or the bodies all over the floor—she didn't show it. She was wearing black leather and blue jeans, and looked deadly and confident.

And she had a gun.

Almost before she'd finished speaking, Lintel swept his pistol around and rapped off three shots directly at her chest.

"Ria!" Eric shouted, aghast.

But she didn't fall. She staggered back against Greystone, and steadied herself against the gargoyle's outspread wing, but she obviously wasn't hurt. She smiled a small wintery smile at Lintel.

"I've done plenty of corporate dueling in my time, but this is a little extreme," she said. "Oh, by the way. I'm sure we haven't met. I'm Ria Llewellyn. Your boss."

Then she shot Robert Lintel neatly in the knee.

He went down screaming, dropping his gun and scattering his men in confusion. Aerune's elven guards surged forward and stopped, uncertain of whether they should try to take advantage of the moment. One of Lintel's men knelt to try to help him. Eric ran down the steps and made it across the throne room to Ria's side in the confusion.

"Glad you could make it," he gasped.

"Wouldn't miss it for worlds," Ria answered. "Get back."

Greystone lifted him out of the way just as a levin bolt flung by an enraged Aerune struck Ria full in the chest. It popped and sizzled, running all over her body like St. Elmo's fire before sinking into the floor, but Ria stood her ground, as unharmed by elven magic as by mortal bullets.

"Stainless-steel chain mail," Ria called toward Aerune. "The least of mortal defenses. Very easy to make in the World Above—I'm sure Lintel's men are wearing it."

To Eric she said: "I'm going to distract him. Can you get your steed free? We're going to need her."

"I think so," Eric answered, his voice equally low. He reached out, feeling at the edges of the spell that had trapped Lady Day. It was a simple one, the Sidhe equivalent of a locked door. *Now let's see if I can find the key.*

As he concentrated, Ria stepped forward, away from Greystone's protection, and bowed her head, a conciliating, coaxing note entering her voice.

"My Lord, your power is vast and mine is very small. I am no match for you alone, even with weapons and armor of deathmetal from the World Above. But the Bard and I together can hold you off indefinitely. He has powerful patrons among the Seleighe Court who would much resent any harm you might do to him, nor is the gargoyle entirely friendless. I pray you, of your great mercy, allow us three—four—to depart your kingdom unmolested. We wish no quarrel with you."

Aerune looked at her measuringly, resuming his seat and regarding her with bleak expressionless eyes.

"Ria!" Eric hissed. She couldn't be suggesting what he thought she was—just *abandoning* those five guys and Lintel to Aerune's mercy? He looked behind him, through the open doors, but the rest of the Unseleighe Court seemed to have vanished; the outer room was empty. "What about Lintel and the others? We can't just leave them here!"

Lintel's agonized groans seemed to fill the room, setting his teeth on edge. A shattered kneecap was just about the most painful and crippling single wound possible to inflict.

"True," Ria answered, her voice low. "I can't afford to leave Lintel to strike a bargain of his own. Saddle up as soon as you can, Eric. We may be leaving quickly. Greystone, you too."

"Check, boss lady," the gargoyle said.

Aerune spoke again, a faint admiring smile upon his face.

"Very well, halfbreed. You, the Bard and his mount, and this . . . creature . . . which accompanies you, all have my leave to depart. But the others remain. Do these terms suit you?"

The magic around Lady Day dissolved, and the elvensteed bounded toward the doorway and Eric, changing form back into a motorbike as she did so. Aerune paid no attention. Reluctantly, Eric swung his leg over Lady Day's saddle. The elvensteed thrummed her engine, impatient to be away.

"They do, My Lord, and many thanks to you for your mercy," Ria said. She raised her gun once more and fired, placing a bullet squarely between Lintel's eyes. The corporate raider slumped to the floor, silent in death, and the commando squatting beside him reached for his gun.

"No!" Eric was half off Lady Day's back—though what he could do, he wasn't sure—when the elvensteed decided she'd had enough of this part of Underhill. With a banshee scream she took off, Greystone close behind. Nothing Eric could do could slow or turn her, and at the speed she was going, he didn't dare just jump off. Eric looked back wildly over his shoulder, catching a last glimpse of the

throne room before it vanished in the distance.

Ria stood alone before Lord Aerune.

\* \* \*

"You are properly ruthless, halfling," Aerune said, getting to his feet. Though irritated by his loss, he looked intrigued as well. She'd counted more than a little on that. Elves were suckers for a grand gesture.

Not that Aerune was a sucker in any sense of the word.

He stepped down from his throne, and stood facing her across a tangle of bodies, Sidhe and human. With a wave of his hand, he banished them all to another part of his domain. No trace of the battle—or Lintel's men—remained to mar the chilly perfection of his presence chamber. The doors of the throne room closed in the same moment, sealing Ria in with him.

Aerune held out his hand to her. The black mail gauntlet gleamed in the unchanging radiance of Underhill.

"It has been too long since I encountered anyone with such beauty who had yet the spirit to defy me. I do not think you have been properly valued by your kin, halfling, nor by the World Above. Matters could be otherwise. Have you considered—"

"And rejected, Great Lord," Ria answered steadily. This powerful Unseleighe Sidhe was offering her a seductive prize—his patronage, and with it, a place in Underhill. Once she could have asked for no greater reward.

Once.

"I want no bargain with you beyond that which I have already struck, Great Lord, though I prize your honorable offer for the tribute it is. I will go now, by your leave, and molest your realm no more. Lintel was my vassal, and he is well rewarded for his treachery. I leave you his men as my gift, to do with as you choose."

Taking a calculated risk, she turned her back on Lord Aerune and walked away. The doors of the throne room opened before her, and she walked out into the deserted castle. No one tried to stop her, but Ria didn't breathe completely easily until she'd reached the nearest Portal and taken herself beyond Aerune's reach—or at least, his immediate reach.

*I know this isn't over. Now that he knows there's something of value in the World Above, Aerune won't stop until he figures out a way to get at it. But that's a problem for another day. Thank God for small favors.*

## **TWELVE: TO END WHERE WE BEGAN**

As soon as Ria reached the World Above, everything that had happened in Aerune's court began to take

on a vague air of unreality. After passing through several Portals and nearly exhausting her store of Power, she'd come out in Sterling Forest, near the Nexus of Elfhome Everforest, and had to hike more than a mile before she found a phone she could use to call a car to take her back to the city. It was late Monday evening by the time she arrived back in New York—time ran differently in the World Above, sometimes to the World Above's benefit.

The drive back to the City gave her a lot of time to think, mostly about the look of horror on Eric's face as she shot Robert Lintel. There'd been no other choice, though. Aerune probably wouldn't have let her take Lintel without a fight anyway, and if she *had* managed to bring him back to the World Above to face charges, the New York courts would probably have let him off on a technicality. That was the way the legal system worked when you had money and influence.

Ria had always preferred justice to law, and she'd spoken no more than the truth to the Unseleighe lord. What Lintel had done was in some sense her responsibility. Threshold was a LlewellynCo company. Lintel had worked for her. Ultimately, she was responsible for what he'd done. Now he'd paid the dead for their loss in the only way possible, with his own life, and that simplified matters. He'd never have the chance to use the information he'd gained at the cost of so many innocent lives.

And if she had to lose Eric's respect—and love—because of it, Ria was willing to pay that price, though it would hurt more than she liked to think.

I might as well find out now how it's going to be as soon as possible, she thought grimly. There was no point in waiting to get bad news.

"I've changed my mind," she told the driver. "I'm not going to the Sherry. There's a stop I want you to make first."

\* \* \*

The ride from Aerune's castle to New York passed in a dizzying blur. After the first few seconds, he'd just closed his eyes and held on tight, and finally the elvensteed had stopped.

When he opened his eyes, the world spun giddily. Eric slid sideways off Lady Day's saddle and into Greystone's arms.

"Steady there, laddybuck. Strewth, that was the wildest ride I've been on since I was a gleam in the stonecarver's eye!" the gargoyle said cheerfully.

"Yeah," Eric said weakly. After a moment the world steadied, and he could stand on his own two feet.

He looked around warily. He was back in New York, behind Guardian House. It seemed strange that everything looked normal. It was dark. Eric had no idea what day it was, though from the powdered-sugar snow that fell lightly all around him, it was still December.

*But what year? Not that I care right now.*

"Let's get you inside," Greystone said. "If ever a man could do with a stiff drink, boyo, it's you."

"No," Eric said, feeling a little better. "Not a drink. But I wouldn't turn down a strong cup of coffee. Meet you upstairs."



Greystone bounded skyward with surprising grace, settling back into his place with a flourish and a bow.

\* \* \*

A shower and a change of clothes helped. He was still trying to sort everything out in his mind, trying to fit the events into some kind of order. Eventually he was going to have to figure out something to tell Toni and the other Guardians. They deserved to know how the story ended.

Greystone had joined him inside, his cheerfully ugly face contorted into an expression of worry as he watched Eric move around the apartment. Finally, coffee and sandwich in hand, Eric sat down on the couch.

"I can't believe she did that," he said, sighing. As much as he tried to avoid it, Eric's thoughts kept returning to that one image of the bullet hole in the middle of Lintel's forehead, stopping him from thinking past it. He set his sandwich down on the table untasted. She'd just shot him. No hesitation, no remorse. Bam!

Greystone shook his head in sympathy. "I can't either. Man, talk about *cold* . . .!"

"No," Eric said, grudgingly fair. Somehow Greystone's putting his own thoughts into words made Eric see Ria's side of things. "As much as I hate what she did, I think she was telling the truth. She didn't have a choice. She couldn't leave Lintel there in Underhill alive. Believe me, he and Aerune were *this* close to making a deal. Cold Iron in Underhill—humans knowing about elves—magic in the World Above—it would have been . . ."

*It would have been just like my dream: New York a wasteland. Thousands—millions—dead. And Underhill . . . gone. Humans and Sidhe need each other. Our lives are too intertwined. One can't really survive without the other. But that doesn't mean most people need to know about Underhill, or magic, or the Nexuses, any more than they need to know how to build a nuclear warhead. Ria knew that. She did what had to be done. But that doesn't mean I have to like it. . . .*

"She could have brought him back here!" Greystone protested. "I could'a carried him. Easy!"

Eric shook his head reluctantly and drank his coffee. The bitter warmth helped clarify his thoughts. "Then he'd be back here, alive, still knowing what he knows, with his cache of designer poison still out there somewhere. Sure, there'd be a trial, but he'd probably be out on bail while he was waiting for his court date, and that means he could escape back Underhill, strike a bargain with Aerune, or come up with something else horrible I haven't even thought of yet. And Ria would be stuck in the middle of it—if she did anything to stop him here, she'd be the one who went to prison, not him."

"Maybe," the gargoyle said grudgingly. "But I still think we should'a brought him back here and let Jimmie and the gang sort him out."

"I don't know," Eric said unhappily. Maybe that would have worked. But with the stakes so high, was it worth taking the chance? The worst of it was, he probably wasn't going to see Ria again. He still wasn't sure how she'd found him, but she had. She'd rescued him, given him all the help he'd asked her for, and he'd thrown it back in her face—and deserted her, even if that hadn't exactly been his idea. He didn't even know if she'd gotten out of Aerune's realm alive.

*Good going, Banyon. So much for your vaunted leadership abilities.*

"I don't even know where she is now, or if she even got out alive. Greystone, can you—"

"Well," Greystone said abruptly, "guess I'd better get back to work. No rest for the wicked, and all that. See you around, boyo. I'm going back on duty before anyone notices I'm AWOL."

"Hey," Eric said, getting to his feet as Greystone climbed out the window. Maybe Greystone hadn't wanted to be asked if he and the Guardians could find Ria, but that didn't mean he had to just run off like that!

There was a knock at the door.

He stared after the gargoyle. The knocking continued. Thinking it was Toni, knowing that Guardian House would never allow in anything that could do its inhabitants any harm, Eric opened the door.

Ria was standing there, still dressed in battered denim and leather. A few snowflakes lay on her hair and shoulders, melting slowly. She looked tired, uncertain of her reception.

A vast relief filled Eric, as if he were finally able to set down a heavy load he'd been carrying, and he smiled.

"Glad you could make it," he said simply.

Her face relaxed into a smile of sheer relief, as if she'd gotten good news she'd hoped for but hadn't expected. Eric stepped back, gesturing for her to enter.

"Wouldn't miss it for worlds," Ria answered.

\* \* \*

Later—much later—there was time to talk it all out. Ria explained the whole story from the beginning as she'd managed to piece it together, about Threshold's black-budget project to come up with a drug that turned ordinary people into Wild Talents. How she'd tracked the project back to Threshold, found Lintel gone, and then followed Lady Day to find Eric, knowing that wherever Lintel was, he, too, would be hot on Eric's trail.

"I still don't like what you did," Eric said. "It wasn't the only solution. We could have taken him to the Seleighe Sidhe, made him *their* problem. . . ."

Ria shrugged. "I don't know that I trust them with Lintel anymore than I did Aerune. He was too much of a wild card. This was more expedient."

Eric already knew he wanted Ria to stay a part of his life. But if he let her set the terms for their relationship, they'd still be in the same situation they'd been back in L.A., and that wouldn't work for him.

"If we're going to stay together, you're going to have to promise me that if we get into any more situations, you won't do the expedient thing anymore," he said firmly, but inside he was holding his breath, waiting for her answer.

She regarded him with a raised eyebrow, for a frozen moment looking more elvish than she did human. At last she smiled faintly.

"I'll offer you a compromise, m'love. I won't do the expedient thing without consulting you and letting you have a chance to convince me otherwise. Have we a bargain, O great Sidhe Bard?"

Eric thought about it for a moment. Things had changed between them, he realized. He wasn't her pet. She wasn't his lackey. They were equal partners. He found he liked the idea very much.

"That'll work. I'll be your conscience," he answered.

"Just like Jiminy Cricket," Ria said mockingly. She kissed him lightly on the forehead and got to her feet. "Don't forget the cricket spent most of the movie as a ghost."

"I'm not worried," Eric said contentedly.

Ria smiled, looking younger and softer—and somehow hopeful, as if she'd been offered a new beginning.

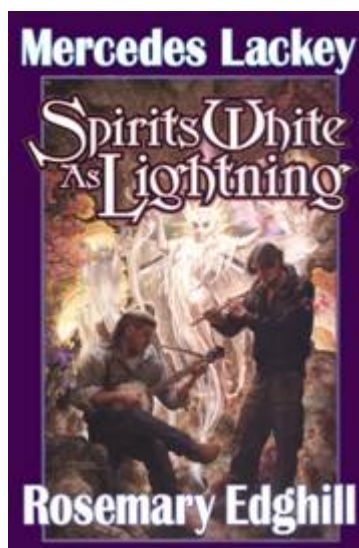
"And now, the police are probably looking for me—and I'll bet you need to come up with an explanation for playing hooky from school today. I'll probably be out of touch for a while, but don't worry. Watch for me on the news. Then give me a call and we'll have dinner. We've still got a lot of loose ends to chase down."

"It's a date," Eric answered. He knew he was grinning like a fool, but he didn't care. He walked her to the door and stood in the doorway, watching her walk down the hall, still smiling.

I can't wait to tell Kory and Beth about all this, he thought to himself. I wonder what they'll say.

He heard the elevator cage rattle closed, and heard the elevator start down. *Louis, something tells me this is the start of a beautiful friendship. . . .*

## -- Spirits White as Lightning --



This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in this book are fictional, and any

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# DEDICATION

This one's for Mrs. Johnson and Mrs. Anderson,  
my high school English teachers,  
without whom I wouldn't be doing this for a living.

-Rosemary Edghill

## ONE:

### THE SIMPLE GIFTS

The Spirits White as Lightning

Would on my travels guide me

The stars would shake and the moon would quake

Whenever they espied me

-Tom O' Bedlam (traditional)

Sir Eric Banyon, the Queen's Knight, known as Silverflute wherever soldiers of fortune gathered together, strode manfully through the thronging crowd, determined to leave the memory of his disgrace at the hands of the foul Frenchman Black Levoisier behind him as surely as he had left the dastardly minions of his Great Enemy in his dust. . . .

Eric dodged around a bicycle messenger just dismounting on the sidewalk, then grinned, startling the bike messenger into an answering smile. Heh. Banyon, m'lad, you ought to go in for writing Hysterical Historicals in your off-hours. He actually was striding-though not exactly "manfully"-through the noontime crowd, heading for the subway and home. His classes at Juilliard were over for the day and no rehearsals (for once!) were scheduled for this afternoon. He could practice as well, or better, at home than in one of the practice rooms, anyway. And he was determined not to sour a perfectly good day with the memory of one jealous teacher trying to make a fool out of him in front of the entire class. Well, all right-maybe not the entire class. Just most of it. And anyway, Levoisier hadn't succeeded, though he'd certainly done his best.

Missing his midterm last winter (he'd been off saving the world, necessary though it had been) had given Professor Rector the chance he had been hoping for all term. He'd failed Eric, banishing him from Introduction to Music Theory with unprofessional glee. Fortunately, Eric's work in his other classes and in ensemble had been good enough that he had been given the opportunity to make up the lost Music Theory credit during summer term, and he had taken the chance to add a few more courses in order to

lighten next fall's course-load. Still, this hadn't quite been the way he'd envisioned spending his July and -August, which was out on Fire Island with a pitcher of virgin margaritas by his side. And Levoisier made Ethan Rector look like a prince of transpersonal fairness by comparison.

Parisians. Feh. Paris would be such a lovely place without all the Parisians in it, Eric thought grumpily. And the man had certainly been on form today, baiting Eric unmercifully in hopes he'd lose his temper. Once he'd lost it, the professor would have taken him apart in a cool and scientific dissection rendered without benefit of anesthetic.

Levoisier had begun with sarcastic comments about Eric's depth of experience-on the RenFaire circuit. (Why did they always obsess about that? It couldn't be jealousy.) Not exactly a concert-hall environment, as the professor had repeatedly pointed out. Nor were the customers who so praised his playing sober . . . or necessarily bright . . . or able to distinguish Bach from Bacharach . . . or a flute from a clarinet. Certainly even an idiot with three tunes in his repertoire could win acclaim on the RenFaire circuit-which only proved, to Eric's mind, how little Levoisier knew about the RenFaire circuit.

As the professor had expounded on each and every way in which he felt that Eric resembled half-drunk Fairegoers-at exhaustive length-Eric stood there silently. Every single word was calculated to get Eric to explode with temper.

And that would have worked, once, but Eric was a far different person now than anyone that the professor had ever encountered before, at least within the hallowed halls of academe. He had waited, quietly and calmly, until the professor grew frustrated by Eric's lack of agitation, embarrassment, or any other identifiable emotion.

When Levoisier finally ran out of insults, Eric had simply said, "The Review Committee and the Entrance Committee were satisfied with my performances, Professor, as are the rest of my teachers," and sat down again. And at that blessed moment, the change-of-class bell sounded, and he was free.

Not as satisfying, perhaps, as telling the professor off would have been. Not nearly as satisfying as pointing out the professor's own deficiencies as both a musician and a teacher-many of which Eric had already heard for himself during faculty recitals. Yehudi Menuhin, the professor was not.

Yahoo Menudo, maybe.

But the point wasn't to get the better of the arrogant Frenchman. The point, in fact, was not to even bother with making a point. The point was to take what was good, leave what was bad, and pass through all the name-calling and innuendo like the wind through the grass.

Be Teflon. That's the only way to handle guys like this. He's insecure, ignorant, and arrogant. Just let everything slide right off until he gets tired of not getting a rise out of me. By then he'll probably have gone far enough to expose himself as the trivial goon that he is. That might take the full eight-week summer session, but Eric didn't mind-while Levoisier was heckling him, he wasn't picking on the younger and more inexperienced students, who were not equipped to deal with him. The bastard had already reduced Midori to silent tears before he'd turned on Eric.

Well, let him wear himself out on me. Levoisier doesn't know half of what he thinks there is to know about me. I have a black belt in Verbal Aikido, you arrogant Frog.

Levoisier's appointment wasn't an insoluble mystery. Eric knew why Juilliard had such a miserable excuse for a teacher on its staff this year. Levoisier was no great shakes as an interpreter of music, but he

was a brilliant technician. Even Eric was willing to admit there was a lot he could learn from the man, if he ever decided to stop humiliating the students and elected to teach. And even at his worst, he was teaching valuable things to his students.

Though he knows it not. Though he intends it not.

It was a cruel, cold world out there, a world singularly lacking in first-chair jobs in fine symphony orchestras and prestigious traveling ensembles, recording contracts, solo tours, and praise-and full of cruel critics and low-end positions teaching in schools or playing in little city orchestras under conductors who themselves had failed to make the cut for a high-end professional musical career. Trial-by-Parisian might harden some of them to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. The students at Juilliard were fairly well equipped to deal with professional rivalry and even sabotage from other students, but they weren't ready for the real world of real people and the fact that most of them were doomed to eke out a living playing in the Tacoma Sousa Band.

Or playing harps in hotel lobbies, pianos in cocktail bars, clarinets at weddings, and yes, flutes at RenFaires. Anything that Levoisier can throw at them isn't half of the abuse they'll get out there. Or, in the dark of the night, what they'll give themselves.

What had triggered today's attack, he suspected-given that Levoisier had first gone after Midori, then him-was the results of the placement auditions for the summer-session orchestra. Eric (and Midori) had been placed in second chair.

Now, Eric hadn't heard Midori's audition, but there was something that no one, including the Audition Committee, knew about Eric's. He would never get first chair, because all during his audition, he had been sending out a thread of Bardic magic.

No matter how good I am, you won't give me first chair, the magic had whispered, carried along on the wings of Debussy. I don't need the experience, and you should give it to someone else.

In fact, at the end of the audition, one of the committee had taken him aside, apologetically, and had said, "Banyon, you deserved first chair, but frankly, we can't give it to you. You don't need-"

"-the experience," Eric finished, with a grin and a toss of his long chestnut hair. "No worries, Doctor Selkirk. Frankly, what I need is a lot more experience in backing and supporting another flautist. They also serve, and all that."

Doctor Selkirk had sighed with relief and shook Eric's hand. "I knew we hadn't made any mistakes in readmitting you, Banyon. If running around in tights and floppy shirts on weekends would give our students that kind of maturity, I'd assign it as a course."

Eric grinned to himself again. It's not as if I need experience in front of an audience. I rather doubt that I'm ever going to face a more hostile audience than a flock of Nightflyers, or a pickier one than an Elven Bard and Magus Major. And it's not fair to the kids to make them compete with me for something I don't need or want.

The New York streets simmered with summer heat, and the kind of glare found when the only thing to take the sun's rays is stone, and glass, and more stone. His local friends told him that August would be even worse-if they got a really hot spell, even the blacktopped streets would go soft underfoot. He hadn't believed it at the time, but now Eric was just as glad that he'd spent the time last winter setting up bomb-proof spells on all his apartment windows: now, when he opened them into muggy July heat, he

got arid January cold. It was a more elegant solution than nursing a power hog a/c along with Guardian House's cranky electrical system. His computer and stereo systems were already major power hogs, not to mention his pet microwave; he'd learned he had to shut down every other appliance in the place when he vacuumed. An air conditioner would have been the final straw. When Guardian House had been built back in the first decade of the 20th century, all those appliances hadn't even been distant dreams.

He was looking forward to getting home, opening all the windows, and maybe coaxing Greystone down into joining him for a glass of something cold. It wasn't likely anybody would miss the gargoyle if he deserted his post-not in a sweltering afternoon in July.

All he had to do was make it through the subway alive. Though most of the cars were air-conditioned to pneumonia levels, only some of the stations had any pretense to climate-control at all. Fortunately, the Lincoln Center stop was one of them. Can't let the aesthetes and yuppies fry, after all.

Eric joined the stream of humanity descending the steps into the subway, whistling a Bach gigue to purge his brain of any remaining taint of irritation with Professor Levoisier. There was nothing like Bach to rev up the old right brain and let logic take over from emotion.

He let the flow of traffic take him along towards the turnstiles. Hey, it's Friday. I've got a whole weekend in front of me, the sun is shining, nobody wants to kill me, and there's not a single crisis Underhill or Overhill that needs sorting out. That thought put a bounce in his step. Maeve had been born and Kory and Beth were planning to bring her for a visit. If the weather held, maybe they could make a run up Long Island and see how the other half lived. And if it didn't, well, if you couldn't find something to do in New York on a weekend, you were in pretty sad shape.

And when they go back Underhill, if Ria isn't up to her sculpted eyebrows in Business, I might even get her to go out with me to some New-York-Magazine-Approved event. So maybe I ought to have a look for something she might not ordinarily go to. Not that Ria's actually a party animal at the best of times. How could someone who looks like she looks be such a grind? It's one of Life's Great Mysteries.

He turned his mind back to the question of finding something fun he could tease her into attending. Anything musical was a good bet, but it would have to be both competent and something she wouldn't have thought of for her-

Something teased his ears as he passed the turnstile. A string instrument-

Banjo?

And a very, very familiar tune.

'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free, 'tis a gift to come 'round where we ought to be-

Someone was playing a banjo in the subway.

That wasn't all that unusual. Eric had heard everything from bagpipes to string quartets to old-fashioned One Man Bands playing on subway platforms throughout the city. Busking was permitted in the New York subway system and on the city streets as well, but it was a peculiar form of busking. You had to have a license, and you only got the license by passing an audition.

It was a pretty good system, actually. The ears of the public weren't assaulted by talentless musicians, licensing kept down the territory wars for the best spot, and the beat and transit cops weren't put on the



spot by having to bust a player who was doing the public a favor by being there. Eric didn't know all of the licensed buskers-New York was a bit bigger than any Faire pitch he'd ever worked-but he thought he was familiar with most of the ones who set up near Lincoln Center on a regular basis and he was sure that none of them played a banjo. The pleasantly jangling notes ricocheted off the echoing tile walls of the subway, the echoes providing a depth and richness to the music that was the reason so many musicians-including Eric-liked to play here. Something else teased his inner ear as well, as he approached the platform.

Magic.

Nothing overwhelming, just a gentle little lilt, a Bardic lilt to the tune, something to tease a little money from the pockets of the passers-by, but only by those who had it to spare. More of a reminder, really, to be courteous.

If you like what you hear, and can spare the money, drop a coin or two-if not, pass on, pass on. . . .

And no one with a New York City busking license was a Bard. Except, of course, him.

A sense of urgency hit Eric in the gut: not only did he want to catch this unknown Bard and find out who he was, he wanted to get to him before he was busted! He hurried towards the platform. The transit cops, who were supposed to enforce the busking licenses, could be along at any moment. Some of them were inclined to turn a blind eye towards the occasional violator, if he was good, if the cop in question liked that particular kind of music. So how many of them like bluegrass?

Eric shoved his way towards the cluster of people around the source of the music, and shouldered his way into the magic circle, ignoring the indignant looks of the two he squeezed in between. "When true simplicity is gained, to bow and to bend we shall not be ashamed-" his mind supplied the words to the tune.

The busker was a tall young man, built like a linebacker. Eric took it all in with a single glance. Blond. Longish hair, jeans, faded blue work shirt-and that indefinable something that said "not from around here" to city-trained eyes. He had an open, friendly face and piercing blue eyes, which held a promise of friendship out to the entire world, if only the world was wise enough to accept it. His banjo case was open at his feet, money in it, as he ran leisurely fingers through the intricate patterns of the old song. An old Army surplus duffle bag rested at his heels.

And the banjo- The banjo-glowed. Not that anyone other than Eric or an elf would have seen the glow. The strings were a network of silver-fire, and blue afterimages danced along the pattern of the busker's darting fingers.

An enchanted banjo?

There were legends of enchanted instruments in the ancient days. The traditional songs were full of examples. Flutes made from a Bard's bones. A harp strung with the hair of a murdered girl-

No, that's a bit too grisly. Nothing like that here. More like . . . an enchanted sword, forged for a paladin. I didn't know there was anyone left Overhill who could do work like that.

Not that he knew, yet, that the banjo had been made here. But if it were elvenwork, he would have sensed that, and Eric's Bard-trained senses caught no trace of Otherworldly craftsmanship here, just innate human magic.

A stir caught his attention—the glimpse of a uniform hat down by the turnstile. The transit cops.

The busker finished his song and coins and a couple of bills dropped into his banjo case, accompanying a spatter of applause. And in the pause, Eric pulled out his busking license and propped it in the side of the banjo case, very visibly, then got out his flute. He opened the flute case and put it behind the banjo case, and began fitting his instrument together as he stepped to the side of the very surprised banjo player.

"You need a license to play down here, friend—I've got one, and you just became my partner," Eric muttered under his breath just as the transit cops reached them. "So, 'Unquiet Grave'?" he said, louder, as if he and the stranger had been duetting for some time.

The stranger nodded, and they both began—quite as if they had been duetting for some time.

Mind, "Unquiet Grave" wasn't Eric's tune of choice, but it was the only Appalachian piece he had been able to think of on the spur of the moment. Plaintive and just a little on the spooky side, it wasn't one calculated to haul in the cash. But that was all right; it made some of the audience clear off, giving the transit cops a good look at the two buskers—and Eric's license.

And giving Eric a good look at them, just as he nodded to the banjo player to wrap it up. He sighed with relief; they were people he knew, who weren't going to quibble that his license was for himself alone and not with a partner.

"Top o' the mornin' t'ye, constable," he said in his best "Faire-Irish" accent. Officer Zielazinski laughed.

"More like afternoon, isn't it, O'Banyon?" the transit cop jibed good-naturedly. "Who's your partner?"

The banjo player answered before Eric could fumble. "Hosea Songmaker, sir, at your service," he said in slow syllables sweetened with the honey accent of the hills and deep with respect. Eric could sense the touch of Bard-magic here, too: I am no threat to you; I will cause no trouble. . . . He supposed a man as big and physically intimidating as Hosea Songmaker'd had plenty of use for that particular charm more than a few times in his life, and it made him like his new partner all the more.

Zee laughed, responding unconsciously to the touch of the benevolent magic. "Not from around here, are you! Well, you stick with Banyon; he'll show you the ropes. He's pretty street-smart."

The two transit cops moved on, back to business; there were more important matters to claim their attention in the subway than a couple of licensed buskers.

When they'd gone, Hosea gave Eric a sidelong glance, followed by a slow smile. "Reckon I owe you one," he said. Eric laughed.

"Just want to keep a good musician out of trouble," he replied easily. "How were you to know you need a license? Listen, let's collect a take while the collecting's good, and I'll tell you all about what you need to know afterwards."

Hosea nodded, and combed back the long blond hair that flopped down into his eyes back with a set of strong, brown fingers. "Old standard?" he suggested, and played the first few notes of "Foggy Mountain Breakdown."

Eric nodded. Everybody knew that one-the Lester Flat and Earl Scruggs classic had been the theme song to the movie Bonnie and Clyde. And while it was written for banjo and fiddle, there was no reason he couldn't take the fiddle part.

"Then-how about we follow straight into 'Devil Went Down to Georgia' and 'Mama Tried'?" Eric countered. There. I'm not just a Celtic purist, you know.

"Right." Hosea's eyes lit up slyly, and Eric suspected he was about to be given a run for his money. Hosea surged into the opening bars of the "Breakdown," his fingers blurring on the strings. Eric barely made his entrance in time to take the melody away from the banjo and carry it.

Hosea, like many an Irish player at the Faires, had a wicked sense of humor and liked to accelerate the pace of an already fast piece with each successive pass. But Eric was ready for him-not that it was all that difficult for a Bard to figure out what another Bard was going to do next. By the time they segued into "Devil Went Down to Georgia," they'd hit light-speed. The crowd around them was thicker than before, and people were grinning and tapping their toes to the Charlie Daniels standard.

He'd had the joy of working with another Bard only Underhill, with his mentor Dharniel. That was always fun-if you could really use that word for anything to do with Master Dharniel-but it was nothing, nothing like working with another human Bard! There was a level of spontaneity and creative spark here that just wasn't present when he made music with the elves, and it made all the difference. Eric closed his eyes and gave himself over to the purest pleasure he'd ever felt outside of sex-and it certainly lasted a whole lot longer than even the most athletic sexual adventure he'd ever had!

It wasn't until he opened his eyes as he played the last flourish of "Mama Tried" that he realized they were surrounded six-deep by a gaping, grinning, toe-tapping human audience of people who should have been getting back to their jobs (or on to their lunches). The very moment they finished, money actually began to snow, rain, and hail into the banjo case, a veritable Hurricane Andrew of coins and small bills. Money that missed the case was scooped up and dumped into it by helpful hands, which was a small miracle in and of itself, as applause followed on the monetary accolade.

"Got enough to hold you for the next day or so?" Eric muttered sotto voce with a nod at the case.

Hosea grinned and nodded, his hair flopping into his eyes again. "That'll get me vittles and a bunk at the Y for a couple days, while I study on what I've got to do next," he replied. "Let's give these nice folk something to play 'em out on." His fingers began to move on the strings again.

Of all the tunes that Eric would have suspected Hosea would chose, this would not have been one. He listened as the banjo-Bard's clever fingers picked out the deceptively lazy little "pink-a pink-a pink-a pink-a pink (pause) pink-a pink-a pink-a pink-a pink (pause)."

Eric recognized it immediately, and knew the tune so well that his flute was at his lips and the soft notes spilling out at exactly the right moment after that second pause. "The Rainbow Connection" from the very first Muppet movie-how had Hosea known how much he liked that tune? And where had an Appalachian mountain boy learned it?

I guess that only proves that we live in a globally connected world, when an Appalachian mountain boy and a Juilliard student can recognize the same tune and play it like a couple of old buddies.

Simple tunes are deceptive things; superficially easy to play, they are the very devil to play well. But in the hands of not one, but two Bards, the very simplicity allows the heart and soul to shine.

When they finished, this time the reward was smiles as well as applause. Eric bowed with a flourish, Hosea with a kind of foot-shuffling modesty. Eric was pretty sure that though Hosea was a practiced musician, he hadn't been playing for money for very long-at least not as a street musician.

"Ladies and gents, you need to get back to your jobs, I'm sure-" Eric announced with practiced Faire-patter. Groans, and a chorus of "aaawwww!"-surely the greatest music to a musician's ears-greeted this announcement.

"-so in the interest of making sure you don't get in trouble, my friend Hosea and I will be taking a break now for a few hours. Thank you all, and we'll be here off and on for the rest of the week!"

With no display of hurry, but with the efficiency of any busker who has sometimes seen his "take" vanish along with the rear end of a petty thief, Eric shoved the banjo case over behind Hosea's legs with his foot while he scooped up his flute case and began taking his instrument apart and cleaning it. The crowd dispersed-with a few generous souls lobbing a couple more handfuls of change at the case for good measure as they left.

"This is half yours," Hosea said, from a bent-over position, preparatory to doing something about the "take."

"Oh, just pull out enough for some lunch for both of us and I'll call it quits," Eric replied absently. "Fifteen bucks should do it; that'll leave you enough for bus fare to get to the Y and a street and subway map."

Hosea looked up at him doubtfully, but seemed to sense that Eric was in earnest. He just shoved most of the "take" into the duffle he'd had behind him, keeping out a handful of bills that he crammed into his pocket. He placed the banjo lovingly into his case, and handed Eric his busking license back.

He moved very gracefully for such a big fellow; shortly he stood up with duffle and case slung over opposite shoulders, looking very much at ease and entirely out of place.

"So-your name's Banyon," he said, giving Eric a slow and considering once-over with those piercing blue eyes. "Is that a first name or a last?"

"Last. Eric Banyon, former RenFaire player, current Juilliard student, at your service," Eric replied, making a little bow that mocked his status as "Juilliard student."

But Hosea's slow smile wouldn't accept the mocking attitude. "Figured you had to be from around there," he said. "Some feller told me it was up that-a-way"-he waved vaguely at the ceiling-"and I reckoned anybody could play like you was probably from there. Well, Eric Banyon, the cop said I was to stick by you, so where do we find lunch?"

Central Park on a July day was as good a substitute for countryside as you were likely to find within fifty miles, and a lot cooler under the trees than the city streets were. The park was a lot bigger, and had more secluded places, than anyone but a native New Yorker would be likely to guess-a lot of them avoided the Park anyway, fearing gangs and muggers. There had been a suggestion, a couple of years back, that wolves should be reintroduced-a suggestion that wasn't entirely a silly idea. Wolves would do very well here if they could be kept in isolation, but it was inevitable that they'd crossbreed with feral dogs, which in a few generations would only mean that there would be a resident pack of slightly-more-lupine feral

dogs in the remoter parts of the place. Probably not the best idea in the world, given the unpredictable nature of lupine-canine crossbreeds. It was bad enough that coyotes had made their way here and had a thriving pack up by the Reservoir: no garbage can-or stray poodle-was safe.

Eric and Hosea gathered hot dogs and drinks from one of the Sabrette's carts outside the Park, and Eric led his fellow Bard into one of those quieter spots more familiar to the bird watchers than to the Frisbee throwers. There was, in fact, one of the bird feeders that the bird watchers maintained in this little bit of half-tame wilderness, and when they finished their food, Eric watched some sort of tiny birds flitting to and from it.

Hosea had clearly not eaten today, but he hadn't wolfed down the four (!) hot dogs he'd gotten for himself from the vendor. He'd eaten neatly and precisely, with not a crumb wasted or a bit of mustard smeared. He finished his soda, folded up all the paper neatly, and stuck it and the can into his duffle with the rest of his gear. No littering for this lad, evidently.

"So," Hosea said at last, breaking the silence. "Where do I get me one of them licenses so I can play for the folks without getting myself in trouble with the law?"

Eric explained the whole process while Hosea listened carefully. "The next audition isn't for another three weeks, though," Eric concluded, and as Hosea's face began to fall, he added quickly, "But don't worry-you can busk in the Park without one, and you can busk with me in the subway."

"Ain't you got classes?" Hosea asked doubtfully.

"I can work around them," Eric replied, then chuckled. "Besides, look what we did in half an hour together! There's probably about a hundred bucks there-figure we hit the lunch crowd and the commuters going home, we'll take in more than enough to cover your expenses until you can get a license for yourself. And you will," he added, with certainty.

Of course you will. You're a Bard, how can you not, if you put your mind and magic to it?

Hosea's earnest gaze met his steadfastly. "You've been helping me because . . ." There was a long pause, and for the first time Eric saw Hosea hesitate, as if he weren't quite sure how to put the thought into words. "Because of the music-magic. You've got the shine, too. Right?"

Eric hadn't expected him to put it quite so bluntly, though after the first few notes he'd been pretty sure that Hosea knew his own gift, and recognized Eric for a kindred soul.

"Well-yeah," Eric admitted a little sheepishly. "Where I come from, we're called Bards."

"Bards." Hosea rolled the flavor of the word over in his mouth and thoughts. "Like-back in the Druid times?" He grinned at Eric's raised eyebrows. "You reckon I'm right out of the hills, but we got libraries there, too. And the Internet."

Eric laughed, a little ashamed of himself for assuming Hosea was as simple as he looked. It wasn't precisely an act, Eric was coming to realize, but more of another defense against frightening people. Hosea was almost painfully courteous. "No offense meant," he said.

"None taken. So, I ain't never met another Bard before, except my Grandma. She had the shine, right enough. Guess I got it from her. I'm right glad you came to my rescue, Eric Banyon." Hosea's friendliness was as infectious as his grin.

"Right glad I did, too-" How could he not respond? There was something about Hosea that not only exuded trustfulness, but trustworthiness. He could no more have walked away from the guy than kicked a puppy in the face.

Besides, it isn't as if I need the money. Eric's needs were met-and more-by Elven magic. He'd gotten his busking license as much to help out some of the kids at Guardian House as to line his own pockets-or, admittedly, for the joy of playing for a live and mostly uncritical audience. His last assist had been to one of the dancers who lived on his floor-Amity was between dancing jobs and desperate to find something to pay her bills besides waitressing or cleaning houses. Eric had suggested that she bring a small square of "floor" with her down to the subway with him. He'd played, she'd danced, and together they made enough to pay her bills until the next job came along.

"Well, reckon you can find me the YMCA?" Hosea continued. "Friend of mine back home told me that was the place to stay when I got here; told me the rooms was cheap-at least, cheap as anything is here in the big city-and pretty safe. Not that I've got too much to worry about. Folks just take a look at me and just naturally think twice about making trouble, I guess."

Eric grinned. Most people would leave a Bard alone, even if they weren't sure why. And a Bard who was six-four and looked like he juggled pianos in his spare time was even less likely to attract undesirable attention.

He quickly thought about all the things he'd most needed when he first moved to New York. Bonnie and Kit had been there to get him settled in, but he'd still spent most of the first month getting lost every time he ventured out of his own neighborhood.

"First, we get you a street map, a bus-route map, and a subway map," Eric decided. "That'll help you find your way around. Come on."

A quick stop at a newsstand took care of those immediate needs, and for good measure, Eric picked up a guidebook that would give Hosea a lot of reference points-not just the tourist attractions, but the important buildings, the schools and libraries and other major landmarks. After that, it was no great effort to get Hosea planted firmly in front of the nearest YMCA. Once inside, and only then, Hosea dug the day's haul out of the duffle and counted it-he might not be street-smart, but he had a lot more common sense than a lot of people Eric knew.

They'd done better than Eric had thought. There was almost \$200 there, even if half of it was in quarters and dollar coins, and a lot of subway tokens.

"I'm good for a week-" Hosea said, tentatively. He raised his eyebrows questioningly, offering Eric his share again as he paid for his room and took the key. Hosea didn't have a credit card-no ID of any kind but a driver's license and a library card, both from someplace in West Virginia-so the room clerk had asked for cash in advance. Hosea had paid for three days, after being assured he could extend his stay if he wished.

"No worries," Eric assured him. "Look-here's my phone number and address, but I'll come and meet you back here-Sunday night, say. That's day after tomorrow. We can run through some numbers and set up a playlist. Then at noon break on Monday, wait for me at the main entrance to the school and we'll do a lunch gig." He coughed, a little embarrassed. "I'd gig with you the rest of this weekend, but I've got friends coming in-"

"Reckon friends got to come before strangers," Hosea countered, with a grin. "You said that it's okay to play in the Park, right? So I'll play in the Park. I'll do all right. Don't you worry none about me, Eric Banyon. I'm a big boy and I can take care of myself. You go on and be with your friends."

Relieved, Eric clapped him on the back-and had to reach a bit to do it. "One of these days-and soon-they'll be your friends too, if I don't miss my guess. Okay, Hosea, I'll be out here Sunday night-about six. We'll get something delivered for dinner, talk some music, and see what happens."

"I'll be looking forward to it," Hosea said genially, then hauled his duffle up onto his back again as if it weighed nothing and headed for the elevator, his room key jingling in his hand.

Eric just shook his head, watching Hosea go. He tried to imagine all the trouble this guileless country boy could have gotten himself into within thirty seconds of arriving in the city, and couldn't even calculate it. If he wasn't a Bard . . .

Well, he is a Bard, and he'll be fine. And I need to get home and start cleaning before Bethie gets there and has a fit!

## **TWO:**

### THE TREES THEY DO GROW HIGH

By turning himself into a cleaning tornado for a couple of hours-and by recruiting Greystone for things like moving furniture while he vacuumed and then used the steam cleaner he'd borrowed from one of his neighbors-Eric got the apartment up to Beth's standards of hygiene, with all the windows wide open to let in blasts of borrowed winter cold. He even sucked all the crumbs out of the crevices of the couch and chairs-something he hadn't done since before the last party. Ordinarily he wouldn't have bothered doing the Martha Stewart thing. The floor and most of the surfaces were clear, and what was the good of being a Bard if you couldn't set a spell around your home to chase out cockroaches, insects, and rodents, after all?-but Beth was going to be a lot fussier about cleanliness with the baby around.

A baby. Bethie had a daughter. Eric could barely imagine it. And the thought that he might have had any part in the deed seemed to be the rankest fantasy.

"Have I ever told you about the time that Kory discovered microwave popcorn?" Eric called over his shoulder as he shook out a match. Just to be sure that Beth's nose didn't twitch suspiciously, he was lighting vanilla-scented candles on top of the bookshelves, while Greystone popped the Chinese he'd ordered into the oven to stay warm.

"No. What'd he do? Pop every bag in the cupboard?" the gargoyle asked with a snigger. Greystone was an actual, genuine, medieval gargoyle. He had a fanged doglike face and curling horns, long apelike arms, and hindquarters like a satyr's, right down to the cloven hooves. Great bat wings lay against his back like furred umbrellas. Except for his big dark eyes, he was a uniform, textured gray all over, right down to the soot smudges and patches of lichen. And despite the fact that he lived and moved and talked, he seemed to be made of solid stone. He'd been Eric's first friend in Guardian House, coming that first night to Eric's tentative request for a friend. And Greystone had been a good one ever since.

"And then some," Eric said. "Gulls ate well that day. You should have seen Bethie's face." It had been a

sight, for -certain-sure; they'd eaten the stuff for breakfast as if it was cereal, with Beth standing over both of them (as if he'd had anything to do with it!) brandishing a wooden spoon to make sure they finished every bite. Even stuffing themselves with popcorn three meals a day, there was too much to eat before it got stale.

But to see the dumbfounded expression on Beth's face when she'd come into the kitchen that morning and found it full of popcorn had been worth it. Eric smiled reminiscently.

The gargoyle (who normally spent most of the day on the cornice ledge just outside Eric's apartment) strolled into the living room, still chuckling. Though as much a creature of magic as any Sidhe, Greystone had been anything but isolated from progress during his long life. He'd been a constant eavesdropper on and observer of life in the big city from the time that the building was erected during the late 1800s, and often (if the occupant of "his" apartment was a Guardian or other user of magic) a participant in the ordinary life of a New Yorker-insofar as anyone Greystone would be hanging out with ever had an "ordinary" life, that was. Greystone knew as much about appliances and the amenities of a modern apartment as Eric did.

More, actually. We'd been on the run for so long by the time we went Underhill that I'd gotten out of the habit of being a techno-junkie, and Elfhame Misthold isn't exactly your local Circuit City.

Greystone had been delighted to discover that Eric wasn't the type to freak out when a stone gargoyle came to life and tapped on the window. The gargoyle often spent the long hours of late nights watching television in Eric's living room-but he never, ever imposed. Having him around was rather like having a congenial roommate with none of the disadvantages roommates often brought with them.

And he's alphabetized my CDs and DVDs. How cool is that?

Greystone cocked his head to the side. "They're on the way up," he announced, though Eric heard nothing. "Can I stick around?"

"With Bethie dying to show off Maeve to the world? No question!" Eric said. He was surprised at how relieved he felt.

Beth and Kory already knew about Greystone-they knew about Guardian House as well, at least what Eric knew; that the House had been built to shelter the Guardians of New York, a kind of magical police force set up to protect ordinary humans from those who would use magic against them-or from inadvertently stumbling into the path of the super--nor-mal entities who shared their world. There were never fewer than two and seldom more than four Guardians living here at the same time-Eric wasn't yet quite sure how one became a Guardian, as that was a subject upon which the Guardians themselves were rather -reticent-and the House itself selected those other "normal" people who would live here. If Guardian House wanted you, you saw a "Vacancy" sign in the super's window. If it didn't, you didn't. It was all as simple as that.

Most of the "regular" tenants were artists, dancers, and musicians. Most of them were quietly, but devoutly, religious, although the House didn't care what their religion was. Most of them had no idea that the Guardians were the sole reason for the House's existence, that the Guardians even existed, or that they supplied a positive and energetic "atmosphere" for the Guardians to live in.

But a few of the House's civilian tenants, like Eric, were true magicians, and they knew. They served as a kind of unofficial auxiliary force to be called on in an emergency.



But though the Guardians were powerful and far more knowledgeable than the average human, Eric had found that they didn't know everything. They hadn't known, for instance, that there were such things as Bards-or that elves, the real Sidhe of legend, actually existed. Hadn't, that is, until Eric moved in.

Then they'd found out in spades.

A light tap on the door told Eric that Greystone, as usual, had been right. He flung it open for two figures in motorcycle leathers and helmets, the tall one in blue and the short one in red, with a tiny baby in a matching red leather carry-sack slung across her chest.

Beth pulled off her helmet and shook out her long hair with a sigh of pleasure. She was still keeping the auburn tresses Kory had engineered for her when the Feds had been on their tail-her original hair color had been black, but the auburn suited her. Her skin still glowed with the hormones of her recent pregnancy, and her brown eyes no longer showed that peculiar "haunted" look that had been in them for so long. Instead, there was a softer, more contented expression on her face, especially when she glanced down at baby Maeve.

"Well, Banyon, are you going to keep us standing in the hall all day?" she asked, handing him her helmet. Eric grinned, stepping back to allow them to enter the apartment.

There was the usual moment of kissing and hugging and congestion in the doorway, while Greystone stood aside and grinned. Kory, as usual, looked every inch the Elven Knight, even though he had a motorcycle helmet under his arm instead of a helm, and leathers instead of armor. Tall, muscular, blond as a child of the sun, if any fashion photographer in the world had gotten a look at him, he could have named his price-except, of course, for the pointed ears and green eyes, with their vertical-slit pupils like a cat's. All elves had those eyes and ears; their natural hair color was blond as well, but not all of them stuck to the natural color. After all, just about anything was possible for an elf, even shape-shifting. Eric had seen elves with heads of pink, blue, and purple hair that would make a punker or raver drool with envy; he'd even seen elves sporting hairdos of feathers, leaves, or tiger stripes. He'd seen them with the gauzy wings of Victorian fairies, or batwings, or feathers-all functional, if not actually capable of supporting flight. Tails, horns, hooves-nothing was impossible, which might account for the sightings of so many kinds of creatures in myth and legend. Kory, however, preferred to keep to the "natural" form-blond hair, slitted green eyes, pointed ears, and otherwise looking human.

Eric carried an armful of leathers and helmets into the bedroom while Beth unpacked Maeve and made sure the baby had survived the trip unscathed. When everyone had settled in the living room, Eric made his introductions.

"Greystone, this is Beth Kentraine and Sieur Korendil, Elven Knight and Magus Minor of Elfhame Sun-Descending. Beth and Kory, meet Greystone."

"I've heard so much about you," Beth said, smiling. "And this is Maeve." She held up the baby in her arms, and then, to his horror, offered her to Eric. He had no choice but to take her-it was that or run, and Beth would have slain him on the spot.

Maeve's flushed face, surrounded papoose-like by a fleecy wrap, didn't excite much in Eric but apprehension.

"She looks like Winston Churchill," he said dubiously, looking down at a face with eyes screwed tightly shut and contorted into a disagreeable grimace. A faint whiff of baby powder and milk came up to his nose as she opened her mouth in a silent (for the moment) protest.

"Eric!" Beth exclaimed indignantly, while Kory looked puzzled, tucking his blond hair behind his sharply pointed ears. Elves loved children.

The baby scowled at Eric. Beth had said she was beautiful, but to Eric she was looking more every minute like a wizened old man in a temper. She mewed. It sounded as if she was thinking about howling.

Now what do I do? he wondered, just a hint of panic arising. She seemed to be all knees and elbows, writhing muscularly in his arms as if she very much did not want to be there.

"Don't be daft, Bard, she's lovely," Greystone scolded. "And you're holding her all wrong. Give her here." He held out his hands summarily, and Eric, not at all loathe, handed the baby quickly to the gargoyle. Maeve might be his-or rather, he was Maeve's biological father-but there was no feeling of parental bonding there so far as he was concerned. He'd never been around babies when he was growing up, and they were almost as scarce on the RenFaire circuit as they were Underhill.

With relief he saw Greystone cuddle the tiny creature in sturdy arms that seemed to understand instinctively how to make the baby comfortable.

"There's a lovely little lady," the gargoyle crooned, wiggling one finger in front of Maeve's nose. "Boojie, boojie, boojie wooooo." The baby looked up at him with blank, blue eyes, but lost that disapproving expression and even made a tentative gurgling sound.

"I think she likes you, Greystone," Eric said, a little surprised.

"Of course she likes me, ye gurt idiot," Greystone retorted with fond indignation. "Never saw a baby that didn't, and I've been nanny to every Guardian's child here since the House was built."

Eric took the opportunity to beat a tactical retreat, heading into the kitchen to gather plates, cutlery, and the cartons of Chinese food Greystone had left in the oven. He arranged them on a tray and added drinks-designer water for Kory and Greystone, tea for Beth-before carrying the meal out into the living room on a tray. Greystone and Beth were both bent over Maeve, clucking and cooing at her while Kory looked on proudly. The domestic tableau left Eric feeling a little unsettled, as if he were being shut out of something he really didn't want to be a part of. It was a peculiar feeling.

"Luncheon is served," he intoned, deliberately breaking the mood. He set the tray down on the coffee table and began setting out the plates.

"Not much Chinese carryout Underhill, huh?" Eric teased, watching Beth and Kory inhale his offerings with a fine appetite while Greystone amused Maeve, holding her in one massive arm while scarfing egg rolls with his free hand.

"They still haven't got the knack of making or even kenning and creating it, and when it comes to carryout, the Fairgoers would rather have pizza anyway," Beth replied around a forkful of moo shu chicken, "And for some reason I didn't want anything like this until after the munchkin came. Then I thought I would kill for lo mein."

Eric and Kory exchanged a wordless masculine look of complete incomprehension. Kory mouthed a single sentence-just a few words, really.

Honey-nut bread and cabbage soup.

Ah, so that was what Beth had craved during her pregnancy! Eric nodded with sympathy, though he privately thought that Kory'd had it easy. Maybe the meals he'd shared with Beth were monotonous, but at least the ingredients were easily obtained Underhill. What if she'd wanted sushi-or birds' nest soup-or some other weird delicacy?

On the other hand, cabbage soup, while being-ah-fragrant, wasn't exactly the aroma-of-choice that Eric would have picked for dinnertime. And it did tend to linger.

Finally, the hunger aroused by a long ride from the Everforest Gate to New York City assuaged, Kory and Beth declared themselves sated and Eric cleaned away the plates.

"Bethie, ye can count on me for babysitting any time you're Overhill," Greystone announced, handing Maeve back to her mother. He looked up now, and raised an eyebrow like a cliff cornice at her as she beamed at him. "How are ye feeding her, then? Just breast?"

Somehow, Eric had noticed, whenever the gargoyle was around Kory and Beth, his Irish-or pseudo-Irish-accent got thicker. Why a gargoyle should have an Irish accent, and not a French one, he couldn't fathom. It was just one of those New York mysteries, he guessed. Or maybe the apartment's first tenant had been Irish. Greystone had to have learned his English somewhere.

Beth blushed. "Well-not entirely. I'm not exactly-well-a Holstein. The healers concocted a formula that Maeve likes; Kory can magic it up for us when we need it."

Elves, even minor mages like Kory, could always ken an object or substance and conjure more of it up later. That was why Eric himself was, for as long as he was in school, financially solvent-Dharniel and Kory had supplied him with enough gold Krugerrands (which, conveniently enough, completely lacked any identifying serial numbers) to give him a fat and very golden nest egg.

Eric wasn't surprised that Kory was helping to supplement Maeve's feeding magically, since as was vividly obvious in the tight motorcycle leathers, Beth's figure was back to her pre- pregnancy slimness, probably in no small part due to a little help from elven healers Underhill.

And we could make a fortune out here in the mortal world if we could just bottle that! No need for the Jane Fonda Pregnancy Workout if you've got the Sidhe on your side.

"Well, good." The gargoyle grinned. "You can just be leavin' the little angel with me tonight while ye have some fun out in the city, an' I'll be givin' her the bottle while ye're gone."

"Oh, would you?" Beth exclaimed delightedly, and then blushed again. "Oh, that sounds awful, but-"

"But what's the harm in you havin' an evenin' out for a movie or summat?" Greystone countered quickly. "'Tis time for a little holiday, I'm thinkin', and the wee one will be fine here. 'Tis many a nappie I've changed in me time-" he chuckled, a sound like rocks grating together "-and it's a fine thing for me that I've no sense of smell to speak of."

Better you than me, Eric thought, but didn't say out loud. He'd been worried that their evening plans might have to be adjusted to include a baby-or worse, that Beth wouldn't want to go out at all. Before she could change her mind, he went straight for the computer and logged on to the net, pulling up the New York Times entertainment web pages.

"Here're your choices," he called over his shoulder, while Beth was still protesting that Greystone didn't have to be a babysitter and Greystone was insisting it would be a fine treat to have a baby in his arms again. Kory got up to peer over Eric's shoulder with interest-computer technology had changed a lot since the last time Kory'd seen a computer-while Beth paused in mid-sentence, then shrugged and laughed, acknowledging defeat.

"Okay, Banyon. I'm sold. What've you got for us this evening, then?"

After some discussion, they decided on The Lion King-it was finally possible to get tickets after months of nothing but sold-out performances, and it was the show Eric thought Kory would enjoy the most.

Movies they could always see later; with help from Elfhame Fairgrove in Savannah, the most technologically sophisticated of the hames, a limited amount of human technology had been brought Underhill for the benefit of Beth and other humans who had sought shelter there. One of those bits of technology was a DVD player-which worked better than the VCR they'd originally had down there did, for some reason. They were still trying to work out how to bring in satellite TV, according to Kory-right now when anyone from Fairgrove wanted to see NASA Channel, Headline News, or (most espe-cially) Speedvision, they had to retire to one of the Fairgrove buildings Overhill.

Eric booked their seats through Ticketron Online-one of the perks of carrying an AmEx Platinum card-and for the first time in a long time, the three of them went out onto the streets of a city, to spend an evening together, as they once used to.

\* \* \*

"That was great," Beth sighed, much later, after peeking into the portable crib set up in the bedroom to make sure Maeve was all right. Babies, Eric had discovered, needed about as much support gear as the average astronaut, but fortunately Beth, unlike most mortal moms, had a portable hole to carry it in. The amount of stuff she'd unpacked from it before she'd been willing to leave Maeve with Greystone had been purely mind-boggling.

"That was fantastic, in fact."

They'd made the curtain without any trouble, walking most of the way so that Beth and Kory could get a taste of New York. After the show they'd stopped at Luchow's for dessert, and were home by midnight.

Kory nodded, his green eyes still shining-literally!-with pleasure. "I forget, sometimes, just what a marvel mortal creativity is," he said, clearly without thinking who he was with. "Imagine creating something that has never been before, just with the power of the mind!"

Eric laughed. "So what am I, chopped liver?" he asked mockingly, and Kory flushed.

"Nay, Bard, I didn't-" the elf faltered.

"I know you didn't! I'm just teasing you!" Eric laughed-but behind the laughter was an inescapable thought. When it was the three of us alone together, he wouldn't even have put that into a thought, much less words-he'd have wondered, maybe, when I would create something that would be on a stage. Now I'm "Bard," not "Eric"-and he forgets what I am. As if our life together never happened.

"Listen, something really fantastic happened today," he said quickly, to drive away uncomfortable thoughts. "I met another Bard!"

The other three settled down to hear the story-though Greystone, being telepathic by nature, already probably knew at least some of it. But like the tactful guest he was, he never flaunted that very useful ability, and in fact, Eric wasn't really sure how much of his regular thoughts Greystone actually heard.

He told them all about meeting Hosea, about realizing what Hosea was, and about the two of them playing together in the subway. Then he told them about his plans to get Hosea on his feet. He realized he didn't know why Hosea had come to New York-he was becoming enough of a New Yorker himself to just kind of take it for granted that of course everyone who could would want to come to New York, the center of the world for so many things.

He couldn't help but get excited about the prospect of playing with the banjo-Bard again. Giggling with another good musician was one of the things he liked to do best, but giggling with another Bard had been an experience so enchanting that he couldn't wait to do it again. Kory nodded his understanding, and the more enthusiastic Eric got, the more pleased Kory looked-but Beth was frowning.

"I don't know, Banyon," she said slowly, her brows furrowing with unease. "This could all be a setup. I don't like it-I mean, you don't know anything about this guy-not really! Isn't it just a little too convenient that he's busking at your subway station just as you get out of class?" She put down her tea and shifted uneasily in her seat on the couch.

It was hard, now, to remember what Beth had been like when he first met her-hard to remember what he'd been like, come to that-but he knew she hadn't been this suspicious, jumping-at-shadows paranoid. Since Griffith Park, and everything that followed after, every year Beth seemed to be darker, more intense, more focused-and not entirely in a good way, either. It was as if the person she might have become had been destroyed by this other self-and equally true that she had always held the potential to become either one. He supposed it bothered him more because he'd been counting on Maeve to erase all the scars and make Beth the person she'd been at twenty. But that wasn't ever going to happen. Done was done, and living things changed.

But some changes weren't for the better.

"Bethie, this guy couldn't be a Fed," Eric answered firmly. "I've been here almost a year-if anyone were looking for me, they'd have found me already. Besides, no Fed I ever saw looked or acted like Hosea, or could. They're just not good enough actors."

"He doesn't have to be a Fed," she argued, leaning forward, her face intent. "What about those people that were using LlewellynCo as a front to make mages on crack or whatever it was? What about the guys with the pet Nightflyers that were after us in San Francisco?"

"Not a chance. Trust me, those kind of guys stink of bad juju a mile away," he insisted. "I'd know. Believe me, I'd know." I'm a Bard, Bethie. This is what being a Bard is. I'd know.

But Beth still wasn't willing to drop the subject. "Maybe," she said grudgingly. "But you have to admit that the story is just-awfully pat. In fact, this sounds like a classic con job to me!"

Oh, Bethie, when did you become so stubborn, so blind? You used to be able to see what was right in front of your nose better than most people!

"He's a Bard, Bethie," Eric said patiently, throttling his irritation. After all, she had every reason to be paranoid; she wasn't Underhill ninety percent of her time because she wanted to be, she was there

because "They" were after her. He'd never understood why it was Bethie they wanted, and not him or Kory, but there was no arguing with the facts.

"I'm telling you. I couldn't make a mistake about this. Trust me. I know he's a Bard; you can't fake that. I know he's one of the good guys-it's in his music. A Bard can't hide what he is-at least, not from another Bard. And anyway, a Bard isn't going to try to con another Bard! What would the point be? Anything he can get from me he can get for himself a lot easier just by using his magic!"

"Not if what he wants is you," Beth said, her jaw set in a stubborn line of temper.

"A Bard would not betray another Bard, acushla," Kory said, coming to Eric's defense. He put a hand on Beth's knee soothingly. "I know this. And our Eric is no fool; he can weigh the human heart as easily as I could weigh an egg."

Beth looked from Kory's face to Eric and back again, and finally shrugged and sat back. "I suppose," she said grudgingly, then smiled with a visible effort. "Well, you've done all right so far. I guess"-now it was her turn to falter-"I guess you don't need us to shepherd you anymore."

Eric forced a grin, though he'd rarely felt less like smiling. "Like you ever did-or at least, any more than I did the same for you two!" Eric scoffed, and the other two looked a little shamefaced and ill-at-ease.

They were all so uncertain with each other! This wasn't the easy seamless reunion he'd imagined. It was as if they'd never been friends and lovers, as if they were meeting now for the first time, none of them knowing the others any too well.

And that would never have happened in the past, either.

Greystone got to his feet, stretching his wings. "Well, I'll thank ye now for a foigne evening, but it's going I have to be. Can't be spending all me time away from me duties, y'know." He clumped across the room to the windowsill and ducked out onto the fire escape. "But any time ye need a sitter for the wee one, just gi' me a shout, eh?" In moments, he was back in his post on the cornice above.

Once he was gone, a silence descended that was just a bit too uncomfortable, and Eric hastened to break it.

"So is there anything planned for Maeve?" he asked, figuring that the baby was the subject least likely to cause any more awkwardness. "I mean, like a christening or a baby shower or something?"

"Oh, aye!" Kory brightened up again, his delight in Maeve transparently obvious. "There's the Naming ceremony-you'll be coming, of course-"

"Of course," Eric assured them quickly, and was rewarded by smiles.

"She will be brought up to the Court for it-you've never seen the Court, Eric-it is a sight beyond compare-and there'll be the godparents speaking for her, and a ceileighe, of course-"

Kory went on at great length, using a number of words Eric didn't know, but he did manage to gather that the real reason for the Naming was to have the biggest party Underhill had seen for a long, long time. Guests from every Elfhome known would be invited, and the ceremony itself would serve to confirm Beth's place as a member of the Underhill community. In one way Underhill was like a family-or the extended family of Rennies-in that it functioned as much as a web of kinships and relationships as after

the fashion of a true feudal society. To be known, and to know people in turn, was the very foundation of Sidhe life. As the old saying went: it wasn't what you knew, but who you knew. . . .

All of this made Eric feel acutely aware of how very much he was no longer really a part of their lives, though he tried very hard not to show it. After all, that was the point of his being here, wasn't it? He had a different sort of life to lead, now, and it was nothing like theirs. It didn't even take place in the same world. Literally.

It's done. The break's a fact. He'd known that, he really had-but here it was in front of him, undeniable, and Eric's throat suddenly knotted with a surge of loneliness that took him entirely by surprise.

He was so lost for a moment in his own thoughts that he missed the change in conversation.

"-think you're going to ask Ria?" Beth was saying hesitantly.

Eric stared at her blankly. To the Naming? You're asking me that? Beth obviously mistook his blank incomprehension for something else, because she flushed and added hastily, "If it hasn't been a good idea to bring up her father and how she was born, I understand, but Kory and I haven't had much luck in finding out anything for ourselves. And I thought . . ."

He shook off his melancholy with a start, and frantically tried to put the bits of conversation together into a coherent whole. Ria-Perenor-oh, of course! Not the Naming. About Sidhe/human crossbreeding.

"I have asked her, actually," he said, hoping he hadn't looked too blank. "I even told her why-well, I had to, she came out and asked me," he added, in response to Beth's sudden scowl.

"Oh, I'm sure she was only too pleased with that-" Beth snapped.

"She's not your enemy," was all Eric said, not defensively, but determined that the feud between Beth and Ria-if there was one-was not going to go on. Maybe bringing Ria to the Naming would be a good idea after all. Beth can't throw a fit in the middle of a big party, and Ria needs to get on good terms with her relatives. Half her heritage is Sidhe. You can't just ignore something like that.

"She risked her life to save the Sun-Descending Nexus-and paid a heavy price for her help," Eric said firmly. "Elizabet and Kayla both say she's okay. Whatever happened in the past is over with, and if she could have told me anything that would help, she would have.

"Unfortunately, she says-and I believe her-that what Perenor did in order to father a child on her mortal mother was not something we'd want to repeat." He shook his head, and sighed. He hated to disappoint them-Beth and Kory wanted a child of their own so badly-but Ria's information had been pretty grim.

"You remember how we found out that Perenor drained all those young kids that would have been Bards if they'd had a chance to grow into their power?" he asked.

"And left them sad, empty husks, aye," Kory said, slowly, the horror of it dawning on him. "Do you mean-that was what he used to make the woman conceive?" The Sidhe knight drew back in horror, his green eyes wide.

"In a nutshell, yeah. He kept draining them for other reasons and other magics later, but that was the first thing he used them for." Eric shuddered. He'd seen a couple of the kids-Elizabet, their human Healer-friend, had gotten some of them as patients once she'd known they were there to look for-and in

Eric's personal opinion, they'd have been better off dead. Actually, most of them had died, especially at first, and to Eric's mind, they'd been the lucky ones.

If anyone had taken the music, the life, the dreams I'd had out of my world and left it gray and drained and empty, I wouldn't have wanted to live.

Ria had told him that the actual spell Perenor had used had been a bit more complicated than simple draining. Perenor had forced two of the incipient Bards—one of them Ria's uncle, her mother's twin—into a kind of mind-bond; they'd hated and feared him and each other, and when they realized what he was doing, it had driven them crazy before it killed them. The backlash had damaged Ria's hippie mother's mind, leaving her with so many mental kinks her psyche resembled a ball of steel wool and an insatiable craving for drugs that could not be explained by normal addictions—if you could call an "addiction" normal. Eric got the feeling she hadn't lasted long after Ria ran away and took refuge with her loving father, either. Perenor probably protected her from herself only so long as she and her friends were useful, literally "minding the baby."

"You're right," Beth said flatly, as Eric's explanation faltered to a stop. "That's not something we'd want to repeat. So it's a dead end. Another dead end." She seemed to fold in upon herself, as if the disappointment were a palpable weight.

There didn't seem to be much else Eric could say, and the conversation stumbled awkwardly into another subject. Eventually, around about three in the morning, Eric smothered a yawn and Greystone poked his head in the window.

"Streets are quiet as a nun's funeral," he said. "Are ye plannin' on stayin' the night, then?"

Beth and Kory looked at each other, a quick sort of "married people" glance.

"You can have the bedroom," Eric offered quickly. "Just like always. You know the couch makes up into a good bed—you picked it out, remember?—and it won't be the first time I've fallen asleep on it."

But Kory and Beth exchanged another one of those looks that excluded Eric, and Beth chuckled.

"I don't think so, Banyon," she said, not unkindly. "Maeve is as good as gold except for first thing in the morning. And she may not have anything else of yours, but there's no doubt she's got your lungs. She'd have the whole building up here, thinking we're murdering a cat."

Eric blushed, but laughed along with the other three, for Greystone seemed to find this observation hilariously funny. "Okay, then—I was thinking you'd spend the weekend, but—"

"What, and get in the way of you making a date with Ms. Llewellyn?" Beth asked, with just a hint of bitterness that she tried hard to conceal. "We'll send you word of when the Naming is—you are coming?" she asked again.

"If I didn't, you'd kill me," he pointed out.

"Well—unless you were in a hospital bed, yeah, I probably would," Beth admitted. Kory went to fetch Maeve from the bedroom, while Beth stood up and gave him a hug and a kiss that was, for one moment, like the old Beth's. "I'll try not to be so jealous, Banyon," she whispered in his ear. "As long as the bitch makes you happy. But if she ever hurts you—"



"That'll be between her and me," he replied, breathing it into her ear. "Don't interfere, Bethie. Not even out of love. I'm a big boy now. You can't always be trying to protect me."

She pushed him away, and looked into his eyes for a moment; hers were suspiciously damp. "You've grown," was all she said, but the smile she gave him wavered just a little.

Kory came back with Maeve. He handed Beth the baby to tuck into her carrier, then put an arm around Eric's shoulders.

"The Bard's a warrior now, acushla, well-trained and proven in dire battle. He doesn't need us for protection anymore." The elf smiled, that kind of smile that just melted the heart. "But I know he will always need us as friends."

"Always," Eric said, drawing both of them into a fierce embrace. Maeve was a warm weight between them-between them, Eric now realized, in more ways than the physical. Beth and Kory were parents now, and he wasn't. "Always. Never doubt it," he repeated. But it's a different kind of "always" than I'd planned for. . . .

It was just as well that Beth and Kory left that Friday night, because Saturday turned out to be a day of running around on a hundred little errands that ate up all of Eric's time from the moment he got up around noon. Light bulbs blew, he ran out of toilet paper, then out of ink for his printer (at which time he discovered that he was out of paper as well). He went down to the basement to do laundry, and discovered he was out of detergent.

If it weren't for the party this evening, I'd be really bummed.

It wasn't anything major in the way of parties, but over the past several months those who were in the "know" about the true function of Guardian House-the four Guardians and a few others-had fallen into the pleasant habit of getting together once or twice a month to just kick back and socialize. These gatherings were usually held at Eric's place-Eric was a Bard, not a Mage, and, as Paul had been happy to inform him, Bards were legendary for their hospitality.

And practically speaking, Mages were solitary types who didn't much like getting their personal space invaded at the best of times, even if Paul's computers and reference library, José's birds, and Toni's kids weren't taking up all the available entertaining space in their various apartments. And Jemima, being a New York City cop, was particularly possessive about her space, which was her sanctuary from the horrors a patrol cop saw on a daily basis.

Eric had been invited in a couple of times; Jemima had a small one-bedroom decorated mostly in blues and greens, its walls hung with her collection of nature photographs, including an original Ansel Adams. It was a serene yet somehow imper-sonal space, reflecting its owner's personal reserve. Especially if you never got to see the sword hanging on the bedroom wall, its blade glowing with Runes of Intent. . . .

Eric shook himself free of the reverie with a smile. So what it all boiled down to was that his apartment had become the de facto Mage Community Center for Guardian House. Fortunately, all he had to do was place his standing order with the corner pizza place and look forward to an evening of good talk and good people.

Tatiana and Alex were the first two to arrive. Tat was a book designer; Alex did indexing and research,

as well as teaching part-time at the New School. Tatiana was tall and flamboyant, with pre-Raphaelite blonde hair and a gypsy taste in clothes. Alex was dark and saturnine, with a neatly-trimmed black beard and a positive addiction to sober suits. His hobby was stage illusion-ism, and on occasion Eric had seen him pull off feats of sleight of hand that he wasn't sure he could duplicate even with the help of Bardic magic. Both were what Alex called "research magicians," devoting more time to the history of the Art than to actual practice. They were members of one of the more close-mouthed magical lodges, New Age by courtesy, though unlike a lot of the New Agers Eric had met over the years, they weren't "in-your-face" about it. They spoke appreciatively about Eric's "air--conditioning," and Tat poked her head out the window to say "hi" to Greystone while Alex got them drinks-Vernor's with lime for himself, Schweppes' Bitter Lemon with ice for Tatiana.

One thing I've got to say for magicians-they certainly make cheap dates. Nobody I've ever met who had the Gift-and knew what they had-really drinks much. Or smokes, or, well, much of anything in that line. I guess once you've plugged into magic, the other stuff all seems second best.

The others began to appear fairly quickly after that, arriving from their various day jobs. Toni Hernandez was the building's manager, a pretty, no-nonsense Latina in her early forties, a single mother with two kids. As much as such an anarchic group as the Guardians had a leader-and Eric had gotten the feeling that they were a lot more like the Texas Rangers, or four Lone Rangers, than any organized Occult Police-the Guardians of Guardian House looked to Toni.

Jimmie-short for Jemima, and she'd kill you if you used it-was fashion-model tall and slim, with thick, lustrous, straight black hair, very dark eyes, a bronzy complexion under a good, even tan, and high cheekbones in a face too strong to be called "pretty." She was manic about keeping civilians off the fire line; back when she'd just been starting out as a Guardian, her partner had been killed because she'd been unable to keep him out of a paranormal investigation. Now she was adamant about protecting the innocent.

Paul Kern was a tall elegant black man with a hint of Islands British in his voice, who carried himself with the grace of a dancer. Paul made his living doing something esoteric with computers, and used the same valuable skills to find information about whatever problems the Guardians might face. Though his abilities had come up dry when the Guardians had faced down an Unseleighe Lord last year, Eric had no doubt that by now Paul had managed to corner the world market in elven lore.

Paul entered along with the fourth of the House's Guardians, José Ramirez. José was the building's super, handling the House's rare mechanical breakdowns, and a breeder of African Grey parrots. He was short and stocky, with the build of someone who lifted weights for use, not show, and the dark craggy features of an Indio Charles Bronson. Of the four Guardians, it was hardest for Eric to imagine how José had wound up as a mystical champion of the Light: he seemed so incredibly pragmatic and down-to-earth, not to mention fully involved in both day job and avocation. Eric had visited his apartment a few times-it was almost entirely given over to the birds. To Eric they looked like budgies on steroids, but there was no doubt that José loved them-or that his love was returned.

The last of the stragglers had arrived by eight, and the apartment was filled with eddies of talk and laughter. Earlier in the day Eric had filled his CD player with an eclectic mix calculated to appeal to everyone-some old favorites, some new finds-and more than once he caught people paging through the stack of jewel cases, trying to identify the music that was playing. The pizzas had vanished early, but Margot had brought cookies-someone usually did-and Eric had laid in a more than sufficient supply of sodas to fuel conversations far into the wee small hours.

Jimmie had looked pretty beat when she'd walked in tonight. Eric had put that down to the stress of her

job-in addition to everything else, the NYPD rotated shifts on a six-week basis, which meant she was always having to get used to new hours-but as the evening passed, the lines of stress in her striking face became more pronounced, not less. Something worse than usual was eating at her, something good friends and conversation couldn't touch.

"Want to talk about it?" Eric asked.

He'd followed her into the kitchen when she'd gone to get a refill on her tea. Eric had found that a Mr. Coffee did a good job of keeping a pot of herbal tea hot for hours-and after six or seven hours of steeping, even chamomile would get as dark as Lipton's.

Jimmie sighed, not turning around. "Is it that obvious?"

"Only to someone who knows you," Eric answered. "I'm surprised the others haven't been on your case about it already."

"What makes you think they haven't?" she asked, turning around, cup in hand, and leaning against the sink. "The only trouble is, none of us can figure this out. I was just about desperate enough to ask you for advice," she finished, with a faint ironic smile.

Eric smiled back, although he was now a lot more worried than he had been before. The Guardians were good folks, but they tended to be . . . insular. Jimmie's flat refusal to put civilians on the firing line was only the more extreme manifestation of the Guardians' general desire not to involve outsiders-no matter how magical-in their business. Either you were already in it up to your neck, so their reasoning ran, or you should take the chance to go live a peaceful, normal life and run with it. The fact that Jimmie was willing to consult him was proof that the Guardians were at the end of their considerable resources.

"Consider the doctor in," he said, doing his best to cloak his unease with lightness.

Jimmie took a deep breath, obviously organizing her thoughts. Eric glanced over his shoulder, but no one had followed them into the kitchen, and the hum of talk and music was still at an even level. They wouldn't be disturbed.

"Okay. For about the past . . . six months, maybe a little longer, I've been having nightmares. They sort of come with the territory, I know, but these have been something special. Fires, open graves, things . . . chasing me. Pretty grim.

"We tried to figure out a reason for them, sure, but it's been pretty quiet magically since Aerune tried his little stunt last winter. They can't really be coming from outside, not with my shields and the House's. And besides, Greystone doesn't pick up a thing-at least, not until I wake up screaming. As for work . . . well, the job is the job, and it never changes. But the dreams have. They've gotten more frequent, and they've gotten worse." She shrugged, glancing up momentarily to meet Eric's eyes. "I'm starting to think maybe I ought to take some personal leave."

These nightmares must be something pretty bad, Eric thought. He frowned. While he could certainly use his magic-with her help and consent-to give her sweet dreams in place of the nightmares, it would only be a temporary solution. The real question was what could break through a Guardian's shields and leave no trace for the House-or Greystone-to sense?

"And you don't think they're coming from outside."

Jimmie shook her head.

"But they could be." Eric cudged his brains to remember all Master Dharniel's lessons on magic, but the Sidhe Magus hadn't been big on lectures. Dharniel had been more the "learn by doing" type. "You've pretty much settled that this isn't something coming from within-if it were, it would probably have resolved itself by now. And I know that the House's shields would stop pretty much everything, but if you have blood-kin, they can almost always get through any shields you can raise. . . ." His voice trailed off. As far as he knew, Jimmie didn't have any living relatives.

"Mom's dead. Dad's dead. But . . ." Jimmie stopped with a heavy sigh. "There's still someone. He's as good as dead, though."

"Someone close to you?" Eric asked, feeling uncomfortably that he was prying into things that weren't any of his business.

Jimmie Youngblood smiled bitterly. "Once upon a time I had an older brother. I went into the Academy because of him-he was a cop, like Dad and Grampa. I wanted to be just like him. Only it turned out that he wasn't a cop just like Dad and Grampa. He . . . cut corners. Did things that no cop can do and stay clean. Dad found out about five minutes before Internal Affairs did. He turned El-my brother-in. He left the Force, and that was that."

"Do you know where he is now?"

"Eric, I don't even know if he's alive," Jimmie said in frustrated exasperation.

"My advice? Better find him," Eric said. "I can play you a charm to give you temporary relief, so you can get some rest, but all it will be is a stopgap. It won't make the dreams go away. And from the kind of dreams you've been having, I'd say it's a possibility that this guy might be in trouble."

Serious trouble.

THREE:

### A DARK HORN BLOWING

In this forest it was always night. A red moon hung eternally overhead, its scarlet light turning the landscape below to ebony and blood, hiding the brambles and pitfalls that could trap a running man. The damp air resounded to the call of hunting horns and the howls of the pack. Whatever mortal encountered them was doomed, for they were the hounds of the Wild Hunt, and once set upon a scent, they never failed to take their prey.

He had seen them succeed four times before. He was the fifth and last, and sometime in this eternal night his end would come in the same way as that of all the others.

He did not know how long any of them had been here, suffering the tender mercies of their tormentor. Weeks or months-or maybe even years. The old stories said that time ran differently under the Hollow Hills than it did on Earth. But the time of year was the least of his worries.

Staying alive as long as he could-and dying well-was what mattered now. Was all that mattered now.

He stopped for a moment, his back to the trunk of a tree of no earthly species, alert for the sound of the Hunt. If he could survive until dawn, he was free. That was what they'd told Hauman, and for a while all of them had hoped to escape-until they realized that in this world, dawn never came.

His antlers caught in the tree's branches. He shook his head irritably as he freed them. They were another part of the trap. There was no way to remove them. Once Aerune had strapped the gleaming silver antlers to your head, only death would release you. That was one of his tricks, and the Sidhe lord had a lot of them. Elkanah Youngblood had sampled them in plenty during his captivity.

Had the blonde bitch known what Aerune would do to them when she'd abandoned them here? Elkanah hoped so. It made Ria Llewellyn easier to hate, and hate was the only thing that gave him the strength to go on. There was no point in hating Lord Aerune-it would be like hating a mountain, or the sea, or the night itself. Aerune was too inhuman to hate, but Elkanah could fear him, and he did.

Too late now to wish he'd never followed Lintel's orders back in the day, nor followed the path that had brought him to the outlaw life of a hired gun. Too late to wish he'd died before Robert Lintel had magicked them all into Aerune's court with his captive espers. Too late to wish he'd turned his own gun on himself while he still could, before he'd become Aerune's prisoner. All that mattered now was surviving as long as he could without going mad. Or maybe going mad was better. Elkanah didn't know.

The one thing he did know was that it was marginally better to be ripped apart by the hellhounds pursuing him than to fall into the hands of the huntsmen. Liverakos had made that mistake. He'd held off the dogs until the Hunt had joined them. He'd hoped for clemency, or for a clean death. Instead, it had taken him hours to die, flayed alive slowly by creatures who fed on human pain.

And all of them-the surviving Threshold mercs-had been forced to watch.

Elkanah didn't know how often Aerune held these hunts. Time had no meaning here. There was being asleep, and being awake, and sometimes it was hard to tell the difference between the two. When Aerune got tired of his petty torments, then it was time for another hunt. They'd never known who'd be chosen next to wear the silver antlers. Elkanah had that small advantage over those who had gone before him. When the last of the others had died in the hounds' jaws, he'd known he'd be next. Maybe that was why Aerune had played him as long as he did, tormenting him with the hope it wouldn't end for him the way it had for all the others. But this morning-it was impossible not to use the word, even though it was meaningless in this world-Aerune had summoned him to the throne room, and Elkanah had known his time had come.

And now he was here in the bone-wood.

The bone-wood was filled with bare, leafless trees like nothing on Earth. Even when there was no wind, the branches moved, rubbing against each other to produce a sound eerily like human whispering. Maybe if you listened long enough, you could understand what the trees said. Elkanah hoped he'd be dead before then.

Though he suspected spring and autumn never came to this place, the forest floor was covered with dead and rotting leaves. Thickets of leafless bramble grew between the trees, a trap for unwary prey, and somewhere beyond the bone-wood itself was a meadow-covered with sere dry grass that had never been green-and a river. He'd used every moment of the other Hunts to try to make a map of the territory in his mind, hoping it would serve him when his own time came.

Except for the silver antlers upon his head, Elkanah was as naked as any other hunted animal. They'd given him a head start before they released the hellhounds-the Unseleighe Sidhe had a warped notion of fair play-and he'd had a long time to plan for this day.

There was no way out of the forest, and no point in waiting for a dawn that would never come. The only hope he had-and all it amounted to was a choice of deaths-was to make the hunt last as long as possible, so that the rade got bored and didn't follow the pack very closely. Then he could be sure that the pack would tear him to bits before the hunters reached him. Until that time, he needed to confuse them, lay a maze of false trails, and use every way there was to throw them off the scent. The times he'd ridden with the Hunt to watch the others die would help him there. He could almost say he knew this forest.

The horns sounded again, closer this time, and he could hear the baying of the hounds. They were huge, monsters, like a wolf in a nightmare: four feet at the shoulder, with ivory fangs as long as his thumb and pupilless red eyes that glowed with the light of hellfire. His daddy'd been a jackleg preacher when he wasn't hard at work at his real job, and in his youth Elkanah had heard all about Hell and its creatures. He could say he knew the territory. If this wasn't Hell, it was the next best thing.

He turned, and began moving away from the pack at a slow, ground-eating lope. The river was near here. He could wade along it for a few hundred yards, then cross over and double back on his tracks. That should confuse them for a while. Later he'd find a tree to climb, move from branch to branch. Anything to throw them off the scent. He could even pretend that he hoped he could make it to the edge of the forest-assuming it had an edge. Hope could keep you alive, or it could kill you. Right now, hope and determination were the only things he had.

He heard the river long before he reached it. He had to force his way through a thicket of thorns to reach it, and he was bleeding from a hundred scratches by the time he made his way to the water. The surface of the water shone balefully red in the moonlight, and for a moment he worried about what might lay beneath its surface. The river was wider than he remembered, but the far bank was an easy slope. But Agel had made it across before he died, and Aerune's Hunt had forded it without difficulty. He had to try.

When he stepped into the water, it was as cold as liquid ice. The scratches on his body burned, a silver tracery of fire, before the cold numbed them. Gritting his teeth, Elkanah forced himself deeper, striking out with powerful strokes for the center. The current would be faster there, and do some of his work for him. Always providing the Hunt wasn't awaiting him downstream, knowing he would do precisely this.

Indecision is your worst enemy. On the battlefield, even a bad decision is better than none, he told himself grimly. You've made your plan, now stick to it.

The cold sapped his strength and made his heart hammer madly. He let the current carry him downstream as long as he dared before striking out for the far bank, knowing he had to save some of his strength to battle his way there. He didn't dare try to drown, though surrendering to the water's chill kiss was tempting. Aerune's healers were too skilled for him to risk it. He'd seen them work on the others, bringing a man back from the edge of death to be tortured again. The death that was his only way of winning this game had to be certain . . . and final.

But it was almost a greater effort than he was capable of to drag himself out of the water, and for long moments Elkanah crouched in the thick grass of the bank, gasping and shuddering with the cold. Only terror and determination forced him to his feet to stagger onward through the wood again. All around him the trees seemed to whisper to themselves as he passed, and he no longer cared if what he saw and heard was real or imaginary. Anything might be true here. The only thing he had going for him was the

fact that the Unseleighe Sidhe didn't like to have their games spoiled. Nothing in this forest would hinder him as he ran, or do anything to cheat the Wild Hunt of its sport.

At least, they never had yet. He'd seen some of the other things that lived here-black horses with cloven hooves and ram's horns, small silvery fox-things that sobbed and cried like children, glowing women as insubstantial as mist. Creatures of nightmare, only here the nightmares didn't end with waking.

Each time he stopped to rest it seemed like only moments before he heard the hounds again, baying close behind as they followed his trail. He crossed a second, shallower stream, and Elkanah spent several minutes circling back and forth through it, making a tangled scent for the hounds to follow, before forging onward. The ground began to rise, and he realized that the trees were becoming smaller and farther apart.

This was a part of the Night Lands he'd never seen before on any of the Hunts. Perhaps if he reached the top of the ridge ahead, he might find sanctuary. A cave to hide in. Something. He had to hope, had to fool himself that he wouldn't die tonight. It was the only way he could manage to get through this, and put himself at last beyond Aerune's reach.

His entire body trembled with exhaustion, and his throat and lungs burned with each rasping breath he took. He didn't know how far he had run-miles, maybe-and he knew that he couldn't fool himself much longer. He was at the end of his strength, and the hounds were closer now. He could hear them. For the last few minutes he'd just been running flat-out, too stupefied with fatigue to turn and dodge and confuse the trail. This was open country, anyway. Backtracking wouldn't do any good. The hounds could see him, and unlike other hunted animals, he had no convenient burrow to hide in.

He risked a look back, and to his horror, he saw that the hounds were not alone. He could see the torches of the Hunt, the glow of the riders' bodies. Against all hope, this time the rade hadn't lost interest in the chase, had followed the pack closely.

Of course. Aerune would want to be in at this last kill. He might even deny the hounds their pleasure, saving Elkanah for some new torment.

Behind him, he heard the horn blow victory, the prey in sight. From a view, to a kill.

At that thought, Elkanah's last shred of control snapped. He could not-would not-die as Liverakos had. He ran, heedless of the stones that cut his feet, up the sloping ground -toward the ridge.

There was a path cut into the hillside, leading up to the top of the ridge. Earlier he would have avoided it as a matter of course. Now it seemed to provide some haven, and he followed it unthinkingly. Twice he fell to his knees as his strength failed him, and twice he forced himself to stagger onward as the pack howled eagerly behind him. He could hear the riders now, shouting and laughing as they closed in, their horses scrabbling and slipping as they were forced up the steep narrow track. He grabbed one of the loose rocks as he ran. It was a poor weapon, but all he had. He would not give up without a fight.

The trail flattened out as he reached the top of the ridge. The wind was colder here, blowing steadily. He looked around, trying to see where the trail led now. There was a cave ahead. No-he paused to claw the sweat from his eyes-not a cave, just two rocks, leaning against each other to form the shape of a crude doorway. He should have been able to see through the opening to what lay beyond, but all he could see was blackness, blackness that shimmered and twisted like an oil slick on water. A Gate-he'd learned about them in his captivity. But to where?

But he had hesitated too long. The first of the hounds reached him, springing silently to the attack.

He went down beneath its weight, fighting to keep its jaws from his throat. He lowered his head and swung it fiercely back and forth, using the antlers as another weapon. The hound snapped at them, snarling, and that was enough to allow him to bring up the rock he still clutched in his hand, smashing it into the beast's head.

It yelped at the pain, sounding almost doglike in its surprise. He hit it again, and heard the crunch of bone. It squealed and scabbled back, glaring at him with those mad red eyes. But it didn't attack again. It didn't need to. The pack was only moments behind it. He scuttled backward frantically with hands and feet, not daring to take the moment to stand or to turn his back on the hound. He heard the riders behind them, and fury banished his weakness. He'd been so close, so close. . . .

He felt rough stone at his back, and something more. Something like dark sunlight, a raw electrical tingling that made his bones vibrate. The Gate. With the last of his strength he thrust himself sideways, kicking out to propel his body through to whatever lay beyond.

It didn't matter what was on the other side.

The Hunt reached the Portal seconds later. The hounds milled about the stones, whining and yelping their displeasure and confusion at their quarry's sudden disappearance. The huntsmen dismounted and waded into the animals, driving them back with whips.

Aerune rode slowly forward, through the confusion of hounds and huntsmen. Behind him, his courtiers waited in silence for the explosion of his wrath. No one had expected this. Never in a thousand Great Hunts had the prey ever made it this far, nor should the Gate have opened for them if they had.

But Aerune did nothing. He gazed at the Portal for a long moment in silence, and then turned back to his men.

He was smiling. It was a sight more terrifying than his anger.

"Now," Aerune said with quiet satisfaction. "Now, the hunt can begin. Now I have set my hunter upon the scent."

When Eric woke up on Sunday morning, he was clear-headed and full of energy-and it occurred to him that although he had made the plan to meet Hosea at the Y for a rehearsal session tonight, the Y might not be the best place to hold it. The walls of those little rooms were notoriously thin, and a flute tended to have a certain piercing quality. The neighbors might not appreciate their playing-or worse, might like it too much.

On the other hand, he had a perfectly good apartment here, with thick walls and unflappable neighbors. Why not bring Hosea here? They could play as long as they liked in peace and comfort, and Eric could run the Appalachian Bard past the House, just to be able to reassure Bethie that he wasn't going off half-cocked here. So, once again he cleaned like a mad thing-polishing away the remains of last night's party and taking several bags of paper plates and cups down to the trash cans. He realized he wanted to make a good impression on Hosea, and the thought made him smile. There was a time when he would



have dismissed a concern like that as sheerest hypocrisy. You've come a loo-o-o-ng way, bay-bee, he sang lustily and off-key inside his head. Though he didn't have Greystone to help him tidy, at least there wasn't nearly as much to do.

Two cleaning sessions in two days. Am I turning into Mr. Mom or what?

When he stepped out onto the street around four, the day's stored-up heat hit him like a hammer. He'd been luxuriating all day in his Bard-crafted winter weather (a lot more appealing in July than in February), and the reality of a New York City summer was brutal. The streets outside his Riverside apartment were the next best thing to deserted; in summer New Yorkers tended to retreat into their air-conditioned shells-those who had them, at any rate.

It took him a little over an hour to make it crosstown to the Y-not one, but two trains died the death and had to be taken out of service-and he was hot and sweaty when he got there. But if he'd been looking for relief, he didn't find it in the lobby of the YMCA. It was only marginally cooler.

Maybe going back to my place was a better idea than I thought.

He didn't bother to check in at the desk, since he already knew Hosea's room number. The elevator was slow and creaky, with absolutely no air circulation. He was glad to get out.

The hallway had the smells of long occupation and illegal hot plates. Several of the doors were open, and as Eric walked by, he could see that some of the windows were open as well, filling the hall with the smell of burnt asphalt and baking brick. Hosea's door was closed. Eric stopped before it, but as he raised his hand to knock, Hosea opened the door.

"I heard you coming up the hall," he said, stepping back to usher Eric inside.

The room was smaller than most of the dorm rooms Eric had seen lately. There was a twin bed and a battered dresser, a wooden chair and a fold-down shelf that served as a desk. The window opened onto an enchanting view of the airshaft, and the battered air conditioner in the window was doing its noisy best, but not making a lot of difference to the temperature. Despite his surroundings, Hosea looked as if he'd just stepped out of a bandbox: he was wearing a white T-shirt and neatly-pressed jeans. His banjo lay in its open case on the bed, which was made to -Marine Corps standards of neatness. Hosea held out his hand and Eric shook it, but despite the fact that Eric's hand disappeared into Hosea's, the larger man's grip was firmly gentle. Here was a Bard who knew a great deal about control; Eric had the feeling that Dharniel wouldn't have much to teach him there.

"Glad you could make it," Hosea added. "Would you care for something cold to drink?"

"You've got something?" Eric asked in surprise. He hadn't seen any sign of a refrigerator.

In answer, Hosea reached under the bed and pulled out a large plastic sack. He opened it, revealing a selection of -containers-Cokes, bottled water, and a carton of milk-nested in a couple of pounds of slowly-melting ice. "Easier than running down to the corner store every couple of minutes." He pulled out a bottle of water and handed it to Eric, who accepted it gratefully. "Cheaper when you buy them at the supermarket, too."

Eric twisted off the cap and chugged the water gratefully. It was as cold as the ice that had surrounded it, like drinking winter. He wondered if Hosea might have used a little Bardcraft on it, but he wasn't sure of how skilled in magic Hosea might be. Playing on people's emotions was a lot easier than affecting the

physical world.

"You haven't brought your flute with you," Hosea observed, when Eric set down the empty bottle. Hosea picked it up and placed it fastidiously into the battered plastic trash can.

"There's been a change of plans. I think we'd be better off practicing at my place."

"Ay-ah, the walls do seem to be a mite thin here," Hosea said, echoing Eric's earlier thought. "Though I haven't noticed anyone ever going to bed at all," he added ruefully.

"The city never sleeps," Eric agreed, quoting an old advertising slogan.

"I've noticed that. Can't imagine how you folks get on."

"You get used to it, I guess." As he said the words, Eric realized that in fact he'd done just that. When he'd moved here a year ago, he'd thought that the noise and constant bustle would drive him crazy. Now he hardly noticed it.

Hosea greeted this remark with a silent-though eloquent-expression of disbelief. "Well, if we're going back to your place, just let me get my traps together. No point in putting temptation into the path of some poor weak-willed critter, is there?"

"No point at all," Eric agreed readily, since this was fitting in very nicely with a nebulous half-plan of his own. It took Hosea only seconds to return all of his possessions to the worn duffle bag and lock his banjo into its case, and only slightly longer to pour the ice-melt out the window and tie the bag full of ice up neatly. On the way out he knocked on a closed door, seemingly at random, and thrust the bag into the hands of its surprised occupant.

"Here you go, Leroy," Hosea said. "You share that with your friends, you hear?"

Leroy smiled, and said something quick in soft Spanish. Hosea smiled and continued down the hall.

"You speak Spanish?" Eric asked. Somehow it wasn't an accomplishment that seemed to go with his picture of a banjo-playing hillbilly Bard.

"Nope," Hosea answered easily. "But it ain't too hard to figure out what most folks mean, no matter how they put themselves."

They hit the street and headed for the subway. At Hosea's urging, rather than wait to get back to the apartment and phone for pizza, they stopped and picked up dinner on the way.

"Save a little that way," Hosea pointed out practically, and it did mean that once they reached the apartment, they wouldn't have to wait around for food to arrive. They stopped at the same place Eric had ordered the pizzas from for the party last night-ought to just open a charge account here-and ordered. The heat had pretty much killed Eric's appetite, but Hosea studied the menu for a moment and ordered three super deluxe sausage calzones, a kind of Moebius pizza with the crust on the outside and the topping on the inside.

"If I ate like that, I'd look like a city bus," Eric said ruefully, all too aware that a relatively sedentary lifestyle and a few more years had stepped his metabolism down a notch from his freewheeling RenFaire days. Hosea just grinned as he picked up the bag from the counterman.

"I'm a tad bit bigger than you are," he pointed out. "Reckon it comes from having to wrestle bears before breakfast," he added, grinning even wider.

"Yeah, right." Eric snorted. "Pull the other one." Hosea worked his country-cousin veneer like a wolf with a designer sheepskin. It was protective coloration, but not exactly the whole truth. They continued up the block, and turned the corner onto Eric's street. Hosea's eyebrows rose when they stopped in front of Guardian House.

"Being a subway minstrel must pay better than I thought," Hosea drawled, gazing at the impeccable Art Nouveau -exterior.

"I get by," Eric said, leading him inside. After this long, he could enter the ten-digit security code almost as a matter of reflex.

Hosea regarded the fragile-seeming brass elevator cage. "I reckon I'd rather take the stairs, if it's all right with you."

Eric grinned. "It's stronger than it looks, but it takes forever. That's why I usually take the stairs."

One more ten-digit code later, the two men were inside Eric's apartment. Hosea sighed appreciatively at the cool-he probably attributed the lack of a window a/c to central air-while Eric got napkins and plates, and a couple of bottles of ice water.

"I'm gonna have to let her set for half-an-hour or so before we do any playing," Hosea said, indicating his banjo. "This weather purely plays hob with her tuning."

"Banjos are kittle cattle," Eric agreed, setting down his burden on the coffee table. Hosea opened the sack from the pizza place and began tucking into his calzones.

"Listen, I've been doing some research, and did you know that the whole banjo modality and a lot of the tunes are derived from bagpipe music?" Eric asked. "Apparently it was hard to manufacture bagpipes and reeds and whatnot in the Appalachians when the Scots and the Irish immigrated there, so musicians borrowed an African instrument-the ancestor of the banjo-and set it up for the kind of music they were used to."

Hosea stopped chewing. "Seriously? Didn't know that."

Eric grinned. "Well, flute and bagpipe aren't exactly what I'd call natural duetting material, but that means we can probably pull off a lot of the Celtic and folk stuff I know, since that's Celtic modality."

Hosea nodded. "You play a tune a couple times, I can pick it up, Mister Bard."

"Same here." Eric chuckled. "As if you didn't know. Mister Bard. Ready to give it a shot? As soon as your lady is tunable, I mean."

"Suits me." They cleaned away the debris of the meal and spent a happy half hour going through Eric's CD collection, then got out their instruments and put them in mutual tune. It took Hosea quite a while to get his lady tuned-no professional kept tension on the strings when the instrument wasn't in use-and Eric remembered the old joke about the instruments' notorious temperament. Q: How do you know when a banjo's in tune? A: It never is. Having silver strings rather than catgut helped a lot, though, and after a little

doodling around, they began working out a playlist.

There wasn't any magic involved in what they were doing, or not overt magic, at any rate, but there certainly was a level of "enchantment" that Eric hadn't felt since he played with Bethie's old group, Spiral Dance. In fact, when he compared that experience to this one, it was like predawn and glorious sunrise-which in itself was kind of odd, since according to Dharniel, in the old days, Bards had been, well, tetchy was the word the Elven Magus had used. Easily irritated, and subject to extremes of professional jealousy that would make a modern pop diva turn green with envy.

But in the old days they were regarded as the equivalent of kings, Eric reflected, as he played "Smash the Windows" for Hosea, while the latter listened with a concentration that would have been intimidating to someone who wasn't accustomed to that sort of reaction at Juilliard. They were treated like nobility, so they acted like brats. Guess having to busk on the sidewalk for their dinners might have cured them of a little of that 'tude. Certainly there was nothing like professional antagonism between him and Hosea-and the way the country boy had pitched right in and helped with the cleanup after dinner without being asked spoke well for Eric's other embryonic plan.

But it wasn't until well after dark, when both of them were satisfied that they had a solid list of audience-pleasing pieces-including one of Eric's favorites, almost a personal anthem, Billy Joel's "The Entertainer," which had a killer banjo part built right in-that Eric put the last test in motion. Greystone, of course, had been skimming his thoughts, and only waiting for his signal.

"Well," Hosea sighed, detuning the banjo and placing it with great care back in the case, "This's been more fun than I've had in a long time, Eric, but I reckon I'd best be getting back."

Eric nodded slightly at the window. "Would you mind meeting a friend of mine before you go?"

With a quizzical look, Hosea turned around to look behind himself, and froze.

"Y'all pick a pretty neat banjo, theah, boyo," Greystone drawled, with a wink to Eric. The gargoyle climbed in through the window and stood in front of Hosea.

Hosea thawed a trifle. "Thank you kindly," he said, punctiliously polite, then cocked his head to one side. Eric sensed little feelers of Bardic magic creeping cautiously towards the gargoyle. Greystone grinned, and opened his wings, just a trifle. "Reckon you may look more than a bit like Old Nick, but you ain't nothing unchancy-so what are you?" Hosea asked, with more composure than Eric had expected. "Besides Eric's friend, that is?"

"Oh, now that is a long story," Greystone replied, dropping the drawl. "Could take a couple of hours at least to tell it." Greystone turned to Eric. "The House likes him," was all he said, but that was all Eric needed to know.

"Listen, Hosea," Eric said, waving a hand to get Hosea's attention away from the talking gargoyle. "You just passed a couple of-well, tests. You need a better place to stay than that steam bath, I've got a perfectly good couch here that won't cost you anything, and you've already got all of your stuff here. Want to stay the night and hear what Greystone has to say? If you'd rather go back to the Y after that, no problem, but I've got this big old place with only me rattling around in it, and there's no reason why you can't move in for a little bit until you've got a stake for a decent place of your own. If you're planning on staying around New York, of course."

Hosea looked from Eric to Greystone and back. "Huh," he said, finally, clearly making up his mind.

"Well, I came up here looking for new things; reckon I'd be pretty dumb to run off when what I was looking for shakes my hand and says howdy."

"Good enough," Greystone said, genially, and lowered his bulk onto the bench Eric had bought just for him. "Well, the story starts like this. . . ."

She had spent the last six months looking for a place to hide, and here in the mountains of West Virginia she'd found it. She'd lucked into Morton's Fork while cruising the Appalachian Chain on Lady Mystery. Hillfolk, as a rule, were even more suspicious of the government than she was, and as closemouthed as the dead. Somewhere in these hills she'd hoped for a bolt-hole, and she'd found it here. No one would be looking for her in Morton's Fork. The town was barely a wide spot in the road. The last excitement in Lyonesse County had been the 1924 WPA project that had left a string of cabins behind. The nearest library was twelve miles away, the nearest supermarket, twenty. There wasn't even television or radio here-the guy down at the general store said there was something about the area that made it impossible for the signals to get through.

That suited Jeanette Campbell just fine. She'd set up housekeeping in one of the old WPA cabins, and for the last several weeks she'd been here, considering her next move. She'd cached her bike and most of her supplies under a tarp in the ruins of an old building about a mile up the hill-she'd found it by following one of the winding deer tracks that crisscrossed the mountain. She didn't like having Lady Mystery so far away, but the old sanitarium was the closest thing to a bolt-hole and a back door she could manage. And Lady Mystery would attract attention wherever she went-a big flashy cream-and-maroon Harley touring bike with all the extras, Jeanette's one extravagance from her time at Threshold. She didn't want to lose her.

When she'd bailed out on Robert last December, she hadn't known whether or not it was for keeps. Robert had been the one who'd found her as an outlaw chemist and rescued her from the Feds to head up a secret R&D project at his pharmaceutical company. She'd been chasing a dream-a drug that would unlock the psychic powers inherent in the human brain. Robert's dreams had been grander and darker, of a secret army of psychic ninja, loyal to him alone.

They'd both gotten more than they'd bargained for. The one hundred fifty-seventh compound of the sixth year of trials-T-6/157-had actually worked. You gave it to people and they manifested psychic powers: psychokinesis, telepathy, thought projection, teleportation, healing. . . .

Of course, it also killed them within hours, but neither she nor Robert had been too worried about that at the time. Neither had Aerune mac Audelaine, when he'd come riding out of Elfland to claim the drug-and the Talents-for his own.

And Robert, like the idiot he was, had decided to declare war on the kingdoms of Faerie.

Jeanette hadn't stuck around to see how that turned out. Everything she'd ever read told her that starting a fight with the Sidhe was all kinds of a bad idea. She'd taken a stash of the experimental drug, her guitar, some money, and her Harley and taken off before she got caught in the cross-fire. A copy of Time magazine she saw a few weeks later confirmed that she'd made the right decision.

There'd been a blonde woman on the cover, executive chic. She'd been wearing an expression indicating she was bucking for Pope, and the banner on the cover had said something about New Corporate Ethics. The caption identified the woman as Ria Llewellyn, owner of Threshold Labs. That had been bad

enough. The story inside had been worse.

Threshold had gone down big time. Robert's black project was the lead story, along with Llewellyn finding out about it and taking full responsibility (and credit) for stopping it. There was even a photo of Jeanette's former lab assistant Beirkoff, "Llewellyn's man on the inside." Now there was a laugh. Beirkoff had been Robert's creature first and last, but apparently Robert wasn't on the game board any more. The article listed him as "missing." She only hoped Aerune had gotten him: it would serve Robert right. This was all his fault.

It listed her as "missing"-and wanted-as well. Jeanette Campbell, the science behind Robert's ambition, wanted for questioning in connection with several hundred deaths last winter. There wasn't a photo, but thanks to Beirkoff there was a pretty good police artist sketch. She'd cut her hair immediately and dyed it black, but that wouldn't help if anyone took a close look-and with rich-bitch Llewellyn and all her money and power screaming for Jeanette's head, people would look and keep looking until someone found her. Jeanette's only hope was to lie low and keep moving, but for that she needed cash money, and her emergency stash was almost gone.

She could have headed south, into Mexico, or made a run into Canada and hooked up with some of her contacts from the old desperado days. There was always work for a good outlaw chemist, and after her years at Threshold, Jeanette had gone from merely good to the best of the best. But leaving the U.S. would make her visible in a way she wasn't now, and she didn't want to take the risk if she didn't absolutely have to. She wasn't sure how long Llewellyn's reach was, or how personal Ria Llewellyn meant to get, and Jeanette still had a lot left to lose.

Her choices were few. On the one hand, she could turn herself in to the authorities and cut some kind of deal. On the up side, if Robert was missing-presumed-dead, he wouldn't be able to say much to contradict whatever story she had to tell. On the downside, with Robert missing, the authorities would need a scapegoat. Jeanette didn't have a lot of interest in spending the rest of her life in a Federal pen.

On the other hand, she could turn herself over to Aerune, if she could manage to find him. Aerune. A genuine, -impossible-but-real Lord of the Sidhe. He had a use for the Talents Jeanette created with T-6/157-T-Stroke-and whatever had happened to Robert, Jeanette was pretty sure Aerune hadn't given up his plans. Once upon a time she could have asked for nothing more out of life than to meet a real live elf, but now the thought of ever running into Aerune again gave her nightmares. She'd used one of Threshold's Talents to tap his mind, and Vicky Moon had called Aerune "the Lord of Death and Pain." Jeanette had seen him up close. She believed it.

But though the idea made her shudder in revulsion, it had marginally more going for it than the first one did. Aerune would have a use for her, and from all she'd seen, he wouldn't care how many people her drugs had killed, so long as he got what he wanted. The only problem there was that she wasn't entirely sure what it was he wanted, and if she couldn't give it to him, the penalties were apt to be a lot more severe than a long life in a small cage.

The third choice, which had a certain horrible fascination to it, was to try the T-Stroke on herself and see what happened. That was why she'd wanted to create it in the first place, wasn't it? To give herself the powers she'd always dreamed of, the powers that would pay back everyone who'd ever teased and tormented her? She'd had a long time to go over her notes on her human test cases, and she thought she might have solved the sudden-death problem. T-Stroke didn't seem to create these powers, only develop the latent ones that were there. Her subjects had died because they burned themselves out, like an electrical circuit when you put a penny in the fuse box. It was as if they only got halfway through some kind of transformation-the body needed to tap into some outside source of power to use the Talents

instead of cannibalizing its own resources, but it couldn't manage that before the initial dose of the drug wore off.

But if she used massive megadoses of T-Stroke over a period of days or even weeks, would that give the subjects the ability to control their newly awakened abilities and use them without burning out?

Maybe. And the only thing that was stopping Jeanette from testing her theory was the fact that only one in ten people seemed to have any innate Talent at all. It would be the blackest joke of all if she, who'd always thought of herself as so special, was a member of that humdrum ninety percent. And if you didn't have Talent for the drug to work on, it killed you outright.

It was like a game of Russian roulette with five of the revolver's chambers loaded.

Decisions, decisions. But a little long green makes them all easier. . . .

Jeanette looked around the little one-room cabin. The walls were papered with yellowing sheets of what passed for the local newspaper: The Pharaoh Call and Record, Published Weekly for Lyonesse County, including the townships of Pharaoh, Morton's Fork, La Gouloue, Bishopville, and Maskelyne. Heat was a wood-burning stove; water came in bottles from the general store. Her cot was in one corner, along with a folding chair she'd bought from the store and an end table made out of a wooden crate. She had a table, courtesy of the previous tenant, and her provisions were stacked around the walls in battered cardboard boxes. It wasn't a lot, considering what she'd started with.

But she could still make a living if she dared. She could go back to what she knew best-dealing. She'd always been on the production end before, not the street end, but she supposed she could manage. Only that would make her more visible, and probably put her on a collision course with whoever already had a corner on the local action. So that was her very last resort, when every other option had been exhausted.

This is the scene where the heroine pages through her address book and decides to look up some old friends. Only I guess I'm not the heroine of the story, and I sure don't have any old friends, Jeanette thought grimly. She'd cut all her ties to people and places long ago-not that she'd ever had many-and now she was alone, her back to the wall. She could turn herself in to the Feds, turn herself over to Aerune, or take the T-Stroke and see what happened. Maybe under its influence she'd be able to see a way out of her problems, or at least a way to fix the formula.

Maybe.

Jeanette sighed, and went over to pick up her guitar. Music was the only thing that had never failed her, the only thing she could love unconditionally. She brushed her fingers across the silver strings, listening to the whispery chords. She'd play for a while. Nobody would hear her, and maybe she could figure out what to do.

All I have to do is figure out which is the lesser of three evils. . . .

Greystone had told his story, all the while managing to entirely sidestep the subject of the Guardians, a feat of verbal terpsichore that Eric could only admire. If Hosea got the notion that the House had been built, and Greystone carved, to assist a group of protectors that no longer existed, Greystone had certainly never said so explicitly. And he'd certainly filled his narrative with a number of amusing anecdotes he'd never mentioned to Eric-like the night the Statue of Liberty had decided to go for a walk,

why construction on the Second Avenue subway had been stopped, and the real reason the dirigible mooring tower on the top of the Empire State Building was never used. The gargoyle was a born storyteller, and he'd rarely had as appreciative an audience as Hosea.

"Well, laddybuck," the gargoyle said, sitting back with a sigh of satisfaction around midnight, "that's my story, and I'm sure our Eric will tell you his, if he hasn't already. But what about you, Hosea Songmaker? How is it you come by your gift-and that banjo? And what brings you to the wicked city?"

Hosea smiled and shook his head. "Reckon I owe you the round tale, but I guess it ain't gonna be all tied up as pretty as yours." He sat back and stretched ostentatiously, obviously settling himself to tell his story.

"I was born and raised in a little place in the hills called Morton's Fork. I hear tell it's been a kind of a special place for as long as folks've lived there, but with everybody moving to the big city, the countryfolk are pretty much gone by now. My folks died when I was little, and I was drug up by my grandpappy and mammy. Grandpappy Jeb came by his shine honestly-got it from his daddy, and on back to where the first white folks came up into the Fork and settled down with the local folks. After he came back from the War-that'd be dubya-dubya-two-he settled down with my grandmammy Dora. They used to say she could play the devil up out of the ground with her fiddle; she was on the radio when she was a girl and everything. But she took one look at Grand-pappy Jeb and said she hadn't any mind to making records and touring and suchlike, and Grandpappy, he said he'd seen enough working for Department 23-that's the OSS-to make him glad to settle himself in the place he belonged. Grand-mammy said she'd got the banjo from her mammy, but she said it was just to hold it in trust, like. It's pretty old, and I guess just about every part of it's been replaced some time or another. She told me to always keep it strung with silver, and never to play it for any reason that was mean or unkindly."

The OSS! Eric sat up a little straighter. Dharniel had always hinted that WWII had been fought on magical turf as well as the mundane, and this seemed to confirm some of the Elven Bard's cryptic hints.

"So I'd guess you'd say I come by the music-magic naturally, but there wasn't no one in the Fork that could lesson me how to use it," Hosea continued. "Grandmammy had the music, and Grandpappy had the shine, but it'd take someone with the two of them together, he said, to really light me up, more than I could study out on my own account. So when I was growed, I went down to the flatlands to get me some more book-learning, but flatland folks don't know much about shining," Hosea said with a grin. "So I went back home to help out on my granddaddy's farm, as he and grandma was getting on in years. When she passed on last year, I knowed it weren't gonna be long afore he followed her, and so it wasn't. So I sold up for burying money, took me her banjo like she'd said to, and decided to follow my feet. I reckon somewhere in the world there's gonna be someone with the music-magic that can lesson me in what I need to know."

"Well," Greystone said in his gravelly voice, "it looks like you've come to the right place." The gargoyle got to his feet and stretched, his wings nearly touching the living-room walls on both sides. "I think you're going to find living here an interesting experience, Hosea Songmaker."

"Just about everything's interesting, if you come at it right," Hosea said. He stood, and offered his hand to the gargoyle. "It's been a fine evening of yarning, Mister Greystone."

The gargoyle chuckled and shook Hosea's hand. "Just 'Greystone,' boyo. And now, if you'll excuse me, I'd better get back to me post before someone counts gargoyles and comes up one short." He waddled over to the window and stepped out onto the fire escape. Hosea watched him climb up the side of the building to his perch before turning back to Eric.



"Well, now, it's been a long day and you look plumb tuckered out, Eric. If you want to show me where to sleep, we'll call it a day, and maybe make us some music tomorrow," Hosea said.

"Count on it," Eric said. A warm glow of contentment welled up in him. Things were working out so well! He had another Bard to gig with, and Greystone and the house both liked him. He wondered if Hosea might see a "Rooms to Let" sign in Toni's window sometime soon.

As for him, there was a call he had to make, first thing Monday morning. . . .

FOUR:

#### THE GLASS CASTLE

The carpenters hadn't quite finished, and the power still tended to flutter unpredictably at times, but it was a pretty impressive job of world-building for five months flat. Ria Llewellyn looked around her domain-corner office, executive suite, barricaded on the umpteenth floor of one of those soulless glass boxes that was taking over Midtown Manhattan. Her new home, and she had to admit that it was a better fit than L.A. had ever been. New Yorkers lived to work, and so did Ria.

She hadn't meant to move LlewelCo's corporate headquarters to New York. That had been the last thing on her mind when she'd come out here last December chasing Eric Banyon. But after the Threshold debacle, there'd been no one else to put out the fires that sprang up all over LlewelCo East, and as the days stretched into weeks and started looking like months, the problem seemed to get worse, not better.

It was bad enough that a couple of her subordinates had thought that buying Threshold was a good idea-she didn't know how far Baker and Hardesty had been in Robert Lintel's confidence, but they'd certainly known something was rotten there-and had kept on funding it. It was worse that Lintel had come up with the notion of whipping himself up a bunch of ninja-wizard super-soldiers with the help of a chemist who'd used to cook meth for a biker gang, and had decided to conduct field trials for his pet drug on most of the city's homeless population. But as she'd laboriously unwound the paper labyrinth that tied Threshold to LlewelCo, she discovered that wasn't, after all, as bad as things got.

What was the worst thing was that buying companies like Threshold and letting them do whatever they wanted had become the sort of thing LlewelCo did.

In a way, it was only to be expected. Ria's father, the power-mad elf-lord Perenor, had built the company to strike out at his enemies in a way that wouldn't draw attention from the other elves until it was too late. In its deepest essence, LlewelCo was fundamentally flawed: designed as a weapon, it carried destruction in the bones of its corporate culture.

Not that anyone saw that but her. Ten years ago, she wouldn't have seen it either-or if she had, she wouldn't have cared. She was dazzled by Perenor's profane charisma in those days, still dancing to his piping. But all things-good and bad-come to an end. Hers had come courtesy of a blow from a Fender guitar that had put her into a coma for a very long time, followed by an even longer period of recovery with the help of some very good-in all senses of the word, for a change-people. And while she'd been gone, LlewelCo had continued on its corrupted way.

She didn't blame Jonathan, her second in command, for what the company had done. Jonathan Sterling was principled and fiercely loyal. He'd done nothing she wouldn't have done if she'd been there. No one at LlewelCo's highest levels had really known what Threshold was up to, though maybe a more suspicious sort of person would have called them to account a little earlier. But returning after her long absence-and the wake-up call from Threshold-had made her see things in a different way than she ever had before. It made her see that LlewelCo needed to do more than simply clean up after Threshold. It needed to be reborn. And that meant giving everything-all their holdings, all their policies, all their plans-a very close look, and then changing the way they did things. Everything. Acquisitions, mergers, hirings, firings, R&D fund-ings, and venture capital outlay.

It would have been easier to sack everyone, divest the company of all holdings, dissolve it, and start over, but Ria had never been a fan of the easy way of doing things. That way, the innocent would suffer along with the guilty, and besides, LlewelCo was hers. She would not abandon it.

But-as someone once said about Hell-the paperwork went on forever.

Ria set the report she was reading down on the leather top of her rosewood desk and sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. Monday morning-and she'd spent the weekend here as well, just as she had for the last six months. The Threshold debacle-the lawsuits, civil and criminal, the investigations that unfortunately seemed to lead right back to government at the Federal level-showed no signs of being over any time soon. If not for Eric, she'd be mired in the middle of it, guilty by association. As it was, she was the media's darling, the valiant corporate whistle-blower who'd stepped in the moment she'd suspected trouble and brought Lintel's evil empire crashing down.

That particular urban fairy tale was pretty close to the truth for once, and if nobody knew she'd chased Lintel to Underhill and executed him there, it was just as well. There were plenty of other villains to chase. The government clients who'd bought Lintel's voodoo pharmaceuticals, for one.

Jeanette Campbell, for another. The chemist who'd given Lintel the power to do so much harm.

You can run, but you can't hide. I'll find you. And when I do-

The intercom buzzed.

"Claire MacLaren," Anita said. "Your two o'clock, Ms. Llewellyn?"

"Sure. Send her in," Ria said with a sigh. "And send in some coffee, too, would you?"

"Sure thing, boss," Anita said. Ria could almost hear the phantom popping of gum: Anita liked to project a persona straight out of vintage film noir, but Ria wouldn't have hired her if she hadn't been formidably competent. Anita Drake was Ria's personal assistant, watchdog, and gopher (as in "go fer this, go fer that . . ."). She wasn't a secretary. Secretaries worked for her. She'd come from someplace like St. Louis, and said she wanted to try a job where everyone wasn't out to kill you and suck your blood. Just wait till you know this world better, Ria thought. Corporate dueling made the kind done with swords or pistols look bloodless.

The door opened, and Claire MacLaren walked in. She was a private investigator-Jonathan had found her and used her to locate Eric for Ria last year, and Ria had been impressed enough with her work to add her name to the little black book of utterly dependable specialists-some with quite exotic specialties-that she kept. Ria'd tried to hire her to come to work for LlewelCo full-time, but Claire preferred to keep her independence-"It's to your advantage, dear, especially considering the sort of

thing you're sending me after."

"Come in, Clairry," Ria said, rising to meet her guest.

"Ria. Thanks for seeing me on such short notice. I know how busy you are."

Ria grimaced. "That never changes. But come, sit down. I hope the news is good."

Claire sighed. She was an uncompromising woman in her fifties, who made no effort to hide either her age or the fact that her figure had long since lost, if it had ever possessed it, the whippet-slenderness of youth. She resembled the Miss Marple sort of detective, gray-haired and kindly, but in spirit she was more akin to the Borderers who had made the wild lands of the Scots borders such a constant trouble to the English. Like her ancestors, Claire MacLaren never gave up.

"It all depends on your notion of 'good,' I suppose. But it's all in my report," she answered, gesturing with the slim portfolio under her arm. She settled onto the couch with a sigh. "You won't like it."

"You haven't found her," Ria said, sitting down in a chair opposite the detective.

"Our Miss Campbell is either dead, or very good at disappearing. She hasn't been arrested, used a credit card, or taken her motorcycle into an authorized dealer for servicing, and there's been no activity on any of her accounts. No one matching the description I've been given has left the country in the last six months-no one who didn't check out, at least. She hasn't contacted any of her old associates among the Road Hogs. No unclaimed bodies matching her description have turned up in any morgue in the United States, nor has the gun registered to her turned up. I can keep looking, but I'm afraid it's a waste of your money. If we're to find her, she'll have to make a mistake."

"She will," Ria vowed. "She has to." If Threshold hadn't sanitized Campbell's apartment so thoroughly in its own attempt to find her, there might have been something left behind that would have let Ria find her magically, but by the time she'd been able to start looking, the trail was both cold and muddled beyond repair.

"Oh, aye," Claire answered. "Eventually. But good as I am, as well funded as I am, I can hardly match the FBI's resources. Why not leave the police to do their job?"

"You know why I can't," Ria said.

The office door opened again. Anita entered, pushing a trolley with a silver coffee service on it. She laid out the cups and saucers-fine bone china with the LlewelCo red dragon logo-on the table between the two women, and added a plate of pastries. She poured both cups full, and set the pot, creamer, and sugar down before wheeling the trolley out again.

"The service here is lovely," Claire remarked.

"I pay for service," Ria said. She rubbed her forehead again.

"But there are some things that money can't buy," Claire pointed out. She added sugar to her coffee and took a pastry. "My dear, if you'll forgive a presumptuous observation, you look as if you're worn right out. You need to take a break from all this."

"And have it fall all to pieces the moment I turn my back?" Ria demanded sharply. She sighed. The

headache was making her irritable. "I'm sorry, Clairy. It's not you. It's everything. If I don't find that little bi-*find* Campbell, we'll never know everything that Lintel was up to. Most of the people involved in Threshold's Black Lab operations are dead. Lintel's records have been destroyed. Beirkoff wasn't involved with anything beyond the manufacturing of T-Stroke. He can't tell me what I need to know."

"You feel responsible." It wasn't a question. "But Ria, you've done as much as anyone could to repair the damage that brash young gentleman caused. The commitment LlewellynCo's made to the homeless-spin-doctoring or not, it's doing real good here in the city."

"The corporate crusader with a heart.' The avenging angel of Wall Street,' " Ria quoted mockingly. She held up an admin-atory hand. "I know, I know. No one person can do it all. But I have to do what I can. I want you to keep looking, Clairy. I know the police and the Feds will keep looking, too, but they have other things to do. They can't spend all their time looking for one woman. But I can. And I want her." Determination turned Ria's voice harsh. She pulled back from her emotions with an effort and took a sip of her coffee.

"Ah, weell," Claire said philosophically. "If you won't be told, you won't. I'll keep looking, but you're going to need a miracle."

"If you can tell me where to buy one, I'll get it," Ria said, forcing herself to smile. "If there's anything you need . . . ?"

"I'll ask for it, never fear," Claire said. She got to her feet. "Shall we say lunch next time? It'll do you good to get out from behind that desk."

"Lunch, then," Ria said, getting to her feet. "And maybe by then I'll have figured out how to broker a miracle."

After Claire left, Ria took her cup and stood looking out her window for a while. The streets below were yellow with taxi-cabs, the sidewalks filled with late-lunching pedestrians.

Claire's news was only what she'd expected, but she still wasn't happy with it. Though she'd done her best to conceal the fact, she was afraid Claire knew that Ria's hunt for Jeanette Campbell was something of a vendetta. Claire wouldn't go along with something like that. She'd made it clear from the first that any information she found about Campbell's whereabouts would be shared with the police as well as with her employer, and Ria respected her for it. But she had more reason to want Campbell found than simple vengeance.

Wherever she is, she knows how to make the drug that turns ordinary people into mages. And that's information I don't trust anybody to use wisely. Especially Lintel's former clients. They're probably looking for her as hard as I am, and if she disappears into somebody else's think tank, there will be hell to pay. Literally, in fact. Aerune's still out there, and if I know my Sidhe, he isn't even close to giving up.

And the Sidhe, as befit a near-immortal race, were accustomed to taking the long view. Aerune would be willing to wait years, even decades, for his plans to fall into place. Despite her half-Sidhe heritage, Ria was mortal. She didn't have the time to outwait him. Campbell had to be found. And neutralized.

The phone rang.

Ria glanced back at her desk. She'd told Anita to hold all calls unless it was a certified emergency, but the light for her private line was flashing. Very few people had that number.

She picked up the phone.

"Llewellyn."

"Have I called at a bad time?" a familiar voice asked.

"Eric!" Ria felt herself smile—a genuine smile this time. Her relationship with Eric was the one authentic bright spot in her life, stormy as it sometimes was. "How are you?"

"Not as busy as you seem to be. You sound tired."

"So they tell me," Ria said shortly. Eric ignored the -warning note in her voice, though she knew he'd heard it. Eric was a fully-trained Bard. He was a lot smarter about people now than he'd been when she'd first met him.

"It seems like things should be quieting down, though," he went on, with that guileless note of teasing in his voice. "I haven't seen a story about you in the news for, oh . . . a week or so."

"Not so much quieting down as reaching a series of dead ends," Ria said wearily. "Look, I—"

"So I figured you could use a break," Eric said, interrupting. "So I wanted to invite you to a party."

"What kind of a party?" Ria asked, a note of suspicion in her voice. The one thing that hadn't changed about Eric Banyon in all the time she'd known him was his puckish sense of humor, and it hadn't been blunted in the least by all the time he'd spent Underhill learning his craft.

"A Naming kind of party. Maeve's been born, and Beth and Kory want me to come to Elfhame Misthold to see her Named. We can use the Everforest Gate, and be back before we've left, or almost. I even promise to talk Lady Day into turning into something with doors and a roof."

Ria stared at the phone. Maeve was Eric's daughter by Beth Kentraine, the woman whose Fender guitar had done such a thorough job of rearranging Ria's life. Eric had ceded his rights in Maeve to Kentraine and the Elven Knight Korendil, since he wasn't ready for the ties and obligations of parenthood, but apparently Kentraine intended for Eric to play some part in his daughter's life.

"Either you've gone mad, or I have," Ria said bluntly. "You're inviting me to come Underhill? To the Sidhe? To a Naming? To a party that Beth Kentraine is throwing?"

"Well . . . yes." Eric's voice lost its bantering note as he -realized this would take some persuasion. "It'll be fun. You've never been Underhill—well, not socially anyway. And I'm allowed to bring a date."

"'Fun,'" Ria echoed. "You want to invite me to one of the Sidhe's High Holy Days—me—and you think it'll be 'fun'?"

The Sidhe loved children. Though Ria was a half-breed, raised in the mortal world, even she knew how seriously the elves took anything to do with children. Though Maeve was of fully human parentage, she was the daughter of a Bard and a witch, and in some sense Korendil's daughter as well. Elven children were an exceedingly rare occurrence and cherished accordingly. The Sidhe would consider her one of their own, and would take her Naming Day very seriously.

It was hardly the sort of thing to which they'd welcome the daughter of a renegade and a traitor, let alone a half-breed, the circumstances of whose conception were, to the Seleighe Sidhe, the vilest sort of sacrilege. Children born to a Sidhe/mortal pairing were even rarer than full-blooded Sidhe children, and Perenor had used the foulest sort of blood-magic to father Ria on her mortal mother-not to mention the fact that he'd tried to use Ria to destroy the Sidhe of Elfhome Sun-Descending. For years she'd lived in fear that the Sidhe would seek revenge for what she'd done, and once upon a time she'd thought that Eric had been sent back into the World Above to lure her to their vengeance.

And while he'd said that most of them really didn't care about what she'd done-considering how high a price she'd paid to thwart her late father's plans-that didn't mean they'd be happy to see her. . . .

"Okay, maybe not fun," Eric said as the silence stretched. "But I have a right to bring anyone I want as a guest and witness, and I think it would be good for you to meet some of the Underhill folk. You can't spend the rest of your life looking over your shoulder. If you come to the Naming, everyone will see that the Seleighe Sidhe have no quarrel with you, and that starting up with you will be the same thing as starting up with Elfhome Misthold."

"When did you suddenly become so savvy at politics?" Ria asked, and Eric chuckled.

"Live with the elves for a while, it's the equivalent of a master class. What else do a bunch of near-immortal wizards have to do with their time? The point is, they owe you for what you did against Aerune, and they need to know that. You do, too."

"I didn't do it for them." It didn't matter to Ria what feuds the Sidhe conducted among themselves. But Aerune had been after Eric, and that mattered to her a great deal.

"Yeah, well, elves are very results-oriented. It's what you did that counts."

"So you want me to come to the party."

"Yeah. I do. Besides . . . it'd be nice to have someone from this side of the Hill to keep me company. And I think it's time you and Bethie settled things between you."

So THAT's what's behind all this!

"So you want me to come and help her bury the hatchet?" Ria asked. The notion had a certain perverse appeal-and Eric was right that it could only do her good to form relationships and alliances Underhill. She lived in the human world, but like it or not, she was part Sidhe, and that heritage couldn't be ignored. "So long as it won't be buried between my shoulder blades." She took a deep breath. "All right. When? And what shall I wear? I've never been to one of these."

"Oh, just wear whatever you'd wear to your average Royal wedding," Eric said breezily. "I'll pick you up Saturday. That'll give you a week to shop."

"In a car," Ria reminded him. "With seats. And doors. And a roof."

"I'll talk to Lady Day. And Ria? Don't worry. I won't let anything bad happen to you."

Ria made a rude noise of mock outrage, but found her smile staying with her as she hung up the phone. She and Eric made an unlikely romantic pair-not that Ria was entirely sure, sometimes, whether what they had going could be contained by any term so mundane as "romance." There'd been a bond between

them from the first moment they'd met as adversaries, she as Perenor's pawn and he as the Sidhe's last hope. Both of them had cut the strings that bound them to the purposes of others, but the tie between them was not so easily broken.

A half-elven sorceress with a Fortune 500 company and a human Bard who prefers busking to playing at the courts of kings. We're a fine pair.

And if there's to be more to it than this, it's going to have to wait until neither of us is quite so busy with our own lives. Whenever that might be . . .

Still smiling faintly to herself, Ria picked up the report on her desk and began to read.

He was home. Or if not home, exactly-for it had been many years since he'd been able to call any particular place "home"-then at least he was back on Earth only a few months after he left.

No one had followed him.

Elkanah Youngblood found himself standing in the middle of a country road. It was night, and it had been raining. He could smell the summery scent of wet earth and growing things. He got to his feet, still aching and bleeding from the injuries he'd taken during his run from the Great Hunt. The antlers were gone, a kind of proof that Lord Aerune's spell didn't run here. He took that as a sign that his luck had finally changed. He was free.

He didn't waste time wondering how it had happened or worrying about what happened next. He had two items on his agenda.

Survive until morning.

And find Jeanette Campbell and wring the bitch's neck.

Survival was easy. Less than a mile away a hay barn provided shelter while he stole a nap to shake off the worst of his exhaustion. When dawn gave him enough light to see by, he followed power lines to the nearest house. It was an old farmhouse, with nothing around it but fields. He guessed he must be somewhere in the South or Midwest, and smiled grimly. Being in the wrong place with the wrong skin color was the least of his worries right now. He was pleased to see a fine cash crop of mary jane ripening in the field out back of the house: whoever lived here would be less likely to run to the cops than an honest citizen, but just to be sure, he cut the phone lines with a set of shears he'd found in the barn before venturing inside. The back door wasn't locked, but it wouldn't have slowed him down much if it had been.

The householders were still in their beds. By the time he woke them he'd found a shotgun. The sight of a naked, six-foot bronze-skinned man holding a shotgun had quieted them both down a good deal. They hadn't made much trouble when he tied them up and put them down in the cellar. If they kept their heads, they could work themselves free of the torn-up sheets in a few hours. He intended to be gone by then.

When he saw himself in a mirror, he was surprised at how normal he looked. A little thinner, a little banged up. Hair a lot longer. The beginnings of a beard. But no horns or scales or staring red eyes. He'd almost expected something like that, some kind of visible evidence of everything he'd been through. But there wasn't anything.

If I were dumb and stupid, I could convince myself it was all some kind of bad dream. But I don't have dreams like that.

Fortunately, none of his wounds was deep enough to need stitches. He washed off the dried blood, and after a shower and coffee, Elkanah made a thorough search of the house. As he'd expected, he found a small recreational stash of goodies, a lot of cash, and some very nice guns. He took the .45 and the .357, and left the shotgun and the rifles where they were. He scattered the drugs around the living room. They'd have to clean the place up before they called in the law, and that would buy him even more of a head start.

The man's clothes were all much too small for him, but he found a T-shirt and a pair of sweat pants that would stretch to fit and a gimme cap with a movie logo on it. He forced his feet into a pair of the guy's Nikes. His first stop would have to be for better clothes-if you looked like you belonged, you didn't attract attention. That was the first lesson of infiltration.

He'd found car keys in the kitchen, so he knew there had to be a ride around somewhere. He stuffed the guns and the money into an old backpack he'd turned up and went to look for it.

Stupid, stupid, stupid . . . Elkanah shook his head. The house and the outbuildings were falling apart, and those idiots had a Lincoln Navigator stuck in the cowshed: about 50K of luxury 4x4. Just the thing for driving to the local 7-11 inconspicuously! As well they lost it then. It probably wasn't even insured. He was almost doing them a favor.

The engine started on the first try.

By the time he hit the main road, he was pretty sure he was somewhere in Pennsylvania in August. He got directions to the nearest town at the first place he stopped for gas, picked up the local paper, and got the date. It was only about six months since he'd left.

Good. The bitch wouldn't have had time to run far.

He picked up clothes, a razor, and some basic medical supplies. He changed clothes in the men's room and slipped out the back, leaving the stained sweats in the dumpster. While he was in the parking lot he took the opportunity to swap the Navigator's plates for a set on another car. The unsuspecting donor probably wouldn't even notice. The trouble with people these days was that they just weren't detail oriented. God was in the details. His pappy'd always told him that.

He still didn't have a driver's license, or any kind of ID, but he didn't think it would matter. From the shopping mall he headed east, not questioning why he chose that direction. From the interstate he switched to the local roads, where he stopped and picked up a couple of bags of groceries, then hit the back roads, driving several hours before finding the place he wanted, an old beat-up no-tell motel, the kind of place that came with hot and cold running roaches, and where the sheets were changed once a month if you were lucky.

It would suit him just fine. He parked the Navigator out of sight of the office and walked back. A few minutes later he had a room for the week under the name Valentine Michael Smith, and he hadn't had to provide either a driver's license or a vehicle registration number.

He went in the room, locked the door, moved the dresser over to block the door, stretched out on the bed, and slept for two days.



When he awoke on the evening of the second day, his body was stiff from disuse, and he was lightheaded as though he'd just broken a high fever. But he was still here, and the room was still here, and his sleep had been without dreams.

Find the bitch. That was Job Number One. But before he did that, he should scope out the lay of the land a little. Find out how things stood with Threshold. Pick up one of his spare identities from one of his drops and find out if it was safe to come out. Housekeeping chores, really.

On the other hand, maybe they could wait. If he went straight for the bitch, he'd have a bargaining chip. He knew right where she'd be. He thought she'd told him about it once, this little bolt-hole she had squirreled away somewhere in Godlost, West Virginia. A good place to hide, she'd said, if anything happened she didn't like. She'd probably run straight to it when the balloon went up and been hiding under the bed ever since.

Morton's Fork, that was it. She'd said it just like he wouldn't know where it was, but he'd grown up in Pharoah, about twenty miles from Morton's Fork, West Virginia.

He shook his head and frowned, a headache starting to build behind his eyes. Hadn't he . . . ? His daddy had been a New York City cop. He'd never been anywhere near West Virginia. What was wrong with him? He found the bottle of aspirin he'd bought and shook half a dozen into his mouth, washing them down with a bottle of warm beer. The headache faded, and with it the sense of confusion and unease. Of course he'd grown up in West Virginia. He'd been a lot of strange places since, but you didn't forget the place where you were born. He'd go to Morton's Fork and find the bitch. That was Job Number One.

And wouldn't she be surprised when her worst nightmare came calling?

The gigging on Sunday had been great. They'd hit up half a dozen of Eric's favorite spots, and even without workday crowds to play for, the take had been more than ample. Hosea had insisted they split it right down the middle, and wouldn't take "no" for an answer.

"You're giving me a roof over my head, Eric, and I'm not one to take charity. If you're worrying about me getting together a stake for a place of my own, I'll be keeping what I make playing in the Park while you're hitting the books, and I guess I'll do all right."

There was no budging Hosea once he'd made up his mind, Eric had already realized-and in the same situation, he too would have been reluctant to take a handout. So he'd agreed to the split-but he'd stipulated that he'd be the one buying the groceries. And with the way he packs it away, I think we'll manage to make this a more reasonable split on the take.

He'd meant to call Ria before he left for Juilliard on Monday, but then he and Hosea had stayed up late talking, and a couple of friends had dropped over, so by the time he remembered Ria, he was nowhere near a phone. But Hosea had been out when he got back-Monday was a half day-and he'd been able to call Ria then. Hosea was good companionship, and fastidiously neat-the couch had been folded up, the sheets neatly folded and tucked away, and as far as Eric could tell, the duffle still hadn't been unpacked-but he'd been just as glad Hosea wasn't around to hear that conversation, as it would bring up things Eric wasn't really ready to discuss with him.

Elves, for one thing. Hosea had been pretty cool about Greystone, but there was something about elves

that seemed to trip people's circuits. Half the time they started babbling about Disney and Elfquest and the Smurfs until you never could get them to settle down again. He didn't want to go there with Hosea.

But at the back of his mind, even when he'd been talking to Ria, was his Saturday night conversation with Hosea. Hosea was looking for someone to teach him the music-magic, and Eric knew some pretty good teachers. Magic was a peculiar force, and Talents were stubborn things. Once the magic had made up its mind to manifest one way, it was almost impossible to train it into a new path. If Hosea said he needed to be taught by a -music-mage, he was probably right. Eric wondered how Master Dharniel would take to another human student. At any rate, he'd be seeing Dharniel at the Naming, and Eric could bring the matter up to him there.

It got dark early here in the hills. Jeanette sat at her worktable, measuring white powder into gelatin capsules by the light of a kerosene lamp. A cup of cold instant coffee sat by her elbow.

It was sweltering in the little shack, but she'd closed all the doors and windows and tacked up sheets over them to keep out any breath of air. There was a storm on the way, and all she needed was for a gust of wind to give her a face full of T-Stroke. That'd kill her for sure.

All drugs were poisons. In small doses they cured, but enough of anything, even aspirin, was toxic. Only T-Stroke was different. With T-Stroke, the more you took, the better chance you had of surviving.

Maybe. If she'd guessed right. There was no way to tell without a test.

And the only person around to test it on was her.

Russian roulette, with five bullets in the chamber instead of one.

She kept filling capsules-a thousand empty gel-caps bought from the health-food store in Pharoah when she made her weekly run for supplies. She wasn't sure what she was going to do with them, but they were a lot more portable than a bottle and a needle. Easier to move, easier to take.

If she decided to take them.

She sighed. It kept coming back to that.

She stopped what she was doing and listened intently. She thought she'd heard an engine. Watchman's Gap Trace ran past the cabin, and people did still use the old road-moonshiners, mostly-but there shouldn't be anybody out at this time of night. She checked her watch. Two-thirty in the morning.

Maybe it'd just been the wind.

Or maybe the Feds've gotten lucky, you spineless git.

She hesitated, and then got to her feet. Her .45 was lying on the bed-Road Hog had always said there wasn't any point to a little gun, when you wanted to show you were serious-and she picked it up. The oiled weight of it in her hand was reassuring.

She picked up the lantern and moved it to the far corner of the room. She lifted the edge of the sheet spread over her worktable and draped it over the mound of white powder. Then, swallowing hard, she

catfooted it over to the door, pushed aside the blanket, and lifted the latch.

The air outside seemed stifflingly cold after the stuffy heat of the cabin. Wet wind dashed droplets of rain against her skin, mingling with the sweat. She could hear the Little Heller creek running hard, and hear the wind tossing the trees.

Nothing else. She stepped outside, letting the door close behind her. There was no light. Even after her eyes adjusted, and she could see the faint shapes of trees against the sky, there was nothing. No lights, no engines.

You've come too far to screw yourself over with an attack of nerves, girl. She waited a moment longer-of all the things I've lost, I miss my air conditioning the most-then backed inside and closed the door again.

It was a relief to put the gun down. Jeanette actually hated guns. If you were waving one around, that meant things were already out of control and heading from bad to worse.

She took a deep breath, rolling her shoulders to get the tension out. There was still some ice from this morning. She'd crack a Coke and relax for a few minutes before getting back to work. She didn't like leaving all that powder out loose. It was too dangerous-this shack was a far cry from Threshold's pristine sterile laboratory conditions.

She opened the ice chest and stood for a moment, rubbing a handful of cubes across her face and throat. She'd thought a thousand times about dumping all the T-Stroke in the creek, but she'd given up so much to get it that she couldn't bear to, and sometimes now it was hard to remember why she'd wanted it so much.

There was a knock at the door.

Jeanette froze, the ice cubes dripping down her arm. Her mind was scrubbed white with shock and sudden terror-they were hunting for her, and now they'd found her, whoever they were. The knocking came again, hard and slow, as if Death himself were outside.

She dropped the ice cubes and lunged for the gun that lay on the cot. There was a thud at the door, and a creak as the wood gave. Cold air filled the room.

The gun was slippery and heavy in her hands. She scrabbled to get her finger on the trigger, falling to her knees.

Something landed on her. The gun went off and was torn from her hand. It was all over so fast. She lay on the floor, half under her cot, staring down at the soft splintery white pine floorboards of the cabin. She would not look. Whoever it was could kill her, but they could not make her look.

"Is that any way to greet an old friend, Ms. Campbell?"

The voice was familiar. Jeanette bit down hard on her lower lip to keep from bursting into tears. She was furious and terrified, and the game was over, but she would not let him see her cry. After a moment she got her breathing under control and sat up.

Elkanah-she'd never known if he had another name-stood in the doorway, her gun in his hand. He was wearing black jeans and a black T-shirt. She'd never seen him in anything but his Threshold Security

uniform. She'd thought he looked scary then. He looked terrifying now. The door hung inward, and she could see the white splinters where the bolt had broken in half. The blanket she'd nailed over the door billowed in the wind.

"Elkanah." Her voice came out in a hoarse croak, but steady. She knew her hands were shaking. With an effort of will she got to her feet, hating the fact that he was seeing her barefoot, in a grubby sweat-soaked T-shirt and cut-off jeans. Hating the fact that she was helpless. "What are you doing here?"

"A lot has happened since you left us, Ms. Campbell," Elkanah answered in that maddeningly slow soft drawl of his. He glanced at her chopped-off hair. "Black isn't a good color on you. Maybe you ought to sit down. You don't look well."

"Neither do you," Jeanette shot back. Even in the dim light of the cabin she could see that. He'd lost weight. His skin was stretched tight over his bones, and there was a look in his eyes—a glittery, crazy kind of look—that told her he was capable of anything.

Of all the people she'd expected to come looking for her, he was the last on the list. Her legs trembled. She sat down slowly on the edge of the cot, feeling it creak under her.

"Okay. Now what?" she asked.

"Why don't you just sit there while I have a look around?" It wasn't a suggestion. She sat, careful to give him no reason to shoot her.

He closed the door, kicking it into place with his heel and letting the blanket drop. She watched as he looked carefully around the room before he moved. First he tucked her gun in the waistband of his pants, then went over to pick up the lantern. He set it back on the table and peeled back the sheet.

"My, my, my. What have we here?"

Jeanette didn't answer.

"You can tell me, or you can eat them." Elkanah's voice was mild, as disinterested as if he were commenting upon the weather.

"It's T-Stroke. All I have left," she added, for no other reason than that anything she knew and he didn't gave her a little power.

"That got us all into a lot of trouble," Elkanah said. "Mr. Lintel dead, the company gone. A lot of trouble. And that leaves me at loose ends, you might say."

Jeanette stared at him. She'd thought Elkanah was dead. If he wasn't, the Feds were looking for him as much as they were looking for her. But that didn't do her a lot of good while he was standing here with a gun. She had no idea what he wanted, and that worried her. If he'd meant to turn her in to plea-bargain his way out of things, why weren't the Feds right behind him?

And how had he found her?

"Lintel's dead?" she asked, just to keep the conversation going. "How did that happen?"

"You know the answer to that." Elkanah moved away from the table and the glistening pile of white powder. He rubbed his forehead as if it hurt. "It's your fault."

"I worked for him the same way you did." It was suicidal to argue with him, but she couldn't help herself. "What he did with what I gave him was his business." But you didn't have to give it to him, did you, Jeanette? You didn't have to go to work for him. If Robert killed people, he did it with the weapon you made for him.

"Business. That's what it all comes down to, doesn't it, Ms. Campbell? We're all just doing business. And that's why I'm here."

He'd moved back in front of the door again, just as if there were any real possibility she would try to run. Jeanette braced herself to hear bad news.

"That T-Stroke. You can make more of it, can't you?"

"Yes." There was no point in lying about that. It was the only thing that might keep her alive, the only thing of value she still possessed. "I'd need a setup and some supplies. But I can make more."

"That's good. In that case, I think we can do business. Get your things. We're leaving."

Jeanette got to her feet. "Where are we going?"

Elkanah smiled. It wasn't a nice smile. "I think that's on a need-to-know basis, don't you?"

I think I'm about to take a bullet, Jeanette thought, but oddly, she wasn't afraid. The worst thing she could imagine happening had just happened. She didn't have to be afraid of it any more, and that freedom brought clarity in its wake. Boy, I really made a mess of my life, didn't I? She moved over to her worktable.

If she were an action-movie heroine, she could blow the loose powder into Elkanah's face, blind him, and escape. But she wasn't. She was just another loser with very sharp teeth-she'd spent her whole life being taught that particular lesson. Life wasn't a movie, and even if it was, Elkanah wasn't working off the same script she was. He was at the other side of the room, out of reach.

She scooped the loose powder carefully back into its plastic jar and screwed the lid on tight. All the filled capsules were already in their jar. She put the lid on that one, too.

The Harley's saddlebags with her clothes were in the corner, and for a panicked moment Jeanette thought Elkanah might ask what had happened to her bike. She pulled jeans and a clean T-shirt out and turned her back to him to put them on.

"Afraid I'm going to lust after your lily-white body, Ms. Campbell?"

Jeanette set her jaw. She knew she wasn't any man's idea of arm candy, but she was glad Elkanah had spoken. It made it so much easier to hate him. If at all possible, I'll see to it you die screaming, you Neolithic slab of rent-muscle. She buckled the jeans and slid her feet into her engineer boots. Her leather jacket was way too warm for the weather, but she picked it up anyway. She'd need it later, if there was a later.

Carrying the saddlebags and her jacket, she turned back to the table and picked up the two jars of

T-Stroke, glancing at Elkanah to see if that was okay. He didn't seem to object, so she stuffed the jars into one of the bags and buckled it shut, then slung them over her shoulder. Her guitar, her Walkman, and her tapes she left where they were. Music had always been her vulnerable spot, and she didn't have any time for vulnerability now.

"Okay," she said. "I've got my things. Now?"

"Now we go, Ms. Campbell." He stepped away from the door. "After you."

She went to the door and pulled it open. The top hinge had torn loose when he broke in and she had to drag it. She walked out into the night. It had started raining in earnest, and the rain plastered her short dyed hair to her scalp. She set down the saddlebags and pulled on her jacket.

Elkanah came out behind her. He was holding a flashlight in his hand. There was a red gel over the lens. A faint red beam illuminated the trees and turned the rain into a shower of blood.

"This way," he said, gesturing with the beam. "You first."

She stumbled through the rain, hearing him move more gracefully behind her. They were heading in the direction of Watchman's Gap Trace. His ride was probably parked there. If only she'd bolted the first time she'd heard an engine . . .

Too late for regrets, Campbell. By about a lifetime, I'd say.

She slid on last year's leaves and stumbled over rocks and branches. He did nothing to help her, but she didn't expect it. Occasionally he corrected her path, herding her uphill. About the time she thought they'd managed to miss the road -entirely, Elkanah's light shone on the side of a panel van. It was painted primer gray-a totally nondescript vehicle. The Sinner Saints had used something like it to make bulk deliveries. It was the kind of ride you could park anywhere and have it go unnoticed.

"Stand still." She stopped. Elkanah walked up close and pulled the saddlebags off her shoulder. He walked past her to the van and opened the passenger side door. He threw the saddlebags in the back. Jeanette winced at the sound of the impact. Lucky everything comes in plastic these days.

The rocker panel on the passenger side door had been removed. There was a length of glittering chain welded to the steel beneath, with a handcuff on the end.

This would be a good time to run, Jeanette thought, knowing she couldn't do it. There was no place to go. And she was tired of running without a destination. In fact, she was just tired. Tired enough to sleep forever.

"Come here. Hold out your wrist. And be a good girl."

Sullenly, Jeanette did as she was told. Elkanah closed the cuff around her right wrist. It felt cold and heavy.

"Now get in."

She climbed onto the seat and pulled the door closed behind her. The inside of the van was shabby and well-used, but scrupulously clean. Sanitized. The rain made a faint tattoo on the roof. Elkanah opened the other door and climbed in. He fitted the key into the ignition. The motor roared to life, and a moment

later the headlights flared into brightness, throwing the road and the trees into sharp relief.

The road was so narrow that Elkanah had to drive almost up to the ruins to find a place to turn around, and for a moment Jeanette thought he knew she'd lied and was going after the rest of her stuff. But he just turned around and headed back down the Trace, out of Morton's Fork.

How did you find me? she wondered again, but she didn't ask. There'd be time enough to ask questions later.

Or there wouldn't.

She had to find someplace to get in out of the weather. Damn all well-meaning fools-her last ride had told her she could pick up the main road just over the hill, and now she was wandering around in the rain, no sign of a road, and about as lost as a body could get and still be in West Virginia. Without her flashlight, she'd probably have broken her neck already.

Got to keep going, she told herself stubbornly. At least she was on some kind of a road. Roads had to lead somewhere, didn't they? Just not always where you were planning on going.

She wished she had something to eat. She wished she had a home where she could feel like somebody's daughter, instead of like another employee.

But that's over with, now, isn't it? You've picked yourself up and gone to Canaan, and if Lord Jesus wants you back the way Daddy's always saying He does, then He can come tell you so Himself.

Her name was Heavenly Grace Fairchild-though she preferred "Ace," and if she had her way, nobody was ever going to call her by her birth name again. Heavenly Grace, Inc. was her father's ministry, carried for an hour three times a week on several thousand Christian networks coast-to-coast. Her earliest memories were of riding in the ministry's bus from one tent revival to the next, of singing hymns at the head of the Heavenly Grace Choir, but that had only been the start of things for Billy Fairchild. He'd had plans-first, for the Cathedral of Heavenly Grace, now a 25-story office building in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and then for a worldwide empire.

But she didn't want to be a part of that. It seemed that the more houses and cars and thousand-dollar suits her daddy got, the more he and Mama argued. And no matter how righteously her daddy pitched the Gospel, it always seemed to stop the minute the cameras stopped rolling. Jesus had been a poor man, hadn't he, bringing words of comfort and love to poor people? The older she got, the less she could see how what her daddy was doing had anything to do with Jesus. She'd begged him to let her stop performing, whipping up the audiences with hallelujah hymns in the studio, but he wouldn't hear of it. And when he'd hired that secretary of his, Gabriel Horn, she'd known that she'd never be allowed to stop. The plans for her going off to college that her mama had talked about so proudly had been set aside. There was plenty of money-there'd always been plenty of money, for as long as Ace could remember-but she wasn't going to be allowed to leave. Not if Daddy and Gabriel had their way.

So she'd run. She didn't know where she'd end up, but anywhere had to be better than Tulsa. And maybe they wouldn't want her back, now that she'd rebelled. Lucifer had rebelled, and been cast down out of Heaven for doubting God's word, but Billy Fairchild wasn't God, and Ace thought that sometimes you had to take matters into your own hands.

A flash of lightning turned the sky white, and in the brief illumination she could see a set of iron gates up ahead. That meant a house. Maybe they'd take her in for the night, or maybe at least there was a garage there she could hide out in until it stopped raining.

But when she got to the gates, she saw they were old and rusted, and the building beyond was only an old ruin, charred by fire. Still she kept on, hoping for shelter. The rain had stopped as she walked, and the clouds rolled back, leaving a full moon riding high in the sky. It gave her enough light to see by, but now the temperature was dropping-even in -summer, wandering around at night in wet clothes was a good way to catch your death. She had dry clothes in her pack. Maybe there'd be someplace here she could change into them.

But when she got inside, she found that the years and the fire had left nothing behind but the house's shell. The upper stories had caved in and burnt to ashes, and where there had been cellars, those too stood exposed. Tears of disappointment filled her eyes, but she scrubbed them angrily away.

As her eyes adjusted to the gloom, she saw a bundle off to one side, something under a tarp. She set her pack down in the doorway and went over to look.

Somebody's left a bike here! She pulled the tarp all the way off, staring at it in wonder. A gleaming Harley-Davidson motorcycle, looking just like it had wheeled off the showroom floor. The keys were even still in the ignition.

I won't take it, she told herself, even if Johnnie had taught her to ride his old Indian before Daddy'd canned him for looking too familiarly at his only daughter. But whoever left it here has got to live around here. I could just take it and ride it down to the road and leave it for them. She hugged herself, shivering, but need won out over scrupulous honesty. She slipped her backpack on again and swung her leg over the saddle.

The bike started on the first try. She wheeled it down the steps and back onto the road.

When she saw the lights off to the side of the road, Ace couldn't keep her conscience quiet any more. This wasn't borrowing. This was stealing, and if she did that, she'd be just as bad as Daddy, taking things from people and saying it was okay because he needed them more than the other people did. She sighed, and turned the bike off the road, toward the light. At least she could tell the bike's owner that it wasn't a good idea to leave your ride out in the middle of nowhere with the keys in the ignition.

But when she got there, nobody was in the cabin. She knew the bike belonged here-there was a helmet in the corner, maroon and cream just like the bike. It looked like they'd left in a hurry, too-there was a glass of Coke sitting on the table, still cold and fizzy. The light was coming from a kerosene lantern, and it wasn't a good idea to just go off and leave something like that burning. When she went back to shut the door, she saw it'd been torn off its hinges, and the bolt was snapped clean through.

Somebody in a mean mood broke in here, Ace thought to herself with a shudder. She knew she ought to leave right now, but she was cold and wet and hungry-and worse than any of these, she was tired and lonely. I'll just stay for a little while, until I dry off and warm up. Maybe I can figure out the right thing to do, something that'll help me and won't hurt anyone else. Or maybe they'll settle their problems and come back.

But she had a cold feeling down in her bones, like whoever'd been here wasn't going to be coming back any time soon.



I'll just stay for a little while. Until I can figure out what to do.

FIVE:

#### THROUGH DARKEST ELFLAND WITH GUN AND CAMERA

Saturday morning dawned bright and clear. Eric had told Hosea that he was going to be away for the weekend and so wouldn't be available for busking, but Hosea took it in good part. He'd discovered the New York Public Library's reading room, and was spending a lot of his time there. During the week, Eric'd had a spare set of keys to the apartment made, and given Hosea the security codes, so Hosea could pretty much make his own hours. He was an early riser, often gone for the day before Eric awoke. For a man his size-or anyone, for that matter-Hosea was quiet as a cat, and never disturbed Eric on his early-morning exits.

Eric dressed with particular care in his flashiest RenFaire clothes. He buckled on his sword belt, and took his sword down from the top shelf in the closet. He hadn't worn it since he'd been living in Underhill, but the elves would expect him to wear it, as a symbol of his rank. He didn't put it on, though. Swords and modern cars were an awkward combination.

Last of all, he took his flute and slipped it into his embroidered gig bag, slinging it over his shoulder. He couldn't match the Naming Gifts Maeve would be receiving from everyone in Underhill, so he hadn't bothered to try. He'd gone to FAO Schwartz and bought the biggest stuffed pink bunny he could find, and for the rest, had composed a piece in her honor. Beth would like that-it was a variation on the piece Spiral Dance had always ended their sets with, called "The Huntsman's Reel"-and what better gift for a Bard to give?

Sword and flute in hand, bunny under one arm, he went down to the parking lot, where a gleaming candy-apple-red Lotus Elan awaited him. It had taken a certain amount of negotiation to get Lady Day to surrender her motorcycle form even for one day; elvensteeds could sometimes be stubborn. As a concession, he'd allowed her to pick the form, and this was what she'd chosen. It took a little work to cram the sword and the bunny into the microscopic space behind the seats, but he managed it and levered himself into the driver's seat. He almost wished she'd chosen something less conspicuous, but it ought to amuse Ria.

"Okay. Let's go," he said, and the elvensteed roared to life with the deep-throated hum of a racing engine.

Ria had offered to pick Eric up, but he elected to meet her up at the Nexus north of Manhattan instead. It was a great day for riding, and besides, on the whole, he didn't want to get into a habit of depending on her. He was still twitchy about that; the time he had spent in her father's Underhill domain as her private boy-toy was not among the moments he was particularly proud of. He headed directly for his destination, and only a few minutes after they started, Lady Day was heading over the bridge toward Sterling Forest.

It was surprising the amount of half-wild land there was so close to the city. If he hadn't known that NYC was 90 minutes away, Eric wouldn't have been able to guess from the surroundings. Sterling Forest State Park was nestled in the gently-rolling Ramapo Mountains-known for centuries to be filled with haunted places and strange creatures, and for good reason. The Nexus lay in a copse of trees accessible

only from a long-disused farm road, the farmhouse itself long abandoned, nothing left but the foundation and chimney.

Behind the house, down a gentle slope, a deer trail led into woods, deep within which lay one special grove of trees that didn't look as if they'd ever been touched by anything but wind and weather. Where there was a Nexus-a power source that tied Underhill and the mortal world together-there was either a Gate already there, or Eric could make one easily. In this case, there was one already, a Portal that hung as a hazy curtain between two oak trees, visible only to those who had the eyes to see it. He was early; Lady Day had shut down the faux-engine noise she made as soon as they were off the main road, and they rolled up to the Gate surrounded by nothing more intrusive than the cracking of twigs under her wheels. He got out of the Lotus, looking around for Ria.

Eric didn't have long enough to wait even to wonder when Ria would get there; shortly after he and Lady Day rolled to stop, unshod hooves thudding on the turf warned him that someone was coming. Somehow he didn't think it was Ranger Rick.

Ria rode into the pocket clearing on a coal-black elvensteed with hooves and eyes of silver, dressed to the absolute nines in something silky and flowing and midnight blue. Eric didn't pay a lot of attention to high fashion, but this didn't look like anything he'd seen during glimpses of shows on the news during Fashion Week. It also wasn't High Elven as he knew it. As always, Ria was setting her own style, it seemed.

"I didn't know you had a 'steed," he said, as Lady Day shivered all over and made a transformation herself-into a blue-eyed white horse, who stared down her long nose at Ria's mount in friendly defiance.

Ria glanced at the giant pink bunny and raised an eyebrow. "It's more appropriate to say the 'steed has me," she replied with good humor. "This is Prince Adroviel's way of keeping track of me. Oh, he's very gracious about it, but there wasn't much question-if I want to enter Elfhome Melusine, I'd better be either in your company or Etienne's, and preferably both."

"Oh." There wasn't much that Eric could gracefully say to that, so he didn't say anything at all. Ria didn't seem put out-and she certainly looked fantastic, sitting up there sidesaddle on the magnificent 'steed.

"I hate being fashionably late," she said pointedly, as he got himself into Lady Day's saddle with a minimum of awkwardness. After more than a year Underhill, riding still wasn't second nature to him, but at least he wasn't as clumsy about it as he'd been when he first arrived there.

"So do I, and this should be a good party," he replied. "Do you want to key the Gate, or shall I?"

She waved her hand languidly at the shimmer of power between the trees, and he took that as answer that he should open it. It occurred to him a second later, as he whistled the little trill of music that fitted his magic into the Gate and gave it the place it should take them to, that the Prince might not have entrusted her with a key. The elvensteed could take her there, of course, but she and Eric wouldn't arrive together if it did. . . .

The shimmer brightened, then pulled aside, exactly like a curtain, revealing-nothing. Not blackness, nothing. Emptier than the space between the stars, the path of a Gate had scared the whey out of him the first time he'd seen it; now he just let Lady Day take up her place beside Etienne, and the two of them passed through together.

There was a moment of cold, a faint brush against his face and hands of something like threads spun of

liquid hydrogen, and they were through.

They passed instantly from broad daylight into twilight; from the wild and overgrown, untidy forest covert into truly ancient forest, the kind that must have stood in North America before Columbus, that never knew the touch of an axe. Huge trees that would have been dwarfed only by the sequoias and redwoods of California rose all around them. The ground beneath the trees, regardless of the fact that there couldn't possibly be enough light under the thick branches to support much vegetation, was covered with lush and fragrant flowers in palest pink, faintest blue, and purest white. All except for the path, of course, which was literally carpeted in emerald moss as deep and soft as any high-quality plush number in a Fifth Avenue condo.

The fact was that there would never be any light under these trees; Elfhame Melusine lay in a perpetual twilight. Eric remembered from Dharniel's few "geography" lessons that Elfhame Melusine was one of the Old World hames, whose members had chosen to withdraw from the World of Men rather than cross to the New World.

"Well," Ria said, looking around, as the 'steeds paused to allow them to get their bearings. "Not very much like my father's domain, is it?"

"What, Elfhame 90210?" Eric asked, and was rewarded by her peal of laughter.

In fact, she laughed hard enough that she had to clutch the pommel of her saddle, and even her 'steed gave out a noise that sounded like a snicker. "Elfhame 90210! Oh lord-" she gasped. "90210! That's gorgeous!"

"Thenkew, thenkew," he responded, bowing at the waist slightly, and a bit tickled at his own cleverness. "Thenkew verrymuch, I'll be here all week, leddies and gennelmun."

"Oh lord-" She straightened up and carefully wiped the corners of her eyes with a fingertip. "It was, wasn't it? Poor Father! Even he couldn't keep from copying the mortals he despised."

"Well, I can't say that I hadn't seen places just like it in the Beverly Hills version of Find-A-Home, because I had," Eric responded truthfully. "And just about every room in one issue or another of Architectural Digest. No two rooms out of the same house, mind, but still . . ."

"Still," she agreed. "So, what's all this? It's not like Mithold or Sun-Descending, is it?"

The 'steeds paced forward onto the carpet of moss, making no sound at all.

"I met a guy from Savannah that calls this Elven Classic," Eric replied. "He says that over in Outremer they say this is how Elfhames looked for centuries-the ones tied to Groves and Nexuses in the Old World, that is. Some of the Seleighe Sidhe wanted things to look like the way they'd been at home when they moved over here to escape Cold Iron, and some, like Adroviel, want their homes to stay that way. There're variations, and these days there are even some who've remodeled their Elfhames to look like the way we-mortals that is-have described them in literature."

Ria's hand flew to her mouth to smother a laugh. "You don't mean that somewhere Underhill there's a Last Homely House?"

He grinned. "And a Hobbiton, and Galadriel's Forest. And, sadly, there's also places that role-playing gamers would feel right at home in, and a spot that looks like Ridley Scott just left it behind after filming

Legend, complete with enough crap permanently floating in the air to give an allergist nightmares." And every one of them the One True Elfland, for the ones who find it.

She bent over again, laughing so hard that she wheezed. "I guess-that Father's taste-wasn't quite as bad-as I thought," she managed to get out.

Eric shrugged. "He had good taste, really good taste," he pointed out, as the 'steeds picked their way across a meadow fully of swaying lilies of the kind normally seen woven into the hair of the maidens in Alphonse Mucha posters. "He only imitated the high-quality stuff. That's their failing, you know, their one big lack-they can imitate like nobody's business, but they can't create. That's what they need us for, or they'd fade away into Dreaming out of sheer boredom." Maybe sleep and creativity are more closely linked than people think. Elves don't sleep, either-not normally.

She sobered immediately. "I never thought of that. Why didn't I ever think of that?" She shook her head. "Father never did anything much with LlewellynCo except use it as a way to launder kenneled gold until I was old enough to be interested in business-

Eric raised an eyebrow-a Spock-like gesture he'd practiced secretly for years just on the chance that one day he'd get to use it to maximum effect. "I rest my case," he said pointedly. "And, need I add, that was probably the major reason why he sired you in the first place. Using you as a spare battery pack was just lagniappe."

She didn't look stunned-she looked angry, but only for a moment before letting the anger go abruptly. "It makes perfect sense," she replied bitterly. "He wouldn't have to keep taming and training mortals every few decades-he'd figure to get at least a couple of centuries out of a half-breed like me. Though-he couldn't have known I'd have a head for business, could he?"

Eric shrugged, but she was already answering her own question. "Of course he could; he probably cast all sorts of spells when I was born to bend me in that direction-

Let's not go there, shall we? "He probably counted on the natural cussedness of kids to do it for him," Eric pointed out. "Your mom was a classic hippie, you said-and how many hippie kids turned around and grew up to be yuppies? I think he figured it was pretty well in the bag that you'd run off to be as unlike your mom as possible. All he had to do was leave you with her long enough for you to get tired of living life á la commune, and as soon as you got a chance, you'd bolt for business school." He cocked his head to one side. "I mean, look at me-my parents wanted a little James Galway of their very own, and first shot I got, I bolted and turned into a busker."

That turned the trick; she smiled, albeit weakly. "You're probably right," she said, and left it at that.

At just that moment, the 'steeds came out of the forest altogether, and paused.

Probably so we get a chance to take in the full effect and are awestruck, Eric thought cynically. He looked down the hill they were on anyway, and so did Ria.

"My god," she said, not at all in the tone the Sidhe were probably hoping for. "It looks like a matte painting."

"I don't think that's the effect they had in mind, but you're right," he said, because the twilight vista stretching out in front of them did look like a special effect. Everything was too-too big, too much, too perfect.

The path stretched down the hill and across perfect fields, just irregular enough to be charming, divided one from another by old-fashioned English hedgerows. Some were full of peacefully grazing sheep, some of red cattle as graceful as deer, some of crops. No one tended them, of course; they were dealt with by magic, and looked as if they'd come out of the dreams of a Pre-Raphaelite landscape artist. Overhead the pale-violet "sky" was studded with "stars" that didn't move. The road led through the fields to a distant castle, but not like anything ever actually built in the mortal world. If Disney'd had an unlimited budget and could have revoked some of the laws of physics, he might have constructed something of the sort; a confection of tall thin gleaming turrets that should have collapsed under their own weight, of porcelain battlements and ivory crenellations, with shining walls encrusted with carvings; balconies, waterspouts, bridges leading from tower to alabaster tower; gold-embroidered awnings to shade against a nonexistent sun. The whole was surrounded by gardens that even at this distance looked lush. There was even a drawbridge over a moat upon which white swans glided-purely for effect, of course, since not even a military genius could defend a castle that looked like this one.

"Elven Classic," Eric pointed out. "Possibly modeled on the ideas of some of the changeling kids they took Underhill to protect them."

Ria smiled again, this time with real warmth. "Now that is something I can get behind," she said fervently.

"Remind me to connect you up with Keighvin Silverhair," Eric replied, and smiled himself. Elfhame Fairgrove in Savannah had what you might call an "active outreach" program for troubled youth.

Having given them enough time to be suitably impressed, the black 'steed now led the way down the hill towards the castle, Lady Day hurrying a little to catch up. As they drew closer, the road widened, and soon they weren't the only creatures heading for what was clearly going to be a bigger deal than Eric had imagined.

Not everyone on the road was elven, either, though they all had to be Seleighe, or they wouldn't be here. Some of them were downright odd-looking; creatures right out of a Brian Froud illustration. There was a group just ahead of them, with long, spindly arms and legs all gnarled like branches and hair seemingly made of twigs. There was another behind, armored knights riding black horses with flame-red eyes.

They caught up with a band of human-seeming folk who wore fur capes, and whose hems were soaking wet although the road was dry; they left little bits of seaweed behind them at every other step. Selkies, Eric guessed.

A band of fat little ponies overtook and passed them. The beasts wore neither saddle nor bridle, and carried creatures with elven features, but as small as children and with-yes-gauzy butterfly and dragonfly wings attached to their shoulders. If this is Elfhame Classic, I guess those guys must be Sidhe Lite.

"This is going to be some party," Ria murmured, as the last group passed them.

"I had no idea," Eric responded, more than a bit dumbfounded. "I really didn't."

"Hmm," was all she said, but she gave him a sidelong glance that he couldn't read.

He was glad enough to see, when they reached the castle proper, that there were young (at least he thought they were young) guards stationed at the gates to direct the crowds. One of them recognized Eric (or maybe Ria's steed) immediately and herded them off as expertly as any celebrity handler. Before you could say "VIP suite" he and Ria were being ushered into the castle and a lavishly appointed reception

room, where a tall, crowned elven man and woman were chatting with selected guests. At his side, Eric spotted Kory with relief-then Beth with the opposite emotion. Bethie was not exactly on the membership list of the Ria Llewellyn Fan Club, to say the least, and while she knew he was bringing Ria, he'd wanted a chance to warn her so she could get her game face on before the two of them met. . . .

But it was too late now. Eric and Ria were being ushered politely but efficiently up to their hosts by a pair of majordomo types. Eric had just enough time to catch a glimpse of Beth's incredulous expression before he went into a full court bow, while Ria dropped into an exquisite High Elven curtsy, her skirts spreading around her in a perfect pool of star-spangled midnight.

Oh, I am going to be in such trouble. . . .

Prince Adroviel gestured for them to rise. "My lady Arresael, I present to you Sieur Eric, Knight and Bard of Elfhame Misthold, and his lady, Mistress Arianrhod, daughter of Perenor the Destroyer."

Eric froze in the act of straightening up. Of course everyone in the room had heard Adroviel's words-the prince had pitched his voice to carry. He glanced at Ria from the corner of his eye. Her face was impassive, but he could almost feel the shock radiating from her like cold off ice.

"All who share our blood are doubly welcome here," Arresael said to Ria. She was tall and slender, with cat-green eyes and silver hair: Elfhame Classic. On her head she wore a diadem that on first glance looked like exotic flowers-and on second glance, revealed itself to be crafted of enamel, moonstones, and wrought gold. "And we have heard much of your valiant aid to our kindred of Sun-Descending." She leaned forward to kiss Ria on the cheek; a formal salute of welcome.

Eric relaxed, realizing what the Sidhe Prince had done. Adroviel had made it perfectly clear that he knew exactly who Ria was and welcomed her nonetheless. There'd be no trouble now, even if anyone would consider making trouble at a Naming.

"Thank you, my lady. You are as gracious as you are beautiful," Ria answered. She turned to Beth. "Thank you for allowing me to share this special day. I am honored."

Beth looked as if she'd swallowed a live mouse. "Thank you for coming. I never did get a chance to thank you for saving our . . . bacon . . . back there in L.A."

Ria opened her mouth to reply, but just then a chime sounded.

"That's our cue," Beth said. "See you later." The look she gave Eric promised him she'd make sure of it.

And she hasn't even seen the bunny yet.

Another elven courtier appeared at their side. "If you would accompany me . . . ?" he said.

Eric held out his arm to Ria, who placed her fingertips delicately upon his sleeve. They followed the courtier through the door he indicated. A small tingle of magic as they crossed the threshold warned them that wherever they were going, it wasn't physically connected to the chamber they were leaving.

Eric blinked, looking around. If you'd taken Chartres Cathedral and crossed it with the Roman Coliseum, it might look something like this. There was a semicircle of tiered seats rising into the distance, most of them already full. A gilded rail separated them from a row of more elaborate seats, and to either side of the dais were private boxes like the ones in an opera house. Banners hung from the ceiling, their

bright silks swaying slightly in the air, and the sounds of music and conversation filled the hall with a susurrus of white noise. They'd come out on the floor below the tiers, and just ahead was a dais large enough to hold a full orchestra, covered in flawless scarlet velvet that was probably deep enough to hide in. It held two thrones, plus a number of lesser chairs.

Their guide ushered them to one of the boxes and opened the low door. "Does this meet with your approval, my lord?"

"Uh . . . fine," Eric said. No matter how many etiquette lessons Dharniel had dinned into him, he just didn't "get" courtly. It always made him nervous.

"Thank you," Ria said graciously, preceding Eric into the box. It contained two chairs only barely less ornate than the ones on the dais, and was obviously a place of honor.

Eric followed her in. The courtier closed the door behind them and turned away to guide others to their places.

"Well," Ria said.

"Look, I'm sorry about that-

Ria waved his words away, sinking into her chair. "Never mind. It was good politics, and good theater. Now everyone knows where the Prince stands; they'd look pretty silly starting something after that. I just wish I'd brought my opera glasses."

"It's quite a show, isn't it?" Eric asked, seating himself beside her. They had a good view of the dais, and their position let them watch the guests without gawking.

A few minutes later, the last of the guests found their seats, and the babble of voices died down a little. There was a flourish of horns, and the hall became absolutely silent. A herald strode out onto the dais.

"All honor to Prince Adroviel of Elfhame Melusine and the Princess Arresael!"

Adroviel appeared behind the herald-must be a Portal back there, Eric thought-leading Arresael by the hand. They took their seats-but not on the two thrones. As the herald called out more names, others appeared to take their seats on the dais, but the thrones remained empty.

"Korendil, Knight of Elfhame Sun-Descending, squire of the High Court, Magus Minor and Child of Danu-!"

Kory appeared, looking regal and knightly. He took a few steps away from the Portal and stopped.

"Mistress Bethany Margaret Kentraine, bringer of new life!"

Beth appeared, holding Maeve in her arms. The baby was wearing what-if they were anywhere but here-Eric would have identified as a christening gown. It was white lace, sewn with small sparkling brilliants, and its end brushed the ground. Beth was dressed in red and gold, a gown that would make any Rennie turn pale with envy. She wore a simple gold circlet on her red hair-a symbol of rank, Eric knew that much. The Sidhe were very picky about things like that: they were doing her great honor here today.

When she appeared, the hall went wild with cheers. She must have been told what to expect; she turned toward the audience, smiling, waiting for the cheering to die down. When it did, Kory held out his hand and escorted her to one of the two thrones, seating himself in the other. Today an elven knight and his mortal consort were ranked above princes.

Elves take children very seriously. If Eric had ever doubted it, here was the proof.

The herald stepped back, and Adroviel rose to his feet.

"People of Underhill. We gather here today in this holy place to welcome new life into the land. In the name of our Holy Mother, Danu, whose children we are, let it be so!"

Elves had some kind of religion, Eric knew, but they didn't talk about it much, and in all the time he'd spent Underhill he'd never seen anything remotely resembling church on Sunday, or even one of Bethie's Wiccan Circles. But that he was seeing it now, he had no doubt. The expectant silence was thick enough to cut with a sword.

"She comes among us small and helpless, yet may she grow great with help and love. And to that end, her mother has chosen wise counselors for her, who will guard and guide her as bone of their own, blood of their own, flesh of their own." He gestured, and a tall stately woman, seated in one of the lesser chairs on the dais, rose to her feet.

"The Lady Coinemance, Lady of Elfhame Misthold and of the High Court, Magus Major and Child of Danu."

"I do accept this task, this burden and this joy," Coinemance said. "I vow to teach this child all my arts, to bestow upon her all knowledge of magecraft and sorcery, bone of my own, blood of my own, flesh of my own."

"And I accept your oath for the child's sake. May all your arts turn against you should you fail of your vow."

One by one Adroviel called out names and titles, until four Sidhe stood beside him. Maeve's godparents, and heavy hitters all. As they stood, each accepted guardianship of Maeve, and vowed to teach her their skills of war, of sorcery, of healing, and of Bardcraft.

Then Arresael rose to her feet.

"Now do I call forth a Protector for this child. As it is written in the Great Book, she shall guard this child until she is grown, putting her safety before any other thing, even the defense of her home and her own honor. May she never be asked to take up her sword! Come forth, Lady Montraille!"

Eric had been expecting another Sidhe, but to his surprise, the woman who came to stand beside Arresael was human-or looked so. Unlike the others, she wore full armor save for her helm. Her red hair was cropped short, her face seamed with age and hard living. She regarded the assembly grimly.

"I come," she said in a thick French accent. "And I do swear, in accordance with your ancient ways, that I am a bachelor unwed, with neither kin nor mate nor child." She drew her sword, and held it high for all to see. "From this moment I vow, by this blade and my own heart's blood, that the demoiselle shall be dearer to me than honor or breath, that her safety shall be more to me than the defense of the hame, that I shall turn away from battle or challenge for her sake." The warrior sheathed her sword.



"I accept your oath," Arresael answered gravely. "May your blade and every hand, here and in the World Above, turn against you should you fail of your vow."

The hall was absolutely still.

"Who names this child?" the Prince asked.

"Her parents name her," Kory said. He got to his feet and took Maeve from Beth as she, too, stood, then returned the baby to her. Side by side, they walked to where Adroviel stood.

"Her name is Maeve," Beth said firmly. "Know her name."

"Her name is Maeve," Kory answered. "Know her name."

"Welcome, Maeve," Adroviel said to the baby. "I give her a second name, a Name of power."

Arresael stood back. Maeve's sponsors and protectors clustered around as Adroviel bent down to whisper in the baby's ear. No one but they would know this Name. For a moment a bright glow surrounded them, fading slowly.

The others returned to their places. Kory, Beth (holding the baby), and Adroviel stood alone together in the center of the dais.

"Now let joy reign unconfined!" the Prince said. "Let there be feasting, and music, and dance-all in Maeve's honor. Let us welcome her as she deserves! Let the ceileighe begin!"

Once more the horns sounded. The hall erupted in wild cheering, drowning out the sound. Kory was grinning fit to crack his face-Beth looked a bit more uncertain, but still mightily pleased. They stepped forward to the edge of the dais, and Beth raised Maeve higher in her arms. From Eric's vantage point, he could see the baby yawn and stretch, unimpressed by all the noise, her eyes squinched tightly shut. After a moment, Kory led Beth back to her throne. The shouting diminished, replaced by a hubbub of conversation as people began to leave their seats.

"Pretty impressive," Ria said, leaning toward Eric so he could hear her.

"I'll say," Eric said. Does she wish Perenor had done this for her? Does she miss the chances she should have had-would have had if her father had been anyone else?

There was a discreet knock at the back of the box, and a door opened in the wall. The courtier who had escorted them to their seats was waiting.

"Sieur Eric? Mistress Arianrhod? If you will come this way . . . ?"

A ceileighe meant music and dancing, as well as the presentation of gifts to the new arrival. The presentations were less formal than the Naming had been, but that didn't mean everyone wasn't watching. Beth and Kory sat in thrones of honor on a small platform. The gifts were piled high beside them, and as each of the presenters advanced to present his gifts in person (something only a few of them were doing, Eric was relieved to note), a page put his gift into his hand. The gifts were as eclectic as the givers:

everything from a golden harp, to a shiny red tricycle, to a tiny but perfect elvensteed with elaborate saddle and bridle.

Eric advanced and was handed the bunny.

"I thought she'd like this," he said, offering it to Beth.

She grinned. "You're one in a million, Banyon. And a good thing, too."

"Aw, c'mon, Bethie," Eric teased. "Every kid should have a few stuffed animals. I've got something else for her, too. I wrote a song for her. I'll play it later."

"Glad you're sticking around. This is going to be some party."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," Eric answered. He stepped aside.

Ria was next in line. The page handed her a small drawstring bag. She opened it. There was a gold ring inside. She held it out to Beth.

"This isn't magic, but it does have my private cell-phone number engraved on it. If Maeve ever needs help in the World Above, she can call me from anywhere. I'll come."

"This is a princely gift indeed," Kory said.

"Yeah," Beth said. "Thanks. I mean it."

Ria smiled and stepped aside to make way for the next giver.

"Pretty cool," Eric said. "Makes my bunny look all no-how."

"She'll probably have more use for the bunny," Ria answered. "I can't imagine that kid'll ever need anything I can give her, but I thought it was a nice gesture."

"It was," Eric said simply. "C'mon. Let's go find something to drink. This is going to go on for a while."

The ceileighe filled several huge rooms. Servants passed among the revelers carrying everything from pitchers to wineskins to silver trays covered with champagne glasses. Ria snagged a glass and sipped it. "Cristalle. Very nice. What about you, Eric?"

"I think I'll stick to fruit juice. I'm driving."

A servant appeared at his elbow holding a large silver cup. He bowed and offered it to Eric. "Your cider, my lord."

Eric took the cup. The servant vanished from sight. He sipped. Pear cider. One of his favorites, and hard to come by even in as big a city as New York.

"Sometimes I wonder why you left," Ria said. "This kind of service would be very easy to get used to."

"Maybe," Eric said. "But I'm not tempted, and neither are you. We belong in the World Above. Down here we'd just wither away and die. There's no challenge to life here. That's why most of the changelings

go back eventually. To a better life than they left, of course."

"I guess that's why the Elfhames never really severed their connection with our world," Ria said slowly. "And you're right. Rough as real life is sometimes, I do like a good scrap. If you can have anything you want with a wave of the hand, there's no savor to it."

In the next room, musicians were tuning up. The dancers stood waiting impatiently for the music to begin.

Sidhe danced. All the mortal accounts of them agreed on that much, and Underhill Eric had gotten a chance to see how good a dancer you could become if you had centuries to do nothing but practice. The formal dances tended to be elaborate, complicated, and very long: Master Dharniel had told Eric tales of elves so caught up in their dancing that whole Courts had dwindled away into the Dreaming, still dancing.

But while no mortal could live long enough to learn the steps of the Court dances, there were others far less complicated. He and Ria skirted the first set of dancers, following other music already playing, and found themselves in the midst of an Irish jig. The musicians were all wearing plaids-the Great Plaid, twelve yards of fabric and nothing more-and the dancers looked as if they'd just stepped out of Riverdance. The music was like a double shot of uisighe, going straight to the blood.

"C'mon," Eric said, grabbing Ria by the hand.

He'd expected her to refuse and need to be coaxed, but instead she grinned, as caught by the music as he was, and dragged him onto the dance floor. The other dancers quickly made room for them, pulling them into the dance.

They danced until they were glowing with exertion and the musicians-fiddler, bodhran, and pipes-stopped to refresh themselves from a keg of beer placed nearby. The dancers broke apart, into groups of twos and threes.

All of them were looking at him. They began to chant, clapping their hands rhythmically.

"Bard-Bard-Bard-"

"Oh, hey," Eric said, raising his hands in protest.

The chanting continued, and now Ria had joined it, eyes sparkling.

Finally Eric gave in and walked toward the stage. He took his flute out of his gig bag and fitted it together as they watched him expectantly.

"Lords-ladies-good gentles all," he said in his best Faire brogue, "I am but a mere traveling player, not fit to play for such a grand company-"

Happy catcalls, whistles, and hoots greeted these remarks, and Ria was shouting as loudly as any of them.

"-but since you're so insistent, it's an exception I'll be making for your foigne selves." He bowed deeply, and then raised the flute to his lips.

Nothing sad or solemn today, no reminders of ancient battles or beloved dead. He blew an introductory trill and swung directly into "Susan Brown," one of the pieces he and Hosea had worked up together.

Fiddle in the middle and I can't dance, Josie/Fiddle in the middle and I can't get around/Fiddle in the middle and I can't dance, Josie/Hello, Susan Brown! The dancers whooped and flung themselves into the music. He followed the tune immediately with another-"Turkey In The Straw," a fine old dance tune-and then another. After the first few, the musicians joined him, their instruments blending seamlessly with his own.

At last, fearing he'd be here all night, Eric played a last song, Mason Williams' "Cinderella Rockefeller." It was slow and sweet, and very silly, even without the lyrics, and by the time he was done, the dancers had all stopped to listen.

"Thank you, ladies and gentles all," Eric said. "It's been a great honor to play for such fine folk, but too much honor can kill a man with thirst. And so I leave you in good hands!" He bowed to the dancers, who cheered him lustily, and quickly made his escape to where Ria stood on the sidelines.

She handed him his cup, and Eric drank deeply. The pear cider was still cold, and the cup was still full, but he was used to that. The rules for normal were different in Underhill.

"Juilliard doesn't do you justice," Ria said. "You're at your best in a situation like this, playing for an audience who feels the music."

"I didn't go back to school to learn to perform for a crowd," Eric said. "I wanted to learn what I don't know, not what I do. C'mon, let's go find the food. I'm starved."

They passed other groups of dancers and other musicians-wild Cajun fiddles playing for an enthusiastic band of selkies; another fiddler and a caller playing for a group of centaurs whose square dancing more resembled polo; a small chamber orchestra playing a minuet for Sidhe in stately Georgian dress. Every form and period of music was represented-every form of acoustic, that was. While many of the Sidhe were passionate rockers, rock didn't mix well with unamplified venues and would be off in a separate space of its own.

Eventually they were forced to ask one of the servants where the dining hall was. He pointed to a Portal; once Eric had seen it, he could see others hanging in the air as well. They passed through. Here the musicians played for listeners, not dancers, and the air was filled with savory smells.

Soon they were sitting in what looked like a garden. It was night here, but the trees were filled with golden fireflies, and glowing will-o'-the-wisps floated gently through the air, shedding multicolored pastel light. Just inside the doorway stood the original Groaning Board where they'd filled their plates. Elsewhere in Adroviel's castle tonight there was everything from a formal sit-down banquet to world-class sushi chefs preparing food to order, but this was the first place they'd found.

"If I eat this, will I be trapped in Underhill forever?" Ria asked, holding up a cluster of Underhill grapes. They glowed with a soft violet light.

"That's just an old tale," Eric told her, biting into a hot roll. He'd loaded his plate with prime rib-all that playing and dancing had given him an appetite, and the evening was far from over. "It only works if the food's bespelled, and nothing here tonight is. Try them. They're good."

They weren't alone in the garden. Around them were other guests taking the opportunity to rest and refuel. Between the trees, the ground rose up in couch-shaped hummocks carpeted in green moss. They were just as soft as they looked. Eric saw a woman with green hair and skin who wore a garment of shining leaves. Her plate was piled high with bread and fruit-a little cannibalistic, considering that she was

probably a dryad, but who was Eric to judge? Her dinner companion was a satyr. His small horns were wound with ribbons, and his hooves were polished and gilded. The Sidhe can look like anything humanity can imagine, and a number of things they can't.

It was peaceful here. "We'd better go find Beth and Kory after this, or we never will. They should be done with opening baby presents by now."

"It'd be easy to miss them in this mob," Ria said. "Fortunately, no matter how long we're here, Etienne can get me back to nine o'clock Saturday night. I've got a lot of work to get through tomorrow."

"You should take a day off once in a while," Eric said.

"I'm here, aren't I?" Ria answered. She tossed a grape at him; he grabbed for it, but a flying critter snagged it out of the air before he did. "You're so easy to tease, Eric. Always worrying about everyone but yourself. Who's going to worry about you, eh?" She reached out to brush a lock of hair back from his forehead.

"You are," Eric answered. He leaned forward, into the kiss.

There was scattered applause.

Both of them recoiled in opposite directions. They had an audience of tiny Sidhe, naked and sexless as kewpie dolls. The creatures had bright butterfly wings, and each wore a different full-sized flower as a hat.

"Scat!" Eric yelped, swinging at them with his flute. They scattered and ran, giggling in high squeaky voices. He glanced at Ria, who was at least trying not to laugh.

"Why don't we go find your friends?" Ria said after a long pause.

Beth and Kory were dancing—one of the simpler Sidhe dances. Five rings of dancers, each rotating in a different direction, jumped and spun and twirled to the music. At intervals, the rings would break into sets for a measure or two, as dancers worked their way into the inner circle of dancers and back out again. The two of them were completely intent upon the dance—it wasn't as simple as it looked, as the pairs bowed and curtsied and flung themselves into the air.

Kory saw them and waved, and in a few minutes they worked their way to the outermost ring and freed themselves from the dance. There were others more than ready to take their place; the music itself seemed to have no end.

"Master Dharniel's looking for you," Beth said, only slightly out of breath from her exertions. "He's in charge of the playing order for the Bards."

Eric winced. Not even the sanctity of a Naming could squelch the dueling egos of most Bards, a circumstance not calculated to improve Master Dharniel's temper. No matter what order they went on in, someone wouldn't like it.

"I'd better go find him," Eric said. And do what he could to soothe matters. He glanced at Ria.

"Oh, I'll stay here," she said with fulsome sweetness. "I'm sure Kory and Beth will take very good care of me."

He had no choice but to leave her there, and of the two women, he wasn't sure which one he was worried about.

"So," Beth said. "Are you enjoying the party?"

"It's lovely," Ria said. "And you?"

"Oh . . . hell," Beth said, grimacing. "We could go on billing and cooing until the end of the world. I'd rather get real. Eric vouches for you, and the Prince and his lady accept you. I don't know whether I like you or not-I never had much in common with corporate types."

"Like me," Ria said. "And I don't know that I care much for elves, myself." She gave Kory a mocking glance.

"But you're . . . oh." Beth said. "Yeah, I guess I can see that. But all the Sidhe aren't like . . . your father."

"'Perenor the Destroyer.' How pleased he'd be to know he was so fondly remembered. Still, done is done: he's dead, and Sun-Descending is still there, keeping the wells of imagination flowing in southern California. Isn't it odd that the Sidhe, who aren't creative themselves, seem to inspire so much of it? Ireland . . . Canada . . . California . . . New York . . . wherever there's a hill, it seems to bring out the best in -humans."

"Or the worst," Kory suggested. "Just as humans do, we cherish most what we lack. Mortals create. The Sidhe live nearly forever. You would not trade your imagination for our long lives, if you truly knew what it would entail."

"I, on the other hand, have the best of both worlds," Ria said lightly. "Human creativity, and at least a little of the Sidhe longevity." She looked at Beth. "Just as any children you and Kory produce will have," she said pointedly.

"Why don't we go somewhere more quiet?" Beth said. "Eric will find us."

Kory gestured, and a Portal opened in the air. The three of them walked through.

"This is the day nursery," Beth said. "Maeve's through there. Don't worry. We won't wake Maeve. Once she's asleep, she's dead to the world."

"Do you want to see her?" Kory asked.

"Yes," said Ria honestly. "I'd like that very much."

They went through the doorway into the night nursery. In the middle of the room stood an elaborate bassinet, covered with ribbons and lace. Lady Montraille sat watching over Maeve, unlikely though it was that anything might happen here. With her were more ordinary nursemaids-in this case, three gleaming balls of light, one pink, one blue, one green--hovering above the bassinet. If Ria squinted, she

could see a tiny figure at the center of each light.

She approached the cradle and looked down. Maeve no longer wore the elaborate christening gown, just a simple pink T-shirt and Pampers.

"I grew up in a commune until I was four," Ria said, speaking softly, looking down at the baby. "I hated it. There was never enough to eat, never anything good to eat-I slept in the same room with all the other kids. The older ones used to scare the littlest ones to make them cry, creeping around the floor growling like bears. I never cried. I already knew there were worse things than bears."

Beth sighed. "The more I see of other peoples' childhoods, the more I appreciate my own."

For some reason, that felt more real to Ria than expressions of sympathy or horror would have been, and she acknowledged it with a nod. "I didn't see much of my mother. She spent most of her time getting high any way she could. She didn't have much time for me. I suppose I don't blame her. She was just doing her best to stay alive after my father's magic fried her mind and killed her twin. She used to have terrible nightmares, waking up screaming about drowning in blood. I guess the others thought it was just acid flash. I don't know what I thought."

"What could you think?" Kory asked. "You were only a child. I suppose you accepted it; young things are like that, they accept whatever form the world takes, however cruel or strange."

That, too, was more sincere than Ria had expected. Now the words she had so much difficulty in forming flowed from her. "Then one day my father came for me. Perenor always liked to leave the dirty work to others. Now I was old enough to follow orders and be an asset." She shook her head, plunging back into a memory that had seemed golden at the time.

"I thought he was the most wonderful thing I'd ever seen. He came driving up in a big black limousine. He brought me candy. It was the first time I'd ever had chocolate. I suppose he gave it to me to see if it would kill me, if I'd inherited more from the Sidhe side than the human." And now, she recalled the calculating look on his face as she devoured the treat, the satisfaction when she asked for more. "He took me back to the commune and started to leave, and I ran after him, ran after the car. I'm sure he was waiting for that. Basically, he abducted me, not that anyone there ever cared. At the time, all I knew was that it was wonderful. He took me to a toy store and let me buy anything I wanted. I had pretty dresses, my own room, a governess who let me do anything I chose-it was paradise. But it came at a price. A few days later, when I started asking whether my mother was going to join us, he told me she'd killed herself. When I was old enough, I checked that out for myself, and he hadn't lied. She'd lost the battle. The commune was on the coast; she just swam out into the ocean and didn't swim back."

Beth and Kory both nodded, saying nothing, and she was grateful for that. Oddly, or perhaps not so oddly, that particular memory gave no pain. Her mother had never been more than one of the "chicks" who cooked, tended the kids, and did the housework when they weren't stoned. In fact, she'd seen less of her mother than any of the others because her mother had been stoned more often, trying to escape.

"He never stopped telling me how fortunate I was to be alive; how he'd wanted me so much he'd used special magic to sire me on a mortal woman. The only way that can happen is for the human partner to somehow become equally a . . . oh, I don't know, 'creature of magic' sums it all up. So either the Sidhe partner has to be weak and close to death, or the human partner has to become a temporary mage. Of course, that was the method Perenor chose. He found some potential mages-about ten percent of humanity has that potential, or so I'm told-and stole their power: their joy, their hope, their creativity-all of it-and fed it to my mother. One of them was her twin brother-that was one of the reasons he picked her,

because her brother was a nascent Bard, and Power ran in her Line. Of course, along with the power of everyone Perenor sucked dry, she got their dreams, their memories, and their deaths. No wonder she went mad. Later, of course, he found other uses for that power."

"That much, we know," Kory said, stern and sad, though neither of those emotions was aimed at her.

Of all the ways this particular encounter could have gone, this was not one of the ones Ria would have put high on the list of "likely." She felt a catharsis, finally telling someone just what kind of burden her father had laid on her young shoulders in an effort to make her as hard as he was. She'd never dared say these things to Eric. Eric cared too deeply, felt too much. It would have hurt him. "Perenor made certain I would know exactly how much my life had cost. I don't suppose it ever occurred to him that having a dozen teenagers-and my mother, in the end-die so I could be born would bother me. After all, why should the strong care about the weak?"

"But that can't be the only way," Beth said despairingly. "There have to be others!"

"Crossbreeds are rarer than elven children," Ria said bleakly. Suddenly, she had to give them hope. Beth's naked anguish, although she didn't exactly understand it, had to be answered. "Perenor chose the most convenient method, but he knew most of the others. They all have the same basis: parity between the energy states of the two partners. Either find some way to turn yourself temporarily into a Sidhe without killing anyone-or turn your elf-friend here temporarily human." Kory and Beth looked at each other with an unreadable expression. "He did find some hints that Sidhe who'd slipped into Dreaming were more fertile with humans than normal Sidhe, but I don't imagine that's an experiment you wish to try?"

Kory shuddered, and Beth took his arm protectively. "There has to be some other way."

Ria looked at Beth's woebegone expression, and again offered a breath of hope. "It isn't impossible to find a way, you know, even if Misthold or Sun-Descending or even Melusine doesn't know how to get its hands on enough life-force. There's more to the World Underhill than the parts of it the Sidhe live in, and creatures out there old and powerful enough to make the -Emperor Oberon look like a wet firecracker in comparison. Do what you'd do faced with a problem like this in the World Above. Find an information specialist and consult him. There have to be trade fairs of some kind here-the inhabitants may not be human, but they're not that different."

"I know of one." Kory spoke up. "I do not think it is precisely the sort of place you mean, but we may begin there."

"Do," Ria suggested. "And let me know what you find out, okay? Who knows? The day may come when I need to know myself."

One of the will-o'-the-wisp servants guided Eric through the labyrinth of interconnecting castle rooms all filled with revelers, finally arriving at the castle's equivalent of the RenFaire's Main Stage. Here only the most elite performers would present their work for the entertainment of the high-ranking nobles and their own coteries.

When Eric got there, Dharniel was talking to the Lady Harawain, one of Maeve's sponsors, and a famous Bard. He'd played her work many times while under Dharniel's tutelage. Her instrument was the harp, and she carried it with her now, slung over her shoulder in a velvet bag. She was one of those



Sidhe who had chosen to modify her natural form: her hair and skin and eyes were all in shades of gold, until she looked like a statue of living amber.

"-the young Bard must go last," she was saying in firm tones. "He's the one everybody will want to hear today, being Maeve's father as well as a great hero."

Me? Eric thought. They can't be serious.

"My dear Lady Harawain, your own natural humility keeps you from seeing what is truly the proper place for so honored a guest. He must go first, of course." The speaker was an elegant and very dandified Sidhe, with waxed moustaches and a goatee. He held a lute festooned with trailing ribbons by its ivory neck.

"If first is such a desirable place, Pirolt, by all means, it should go to none but yourself," Harawain shot back silkily. "Don't you agree, Lord Dharniel?"

"Oh, but I regret that I cannot accept. My lute, she is a temperamental mistress, and I could hardly be ready in time. I will, of course, be more than willing to perform last," Pirolt said hastily.

From his days on the RenFaire Circuit, Eric knew that the end position was the one most coveted by performers. It assured that yours would be the piece the audience remembered best because they'd heard it last, gave you plenty of time to warm up (and the audience to assemble and warm up for you), and meant you didn't have to spend the day waiting around for your turn or rushing to fill in if something happened to someone else. First was also good, for a lot of reasons, but the star attraction always went on last.

And Dharniel was saving that slot for him?

"Eric goes last," Dharniel said. "I am Master of the Revels and that is my decision. Pirolt, your concern for my protégé does not go unremarked. You will play first, so I suggest you begin tuning now."

The foppish elf drew himself up to his full height. His eyes flashed dangerously.

"You will find in me an implacable enemy, Master Dharniel."

"And you will find in me your last one, Master Pirolt. But do take your complaint to Prince Adroviel, by all means. I'm sure the prince would relish the chance to settle your dispute."

Pirolt looked as if he might say more, but settled for spinning on his heel and stalking off.

"Harawain, dearest lady, I place you just before Eric," Dharniel said.

Good lord-is Dharniel smiling? I thought his face would crack if he ever did that.

"The best of the Old Ways followed by the best of the New," she said without ego. "It is a pretty conceit, Master Dharniel. And here is the young Bard now."

Dharniel turned to Eric as Lady Harawain gracefully made her exit. "I suppose you, too, have some complaint of your position in the order of play?"

"None," Eric said hastily. "But there was actually something else I wanted to talk to you about. But if this

isn't a good time . . . ?"

"So long as it is not a matter of artistic temperament," Dharniel said. "But stay. You will need your keeper so that you can attend upon the music in good time."

He plucked a knot of glowing ribbons out of the air and touched it to Eric's shoulder. Eric heard a faint chime, like the ringing of crystal bells.

"It will sound when it is time for you to come to the stage. Do not fail to heed it."

"I won't," Eric promised. As if he'd stand up the biggest audience he was ever likely to have, or miss the chance to hear the cream of Underhill Bard-dom play!

Dharniel regarded him, and Eric realized the elven mage was waiting for him to speak.

"I've found another Bard, Master Dharniel. A human Bard, in New York-"

Quickly he told the story of meeting Hosea Songmaker in the subway, of sensing his Talent, and related the bits of personal history Hosea had confided in him.

"And he's got a lot of natural talent, but he's looking for a teacher, so I thought . . ."

He stopped. Dharniel was smiling again. Mockingly.

"Congratulations, young Bard. You have just acquired your first apprentice."

"I-Me-? But I thought . . . I don't know how to train anyone, Master Dharniel!" Eric sputtered.

"So-as I thought-you slept through all my lectures. Well, no matter. As you are so fond of saying, you can always 'wing it.' "

"But I can't-" Eric said in panic.

Dharniel's face took on an expression of sternness. "Eric, for every Bard comes the time when their first apprentice is sent to them. None of the good ones think they are ready for such a responsibility. But you have learned everything I have to teach you, and learned more in your own life. Who better than a human Bard to train another? I shall look -forward to meeting him when he is ready to present his masterwork."

And that seemed to settle that. Eric gulped. "I- Um, thanks, Master Dharniel. I think."

Maybe Hosea won't want me for a teacher, Eric thought hopefully, then banished the matter from his mind to think about later. Right now he had more immediate things to worry about.

All too soon it was time for him to go on. He'd switched from pear cider to plain water awhile back, and was glad he had-there was enough magic floating around in the air to make him dizzy.

The magic had another effect as well. Music-good music, no matter the style-was always about real things: hope and heartbreak, people and places long gone or yet to be.

Here, music made them real.

Music and magic went hand in hand; Bardcraft had always been about magic as well, about the controlling or the unleash-ing of power. But now he was seeing what that actually meant.

When the Bards performed, what their music spoke of became real for everyone to see. It was like stepping into virtual reality, bringing the audience with you.

Some of the Bards went for simple flashy effects-fireworks, showers of flowers. Others worked more subtle and more powerful magics. For her last piece-each Bard was restricted to three-Harawain had played a Homecoming Song that had left the audience weeping tears of joy-and Eric, too, even though he wasn't quite sure why. But at that moment, it had all been real: the cry of the gulls, the salt smell of the ocean, even the deck rocking gently beneath his feet.

A tough act to follow.

He knew better than to try to beat the Sidhe at their own game. For this performance, he was going to give them human music, ending up with "The Huntsman's Reel," the piece he'd composed for Maeve.

He started with "Bouree," a bouncy flute piece he'd found on an old Jethro Tull album and liked instantly. A touch of magic, and he was playing all four parts of the contrapuntal melody in perfect harmony with himself-a neat trick, and one he'd worked hard on. The music spun shapes of pure geometry in the air, sparkling and changing with each note. As the last note died, delighted applause washed over him. He could see Kory grinning-he, Beth, and Ria were seated beside the Prince and Princess in seats of honor-and Beth shot him a thumbs-up of approval.

For his second piece, he'd used Mozart's The Magic Flute as his inspiration. No magic this time beyond what the music itself produced, but that was enough. He lowered his flute at the end of the piece, and there was a moment of hushed silence before the applause began. When it had died down, he stepped to the edge of the stage.

"Your Highnesses, ladies and gentlemen, for my last piece I would like to play a new composition, dedicated to the Lady Maeve and written in her honor."

Suddenly there was a new quality to the respectful silence. An electric anticipation, almost hunger, that he had never felt before. After a moment, he realized why.

A new piece. New. I spent all day explaining to Ria that elves never create anything because they can't, and never stopped to think what an effect something like this would have. Even the Sidhe Bards don't create new music-they just adapt the old. What have I set myself up for?

There was no choice now but to go on with it.

He raised his flute and played.

The inspiration for the piece was a dancing tune, and the dance was still in its heart-but this was the mortal dance through life, growing and learning. Each time he returned to the original melody it was more complex, deeper, as the child became a woman, then a mother, then a wise counselor to her children's children. Then he stripped away all the ornament and reprised the motif as the woman stood alone, wise and full of years, looking back on all she had done.

When he stopped, there was a long silence from his -audience, and for a moment, Eric was sure he'd mortally -offended them. These were the Sidhe-firstborn of Danu, Folk of the Air, eternal and unchanging. What had ever possessed him to play something that was nothing less than a celebration of human mortality for them?

Then the cheering began. One by one, the audience stood, clapping and cheering. The Prince wept unashamedly. Beth was alternately hugging Kory and bouncing up and down. Ria, standing behind them, spoke silently, but he could read her lips:

"Only you, Eric."

He guessed he'd better get off stage while they were still applauding. Master Dharniel was waiting in the wings, most of the other Bards clustered behind him. The cheering could still be heard, though more faintly than it would be in a World Above venue.

"You're more than ready for an apprentice," Dharniel said curtly, turning away abruptly.

"As I said, the best of the New," Harawain said. She reached out to touch him gently upon the shoulder. "Won't you stay here with us, in Underhill? Your own kind will never value you as we do," she said wistfully.

"I'm sorry." Eric smiled regretfully.

Just then the first of the well-wishers arrived, the Prince among them. His presence kept things from turning into a mob scene, but Eric was still glad to make his escape. Fortunately, on this particular night, Beth could have anything she wanted, even the Bard that everyone wanted.

"Oh, Eric, you rock! That was so . . ." She stopped.

Eric grinned. "Just so you know there's more to me than bunnies, m'lady."

"You could have given us no richer gift," Kory said. "Truly this will be a night long remembered."

" 'And gentlemen in England now a-bed/Shall think themselves accursed they were not here/And hold their manhoods cheap whiles any speaks/That fought with us upon St. Crispin's Day,' " Ria said lightly, quoting Shakespeare to good purpose. Beth shot her a wicked grin-it looked as if they'd settled whatever issues still remained between them, Eric noted with relief.

"So what do we do now?" Eric asked.

"What else?" Beth answered. "Party like there's no tomorrow."

SIX:

TO RIDE THE NIGHT-MARE

You could get used to anything, even fear. After a while, Jeanette Campbell stopped worrying about a bullet to the head.

There were worse things than death.

Being a madman's captive, for one.

There was something not right about Elkanah. She hadn't noticed it at first, of course. She'd been trying to get used to the idea of being dead. But after a while it'd become clear to her that he didn't mean to kill her-not immediately at least-and her mind had turned, with inevitable self-preservation, to what would happen next. Escape. Survival.

They drove all through that first night and well into the next day. He stuck to the back roads, so she still couldn't tell where they were going. She had the growing feeling that he wasn't sure either, and that was the first thing that worried her. The second was his driving. She'd stayed mouse-quiet, hoping to convince him she was no threat, but when the van began to weave from side to side on a road that was only a car-and-a-half wide-if that-fear of immediate death made her bold.

"Either find a place to pull over or let me drive. I don't want to end up dead at the bottom of a ditch."

Elkanah slowly turned to look at her, letting the van drift to a stop. His eyes were almost yellow, she noted with clinical detachment, and the skin beneath them looked bruised and puffy with sleeplessness and something more.

"Let you drive?" he said, in slow echo of her words. "And where would you go, Ms. Campbell?"

"How should I know? This was your idea," she snapped. "I don't even know where we are!"

He chuckled, an almost-soundless rasping that came from deep in his chest. "Don't you? I think you're funning me, Ms. Campbell. I think you know exactly where we are. You shouldn't've been so talkative back in the day, Ms. Campbell. I knew just where to find you."

There was no answer she could give to that because she'd never talked to him at length at all, and so she just stared at him, scared and defiant. After a moment, he put the van into gear and began driving again. But an hour later they'd reached a more traveled road, and he followed a weathered billboard advertising "Lester's Country Rest."

It wasn't much of a rest, but it was certainly country. He left her in the car alone-shackled to the door, of course-while he went to talk to the owner, and came back a few moments later with a room key in his hand.

"I guess you won't mind sharing a room."

He drove the van around to the back of the little row of battered cabins, got out, and came around to her door to open it. Mutely, Jeanette held out her wrist, and he unlocked the shackle. She rubbed her wrist, still able to feel the weight and coldness. She climbed down out of the seat, feeling stiff and unsteady on her feet.

"Come on." He put a hand on her arm and led her to the end cabin. The cabin door stuck, and he shoved it open. A wave of musty hot air rolled out. She walked inside, and when she turned, Elkanah was pulling another set of cuffs out of his pocket.

"Now, Ms. Campbell, I figure we can do this the easy way, or the hard way."

Jeanette swallowed hard. "What's the easy way?"

He smiled then, an expression more frightening than his bland disinterest had been. "I cuff your hands behind your back. And you stay put."

She nodded agreement, unable to trust her voice. As he approached her she turned her back, holding her wrists out behind her. As soon as the cold metal settled over her wrists, she realized she should have asked to take off her jacket first. It was hot in here, and would only get hotter as the day progressed. But something inside told her to stay as quiet as she could, not make him think about her too much.

She sat down on a corner of the bed as Elkanah went back outside to the van. She knew it was a test. Elkanah was armed, and somehow she didn't think that Lester would call the cops if he heard a shot. She'd been shot before, once a long time ago when she'd gotten careless. It was an experience she had no desire to repeat.

Elkanah returned carrying a small backpack. He shut the door, and then picked up the end of the bed and dragged it over in front of the door. Jeanette, caught unawares, fell to the floor. With her hands cuffed behind her it was an awkward fall, but she didn't complain. She thought that for just a moment Elkanah had forgotten she was there, and that was another disturbing thought to add to all the others.

He continued to ignore her, opening the pack and pulling out a can of beer and a small bottle. It was labelled "aspirin," and she only hoped it was, watching him shake the tablets directly into his mouth and wash them down with a long slug of warm beer. The situation was grim enough without adding drugs to it.

And drugs were what got you into this, weren't they, Campbell? And to think, this all started out with you wanting to be an elf. She rolled to her knees and sat cross-legged on the floor, watching him carefully.

Elkanah rubbed his forehead and sighed, and seemed to notice her again. "Would you care for a drink, Ms. Campbell?"

"I . . . sure," she said, realizing only then how thirsty she was. He walked over to her and held the can to her lips. She gulped awkwardly, spilling it down her T-shirt-it was warm, and she'd never cared for beer particularly, but at least it was wet.

"Now, I'm going to get some sleep. You just behave yourself," Elkanah said when the can was empty. "Or we can do this the hard way."

"No," Jeanette said. She had absolutely no desire to find out what "the hard way" might be. Her answer seemed to satisfy him, because he turned away and lay down on the bed. Within moments he was asleep.

She squirmed around until she got her jacket down off her shoulders. It cushioned the cuffs and she stretched out, half on her side. There was no rug, only bare and crumbling lino-leum, and she had a fine view of the dust bunnies under the bed, but it was a better place than she'd thought she'd be in when he'd broken down her door a few hours earlier.

Sleep wasn't possible, and she had plenty of time to think. Her thoughts weren't good. Back in the van, he'd said it was easy to find her, talked like she'd told him something once that'd let him find her.

But even if she had ever had any conversations with Elkanah back at Threshold-and she hadn't-she'd

wandered into to Morton's Fork completely at random. She couldn't have told anyone where she was going, because she hadn't known -herself.

So how had he known? And why was he lying about it?

Who's he working for? He's hired muscle. He has to be working for someone.

Nothing about this felt right. It didn't match any way of doing business she knew of, legit, criminal, or any of the shades of clandestine in-between. Elkanah had been Robert Lintel's right-hand thug, a hired frightener. If Robert was gone, Elkanah should be too.

Unless Robert wasn't gone. Unless somehow he'd survived, and was putting the Black Ops program back together again. She shook her head in frustration, stifling a sneeze. At least Elkanah meant to keep her alive for now. At least she knew that much.

She just wished she knew why.

She must have slept, because she was startled out of confused dreams by Elkanah hauling her unceremoniously to her feet. It was dark outside, and the room was lit by one bare 40-watt bulb.

"What time is it?" she asked groggily.

"Time to go," Elkanah said, turning her around to unlock the cuffs. He gave her a push toward the bathroom. "You go wash up. We've got miles to go."

"Miles to go before I sleep." A scrap of an old poem she'd had to learn in high school surfaced in her mind. Mr. Johnson had said it was about death. She wished she hadn't remembered it now.

The bathroom was small and grimy, its tiny window painted shut. She ran water in the sink until it ran clear, then scooped up several tepid handfuls, gulping thirstily and rubbing it over her face and hair. There was a mirror over the sink. Her face looked blotched and puffy, her eyes big and scared. The dyed black hair looked unconvincing and dull-he'd been right, it looked awful, and with her hellbound for death or slavery, why should she care?

I don't care, she told herself. I don't care what anyone thinks of me, or how I look. I don't. She wished she could stay in there forever, but he'd only come in after her. She slicked her hair down as best she could and washed the beer out of her T-shirt and opened the door. Elkanah was waiting for her. He handed her a warm can of Coke and a granola bar.

"Breakfast."

She didn't argue.

The next day followed the pattern of the first. Elkanah drove, almost aimlessly, and Jeanette sat, chained to the door, and tried to make sense out of what was happening to her. She supposed she ought to be putting her soul in order and repent-ing her misspent life, but it didn't seem to her that any of this was her fault. She'd never told Robert to kill all those people. When she'd been an outlaw chemist, she'd never forced her drugs on anyone who didn't want to buy.

But they couldn't have done it without you, a remorseless inner voice said. She tried to shut it out, but there was nothing to do but listen to it, and finally she gave in. Okay. If the Sinner Saints hadn't had me,

they'd've found someone else to cook for them, but that's no excuse. If Robert hadn't found me, he'd have found someone else, but that's no excuse either. I didn't have to do those things. I'm responsible for what I did.

But how could I have not done them? Once I got started all the way back in high school, how could I have done anything different than what I did?

"Pretty good, you tracking me down like that," she finally said. It was crazy of her to bait him that way, but the only other choice was to listen to that accusing voice inside her head. Anything to shut up her inner Jiminy Cricket.

Her only answer was a grunt.

"I thought I'd gotten away clean. It was more than six months. I read about Threshold in the papers. I thought they'd got everyone else."

Another grunt.

"I guess you must've given them the slip."

Now he glanced toward her. "I'm here," was all he said.

"Pretty good going," Jeanette offered, but Elkanah said nothing more. But now that she'd started, she didn't seem to be able to stop talking.

"You must have high-level backing. Robert did. All I do is make the stuff."

Now he looked directly at her. "That's enough. That's what he wants."

"Who? Robert?" But Robert was dead, wasn't he? Elkanah had said so, back in the cabin.

For a moment she thought she'd pushed him too far. Elkanah cut the van sharply over to the side of the road, stopped, and got out. But he wasn't coming for her. He opened the door into the back. She heard the rattle of the aspirin bottle, and craned over the back of the seat to see. He was standing in the doorway-no, hanging in the doorway, looking like Death on roller skates, slugging back dry aspirins as if they were jelly beans. He looked up as she moved, and for a moment she saw a silvery flash, like the reflection of light in a mirror, but it passed too soon for her to be sure of what she saw.

"You talk too much," Elkanah said.

"I want to know what's going to happen."

He laughed. The sound came as if forced, ending in a wracking cough. "No you don't. You don't want to know what's going to happen."

"What?" she asked, fear breaking through her forced calm. "What's going to happen? What are you going to do with me? Where are we going? Who are you working for? What does he want?"

"Who said I was working for someone?" He glared at her in sullen anger.

You did. Just now. You said he wants me. "All I want to know is-"



"Shut up."

She did.

They stopped again soon after that at a convenience store. Elkanah bought sandwiches and coffee for both of them, a pair of dark glasses, and all the aspirin the store had. She watched him chase another half bottle of pills with scalding coffee.

He didn't have headaches like that when he was working at Threshold. If there'd been anything wrong with him then, that Healer we killed would have spotted it. She didn't like Elkanah, didn't care about him, but suddenly it seemed terribly important to her that he be well and whole.

"Caffeine helps," she said hesitantly. "You should get some No-Doz. It's got more caffeine than coffee does."

For a moment she almost thought he'd hit her, but instead he got out of the van again and went back into the store. She could see him talking to the clerk.

I should get out of here. I could scream. Make a fuss. Jump out of the van.

But if she did, she was still chained to the door. And the man she was with was entirely capable of taking off and dragging her. Her jacket would protect her from the road, but not for long. She sipped her coffee, hating herself for her cowardice. It wouldn't be an easy death, but it might be better than what Elkanah was taking her to. She shivered, suddenly cold. "You don't want to know what's going to happen."

He came back with a handful of bottles, tossing them onto the dash. Something called "Truckers' Pick Me Up." Watching him carefully for signs of displeasure, she reached for one of the bottles. Caffeine pills. He'd taken her advice. That was something.

They drove through the night without stopping except for gas. Near dawn he began to talk-to keep himself awake, she suspected-but it was information, all the same.

"Never did think about all the people you hurt, did you? Never thought about everybody you left. Little blonde bitch, left us all there. Didn't think I'd be back, did you? Didn't think I'd find you. Too smart for you. Miss Ria Llewellyn. Blonde bitch. Thought you could throw me off with a haircut. Too smart. Gonna take you back. Make you run. Fix everything. Teach you to leave us there."

Did he think she was Ria Llewellyn? He couldn't. He'd known who she was when he'd come for her. He'd talked about a partnership, made sure to take her stock.

"I didn't leave you," she said softly, not knowing what else to say.

Her voice seemed to rouse him. He glanced at her.

"I ran out on you-on Threshold, on Robert-but you were free to do the same."

"I guess you think we ought to stop," he said, as if they'd been having some other-more normal-conversation.

"That'd be good. I guess we still have a long way to go?"

He didn't answer, but a few hours later, as the sun was coming up, they stopped again.

She'd been too tired to really notice when it happened, but at some point during the night they'd gone from winding local roads to the main state roads. They were heading east. Toward New York. She was sure of it now.

Main roads meant a better class of hotel, too. This time the room had two double beds. They were bolted to the floor, so this time Elkanah took the pillows and blankets and made himself a bed in front of the door. He unplugged the phone and took it with him, falling asleep at once and leaving her to her own devices. This time he didn't even bother to cuff her hands. Confidence that she couldn't escape-or was he getting sloppy?

It didn't really matter. The windows didn't open, and they were on the second floor. She could throw a chair through the window or set fire to the curtains with the lighter in her jacket pocket, but that was about all. She didn't think he'd sleep through either activity. She wouldn't escape, and she'd be in a worse situation than she was in now.

She could break one of the bathroom glasses and cut her throat, but aside from that, her options were limited.

She honestly considered doing that, staring into the mirror, but she couldn't quite bring herself to do it. Down deep in her heart, Jeanette was afraid that death wasn't a final end, and she was afraid of what lay on the other side-balance and payment exacted for the crimes and weaknesses of a lifetime. Her hands shook, and tears prickled at the back of her eyes, but she couldn't even cry. Something horrible was going to happen to her, and she knew she deserved it, but she couldn't help shrieking inside that it wasn't fair, that she hadn't known what would happen back when she could still change things, back while it would have done any good. And now, nothing she could do could ever make up for what she'd done. She didn't think she could do good if she tried.

So life isn't fair. You always knew that. But I just wish . . .

She shook her head. Might as well wish she'd never been born. Where had her life gone twisted? When she'd started selling drugs? In high school, when she'd dreamed of revenge on her tormentors and vowed she'd pay any price to get it? In kindergarten, when everyone had laughed at her for some reason she'd never understood and she'd hated them for it? How far back did you look for reasons, for the first failure of nerve or spirit that led to all the rest? Should she blame her parents, and their unspoken agreement that she deserved whatever happened to her, no matter what it was? If they'd been one of those happy loving TV families that stuck up for each other, would she have turned out quite the same?

Who knows?

Wearily, going through the motions of living that almost-but not quite-didn't matter any more, she stripped and showered. At least she could be clean when she died, even if she had nothing to wear but the clothes she'd been living in for days. Afterward she sat in a chair, watching the sun rise, watching Elkanah sleep, waiting for him to wake up and deliver her to her fate.

He woke in the late afternoon and took her back to the van. This time he didn't chain her to the door. He headed for Interstate 80, confirming her guess that they were heading for New York.

"Maybe it's time for you to fill me in," she said, trying again for information because it was the only thing she could do. They were on a high-speed road now, one filled with big trucks and drivers who all thought they were James Bond. He'd have to pay more attention to the road. Maybe he'd get careless. Maybe they'd crash and the Smokeys would come and arrest them both. Somehow a lifetime spent in prison didn't seem so bad any more.

"Back in Morton's Fork, you asked if I could make more T-Stroke. You said we could do business."

"What?" Elkanah glanced quickly toward her, his face blank with surprise, then quickly back to the road.

"What do you want me for?"

"I don't," he said flatly. Then: "It's dark." And it was, but there were headlights all around them, and somehow she didn't think that was the kind of darkness he was talking about.

"Just you wait until we get to New York, Ria Llewellyn . . ." His voice trailed off. And though she repeated her questions over and over again at prudent intervals, she never got any clearer answer. It was almost as if he didn't know she was in the van any more.

She'd made up her mind to run for it and damn the consequences when they stopped at the toll gate on the George Washington Bridge, but to her dismay they didn't head for the bridge. Elkanah went around the city, switching from the New Jersey Turnpike to the Garden State Parkway, and then to Route 17, a two-lane road that twisted through dark countryside.

"Where are we going?" she asked desperately.

"To New York," he said, in a terrifyingly reasonable voice. "We'll be there soon."

But they'd passed New York an hour before.

He was crazy. She knew it with a sick certainty. She'd counted on his sanity more than she'd known until the last hope of it was gone. He'd never been looking for her. He must have found her by accident-it was possible-and all the rest: about business, an employer, his accusations of something Ria Llewellyn had done, were all a smoke screen over his madness. Maybe he'd killed Robert Lintel. Maybe he'd killed all of them. And now he was going to kill her. Fear of capture had paralyzed her thinking until it was too late.

"We're going to need to stop for gas," she said, glancing at the fuel gauge. Anything, anything, to make him take her where lights and people were! She wasn't chained up now, and now, knowing what she knew, she'd do anything to keep him from chaining her up again.

"No need. We're almost there," he said, turning off the road onto a one-lane track. A sign flashed by almost before she could read it: Sterling Forest Park.

"Look. Could we stop and get something to drink? I'm really thirsty," she said.

"There's stuff in the back," he said, his eyes on the road. Though it was bumpy and narrow, he hadn't slowed at all. She would have jumped from the van if he had. But this was a chance, at least. She climbed around the seat, into the back of the van, and turned on the light.

Her saddlebags were still there, next to Elkanah's duffle. She scabbled through her bags, hoping he'd

brought her gun, but there was nothing in them but clothes, the jar of T-Stroke powder, and the two bottles full of filled capsules. She reached for Elkanah's duffel.

Aspirin. Caffeine pills. Bundles of cash. Half a six-pack of Coke, and one of those big plastic cups with a straw built into the lid that you got at highway rest stops, the kind that held 64 ounces. No weapon.

But she had a weapon, if she wasn't afraid to use it.

With shaking hands, praying he wouldn't turn and look, she unscrewed the lid of the brown plastic jar and dumped several ounces of powdered T-Stroke into the cup. A low dose kills, a higher dose delays death. She held it between her knees and ripped back the tab on a can of Coke, pouring it in over the powder. It foamed up the sides and she swirled it around. The powder melted away, leaving a murky brown liquid. She added a second can of Coke and clamped the lid on. Her hands were freezing. New York in August, and she was cold.

Cold as death.

Revenge is always an option. She used to think the phrase was cool, glamorous, a creed to live by. Now all she felt was despair.

The van was starting to slow down. Stopping. She stuffed the jar into her pocket and grabbed for the two bottles of capsules. A low dose kills. A higher dose might let you live.

He turned off the engine but left the headlights on as he climbed out of the van. A moment later he pulled open the sliding door of the van. In the wan light his skin was stretched tight, gray and shiny. Oily beads of sweat stood out on his face like sequins, gleaming in the light. He looked like a dying man.

"What's that you got there, Ms. Campbell?"

"Coke." Her voice was hoarse but steady, a tiny triumph to set against the sins of a lifetime. "Want some?"

"You first," he said, unsmiling.

She put the straw to her lips and sucked hard, tasting brackish warm sweetness, a faint tang of carbonation, and nothing more. She gulped hard, forcing herself to swallow the contents of the cup. Forcing herself not to know she was drinking poison.

"Here," she said, holding out what was left.

He took it and drank deeply, and as he did, his expression changed. Realization. Terror.

But not of her. Not of what was in the cup.

Bright pale spots appeared on his forehead. She watched in horror as something glittery burst through his skin, shooting out, branching, shining bright as chrome.

Horns. Antlers. Silver antlers.

He screamed, dropping the empty cup.

Then he reached for her, fast as a striking snake, yanking her out of the van and onto her knees on the summer-damp ground.

"Run, girl! As you love Jesus-run!"

She scrambled away from him, moaning low in her throat with pure terror. Elkanah was clutching at the antlers, trying to tear them from his head, oblivious to her now. She managed to make it to her feet, staggering into the glare of the van's headlights, unable to make sense of what she was seeing. He swung his head from side to side, striking the antlers against the side of the van in his frenzy to remove them. The sound they made was a chiming like struck crystal, a high sweet ringing that grew louder instead of softer, growing and changing until the air was filled with deafening music.

Hearing it, Elkanah turned and ran, crashing off into the night. The horns he wore glowed as if they were made of starlight.

The music stopped. The grass crackled as it froze, turning from green to silver.

Oh, please, no.

Jeanette clutched at the hood of the van for support, then turned, clumsy with terror, to put her back against it.

An armored figure on horseback stood silhouetted in the glare. His black horse gleamed like polished stone. His armor was like something out of a medieval fever dream, fantastically ornate, the gleam of pure silver sparkling beneath a coat of night-black enamel. Long black hair flowed down over his shoulders, framing a face of inhuman beauty, such beauty that she wanted to run to him, throw herself beneath his horse's hooves, weeping, and beg his forgiveness for her ugliness. Behind him the night rippled, as if it had been shattered into a thousand pieces and re-formed once again. He was death and ruin, despair and pain, the end of all hope, all light.

She knew him.

"Aerune," she whimpered, sliding to her knees. Her heart hammered, flushing the T-Stroke through her system, promising her death or transformation, but neither soon enough to save her.

Aerune mac Audelaine, Dark Lord of the Sidhe, Prince of Air and Darkness.

Lord of Death and Pain.

Nothing could save her.

She closed her eyes, hearing the soft chiming as Lord Aerune walked his horse slowly forward.

"They said my hunt had failed." His voice was like ruined music, making her ache with sorrow. "But my hound has brought me the quarry I sought. Look at me, human girl."

Her eyes snapped open as if he had shouted, and she stared up into his eyes, wanting to look away, unable to do anything but obey. She felt herself lost, felt as if she were falling into a deep pit lined with the sharpest of knives.

He leaned down from his horse and took her chin between his fingers. His touch was so cold it burned,

as if his touch alone could wither her flesh and turn her skin to ash.

"You are the mortal alchemist who crowns men with fire?" he asked.

She didn't understand what he meant, but something inside her must have. Without conscious volition Jeanette felt her throat move, felt lips part and tongue move to form a single word.

"Yes."

Aerune straightened in his saddle, releasing her. Warmth and weakness flowed into her as he released her; she fell forward into the dirt, catching herself on her hands.

"And now the same unnatural fire flows through your veins." He sounded lightly amused. "No matter. Now you will be the hound to my hunting, mortal child. Now you are mine. Get up."

Once more his voice acted upon her as if it were a physical force. Jeanette lurched to her feet, swaying unsteadily before him. He held out his hand, and his eyes gleamed cold and black. "Mount up and ride with me, Child of Earth. We have far to go, you and I."

Numbly, helplessly, incapable of doing anything else, Jeanette reached for his hand. All her questions were answered now: Elkanah had found her because he was Aerune's hound, given the magic to seek her out in the World of Iron. Aerune had given Elkanah another gift as well: forgetfulness, so that he did not understand why he hunted her or how he succeeded. His bruised and tormented mind had woven fantasies to cloak the workings of Aerune's magic, while all along Elkanah worked to bring Jeanette to Aerune, not knowing what he did.

Aerune pulled Jeanette up behind him on the horse, and wheeled his mount in the direction of the shimmering black rainbow. A moment later they were gone, leaving the park to slow darkness as the van's lights dimmed and faded.

SEVEN:

WHEN THE GOING GETS TOUGH,

THE TOUGH GO SHOPPING

It took her a few days to recover from the ceileighe-when the Sidhe threw a party, they threw a real party-but Beth spent that time planning her quest. Meeting Ria had not been particularly enjoyable, but Beth was honest enough with herself to admit that a lot of her current reasons for her feelings toward Ria were rooted in envy.

Back in her television days, Beth had always hated the game-playing necessary to get the job done. Working in television was as much a matter of playing political games as having the needed skill set to do the job, and she'd always resisted following the unspoken codes of flattery and expediency that allowed you to get and keep an assignment.

Hell, she'd even hated it in the RenFaires. But Ria Llewellyn seemed to swim through that treacherous

sea with ease. Partly it was the power that came from being majority stockholder in a multibillion dollar company, Beth was sure-no groveling and scraping for jobs or funding there-but mostly it was Ria herself. Take everything away from her, and she'd build it back up with ease.

Beth wished she could be that kind of person. But everything she'd ever had-the glamour job in TV, the music gigs with Spiral Dance, the busking at RenFaires, even her place Underhill-she'd had to work hard to claim in an arena where ability counted no more, and sometimes far less, than networks of favors and friendships. As a small child, her battle cry had always been: But that's not fair! and she'd always been willing to do battle with the world as it was in the name of Fairness. It was one of the things that had drawn her to Wicca. The Craft placed a great premium on taking responsibility for your own life, working to ensure fair-dealing and justice for all, not just its own members.

Even going Underhill with Kory had seemed to her to be a defeat sometimes. The people chasing her had no right to do what they did. But while they didn't have Right on their side, they did have superior force. And so the three of them had gone: she to exile, Kory back to a home that sometimes chafed, as home did.

But Eric . . . for him Underhill had only been a way--station, not a final destination or a goal. He'd learned and grown, and gone back to take his place in Ria's world. To put it most unfairly, he'd succeeded where Beth had failed. Even having Kory's love wasn't enough to make up for that sometimes.

But having Maeve had changed everything. Through all the long months of her pregnancy, impatiently awaiting the birth of her daughter, Beth had thought she was ready for motherhood, willing to take up the responsibility, eager to protect and guide a new life.

She'd had no clue.

The moment she held her daughter in her arms, felt her weight and smelled her baby scent, looked into her kitten-blue eyes, the whole world had changed. Beth became the second most important person in her own life. All the old stupid clichés were true: she no longer cared about things because Beth wanted them, but because Beth-and-Maeve were important. Beth looked into a future that had to be put in order because Maeve would live there; she had to think and plan and prepare for the future because Maeve would be the one to grasp the opportunities there, this utterly beloved one who wrapped Beth in a gossamer web of responsibility for every detail of her existence.

It wasn't crushing. It was liberating and ecstatic and joyful all at once. Maeve didn't diminish her. Maeve gave her a strength and power she had never imagined possible-and suddenly so many things she hadn't thought about were vitally important. She wanted Kory's children for the joy they would bring to both of them, but now she also wanted those children for Maeve--brothers and sisters to tie her human daughter firmly into the web of kinship that linked all Underhill, friends and allies and protectors to share Maeve's grief and happiness as no one else-even her mother-ever could.

Suddenly all the things her friends with kids had said made perfect sense. Maeve completed her, changed her, made her stronger. Made her whole.

Made her worry every moment, even when she knew that at least some of those worries were irrational.

Beth grinned, leaning over the bassinet. No meteor was hurtling toward the Earth. No war was about to break out to ravage the halls of Elfhome Misthold. It didn't even rain. "And there's a legal limit to the snow here. . . ." Maeve had her very own Protector. And the Seilighe Sidhe adored children-all

children-with a single-mindedness that was almost enough to satisfy a new mother's fierce protective instincts. It wouldn't be easy to leave Maeve behind, but Beth had no fear that she'd return to find anything other than a very pampered Elven-American Princess. It was for Maeve, for the future, for her daughter's unborn siblings, that she was going. And if she didn't come back . . . well, she was doing what mothers did, and she felt a peace in her soul that hadn't been there for a very long time.

Yep. It's a whole new Beth Kentraine . . . and ain't that a kick in the head?

Kory had taken care of the practical preparations for their trip. This was the first time Beth would be going outside the boundaries of one of the Elfhames, but to find what they needed would take them out into the Lands Underhill, and that world was far wider than the territory claimed by either Sidhe Court.

"If you need information, find an information specialist," Ria had said. This was the first step. Kory had consulted one of Prince Arvindel's advisors, the Lady Vivalant (who was also the librarian of his very eclectic collection of books) for information about a place called the Goblin Market. He'd told Beth that it was said that all roads Underhill led eventually to that place, and there you could find anything you sought. It was the closest thing to a trade fair that Underhill held.

There were dark rumors about the Goblin Market as well. It was said that you could buy nothing you did not already possess, nor sell that save what you wished to keep. But both Kory and Vivalant-and Master Dharniel as well, when she'd nerved herself to ask him-had thought it was still worth trying.

There was no day or night in a hame, but it still felt like early morning when they left. The elvensteeds stood ready, their saddlebags packed with the necessities of the journey, as well as some trade goods from the World Above: coffee, chocolate, and even a couple of six-packs of Classic Coke.

Beth had been mildly shocked-all three contained caffeine, a deadly drug to all the Children of Danu-but Kory had assured her that not everything living Underhill shared the Sidhe's liability, and that such items were often eagerly sought.

"Figures. Next thing you know, McDonald's will be opening a branch down here."

Kory grinned at her, tightening his mount's girth. "Ah," he said wistfully. "Chicken McNuggets. Thick creamy shakes. And ketchup."

He was dressed in his full knightly regalia: elvensilver armor and sword, and looked every inch the faerie knight. Somehow the wistful look at the mention of Mickey D's didn't seem to go with the rest. Cognitive dissonance, that was what they called it.

"Don't," Beth begged, grinning. She'd lost her taste for junk food while she was pregnant and had never regained it, but ketchup was something she still missed.

"And Chinese food, no MSG. And pizza," Kory continued teasingly. " 'Tis a pity we could not bring any of that with us. We could gain empires."

"You're right at that, kiddo. I guess when we get back I'm going to have to set up a kitchen and see about satisfying some of your . . . cravings." She winked at him, camping up her saucy Faire-wench



persona-though her costume would certainly never have passed muster with any of the Authenticity Nazis. Beth was wearing woven leggings-embroidered down the outside of each thigh with a pattern of fruits and vines in glittering thread-tucked into high soft boots of green and gold. Above that she wore a cowed tunic in a green to match her boots, its hood, now lying over her shoulders, lined in a gold satin that matched her leggings, and around her neck a glowing pendant, warning any who could read it-and that was practically everyone they would meet-that Beth Kentraine was under the protection of Elfhame Misthold: mess with her, and you messed with them. Her tunic was gathered in with a wide belt of tooled leather, from which hung a very businesslike dagger. Under her tunic was a chain mail shirt of elvensilver worn over a linen shift, and beneath that, in a protective silk pouch embroidered with spells and hung from a thong about her neck, was her old flip-knife. Its blade was Cold Iron, anathema everywhere Underhill, carried only to be used as a last resort if things turned really bad.

She'd thought about asking to wear armor, but elven armor was as much for display as for protection. Kory's armor proclaimed him a Seilighe knight, and Beth, he'd insisted, should dress to reflect what she was as well. She'd drawn the line at the idea of wearing a long dress, though. She'd always been more of a blue-jeans person-and besides, neither she nor Bredana really cared for the sidesaddle that went with the dress.

Kory patted Mach Five on the shoulder-named long ago out of a Speed Racer cartoon, he'd once explained blushingly. The elvensteed whuffled and stamped his foot, and Kory turned to inspect Bredana. Finding everything there to his satisfaction (it was amazing, Beth reflected, how much of Pony Club stayed with you through the years), he held out his hand to Beth.

"All is in readiness, my lady. Shall we away?"

"You've been reading Howard Pyle again," Beth said, giving his shoulder a playful shove. He knelt and made a stirrup of his hand-elven armor was far lighter and more flexible than its World Above counterpart-and Beth stepped up, swinging her leg carefully across the saddle. The cantle was higher than a modern saddle; though Bredana could have created saddle and tack to look like anything, for this trip it was best that everything be Sidhe Classic. In a lot of places Underhill, it was safest to look like exactly what you were.

Kory mounted Mach Five and took up the reins. Grooms rushed to open the stable doors, and the two of them rode out.

The park was lit with the silvery unchanging light of Underhill. The air smelled of roses and apricots, and the world was filled with the singing of birds. In the middle distance, Beth could see another party, much larger than their own, lords and ladies out for a morning of hunting.

Beth had never been to the edge of the parklands that made up Elfhame Misthold-or rather, she had, but the magic had simply brought her back to the far side of the park, as if the whole place were somehow built on a Moebius strip, which for all she knew, it was. But today they were going through a Gate that would lead them into the world beyond.

Every Gate was essentially the same, Kory had told her, just as the essential magic of all the Lands Underhill was the same. Most Gates could be set to take their user to any of six "pre-set" destinations. Some could be set to open only to the proper code, others operated by anyone. You had to travel overland, hopscotching among friendly or neutral Gates, until you got to where you were going. Most of them led in and out of neutral or unclaimed territory; you couldn't just ride through a Gate and find yourself in the middle of somebody's living room. The Gate that led into someone's personal domain was usually well-guarded or well-defended-or both-and whoever was behind it would have a lot of warning

that you were coming.

The Gate that led out of Elfhome Misthold was a golden archway-some long ago elfmage's pun on the Golden Gate, since Misthold's anchoring Nexus was in the San Francisco Bay Area-with an ornate design covering every inch of its surface. The space in the center of the archway shimmered faintly, like a curtain of gold chains. Two Sidhe in full armor stood before it. Once upon a time Beth had been surprised that with magic available for the asking, the Folk performed so many mundane tasks for themselves, like guarding doors and sweeping out stables, but at heart the Sidhe were warriors who knew that someday they might be called upon to fight. There were hames as decadent and luxurious as she could possibly imagine, and even hames where all the work was done by human changelings, but Misthold wasn't one of them.

Age and power seemed to radiate from the Misthold Gate. One of the knights saluted as they drew near.

"Fair morrow, Lord Korendil, Mistress Beth," he greeted them formally.

"Fair morrow, Sir Vinimene. My lady and I ride upon quest, at my lord Arvindil's good pleasure," Kory answered, equally formally.

"Quest well and come home safe," Vinimene answered. He stepped back, and Beth and Kory rode through.

She'd gone through Gates a lot of times, traveling between Earth and Underhill, but they'd always seemed to go from outdoors to indoors, or the other way around, and her mind had accepted the change. Here, it was as if the whole world vanished in an eyeblink. The flare of bright sunlight--sunlight?-caught her by surprise, and she swayed in the saddle just a little.

"Beth?"

"I'm okay. Just wasn't ready for it. Kind of weird, isn't it?"

"I remember being just as surprised the first time I saw a movie," Kory said fondly.

"But what's with the sun?" Beth asked, squinting up at it. "We aren't back on Earth, are we?"

The landscape resembled the park they'd just left-a little raggeder around the edges, the colors less bright, but still beautiful. She glanced over her shoulder. The Gate on this side was also golden, but smaller and plainer. It, too, was guarded by a set of armored knights.

"Perhaps in a land much closer to it than Underhill," Kory said, considering. "Or perhaps it is merely there for decoration. Either way, we will not be here long."

"Lead on, Kemosabe."

After riding for several hours, through a succession of Gates that led through some eye-poppingly strange places, Kory called a halt.

"We are here." He pointed.

It's the Faire! The old Faire-the one they bulldozed!

For a moment Beth's heart leapt with a pang that was not only homesickness, but nostalgia. The best parts of her young life had been spent at the Faire.

But when she looked again, she realized it wasn't her Faire. There was a scatter of brightly-colored tents and garlanded booths, and banners belled in the soft noontime breeze. But the longer she stared, the less it looked like the SoCal Faire, until she couldn't figure out how she'd ever confused the two.

"It's magic, isn't it?" she asked. "I mean, even more than usual."

"Yes." Kory didn't seem completely happy about it. "But we will take no harm here. Should a warrior meet his worst enemy at the Goblin Market, he must smile and pass him by. No weapon may be drawn in anger here, no power summoned to bind or harm a foe. Here is the place where all worlds meet. Even yours."

"I guess that's why it all looks so familiar," Beth joked, trying to conceal her unease.

"Do not trust it," Kory said. "The Goblin Market is . . ." He seemed to be at a loss for words. "It is a neutral place. In the human expression, 'proceed at your own risk.' If you come here, they feel you have accepted the risk."

"Gotcha," Beth said. "Lead on." She forced a smile, feigning a confidence she did not feel.

They entered the Market between two black-and-white striped posts-about eighteen feet tall and slender and straight as teenaged telephone poles. Kory turned Mach Five sharply left, riding along the edge of the fair until he reached what was obviously a parking lot of sorts. There were lines of hitching posts right out of the Old West, but the things hitched to them were anything but ordinary.

There were horses, both in the usual range of colors and in all the colors of the rainbow. Some she recognized as elvensteeds, others were ordinary horses, and some of them were neither one, but something else entirely in a horse's shape. But that wasn't the extent of the livestock. There were giant ostriches. Bridled lizards that hissed and snapped as the two of them passed. Even a hippogriff-half horse, half eagle.

Motorcycles. Bicycles. Hovercraft that looked like they'd been assembled by a mad Victorian inventor. A genuine antique Model A flivver painted a glaring yellow. A classic VW Beetle with an iridescent paint job. It flashed its headlights at them, but Beth was already staring past it, at a brass bed with ornate bed-knobs, complete down to the patchwork quilt and lace-trimmed pillows, that hovered several inches off the ground.

"I guess people come here from all over," Beth said in a strained voice. Next to the brass bed was a carousel horse that turned its head to watch them as they passed. Beyond it was a green tiger with purple stripes wearing a saddle and a glittering rhinestone collar.

"From everywhere there is," Kory answered. Beth was cheered to realize that he was staring just as hard as she was. "And from some places there aren't."

They found an empty post a safe distance from some of the more irritable mounts, and dismounted. The elvensteeds would stay unless summoned, and were more than capable of defending themselves.

"Hi, there. Need a guide?"

Beth stared. She was looking at a fox. A talking, five-foot-tall, cartoon-style fox. It was wearing a red James Dean jacket. Around its neck was a gold collar with a gold tag dangling from it. Engraved on the tag were the letters "FX."

"Special effect"? Oh, yeah. . . .

It swished its tail, and Beth blinked again. Not tail. Tails. Three of them, in fact.

"Allow me to introduce myself," the creature said, with a deep sweeping bow. "I am Foxtrot-X-ray. But you can call me Fox. Or you can call me handsome. Or you can call me adorable. Just call me, beautiful lady!"

"Uh, hi," Beth said, smiling in spite of herself. "Come here often?"

Kory had come to her side and was regarding Fox warily. Fox grinned, exposing a mouthful of gleaming teeth. "Hey, pretty lady, are you doubting my expertise?"

"No," Kory answered bluntly. "Only your sincerity."

"I'm hurt," Fox said, though he didn't sound it. "But if you'll pardon me for mentioning it, *Sieur Sidhe*, it's plain to see that this is your first time at our lovely fair, and I thought you might like a little help. No offense."

"And you would offer us this help freely?" Kory asked.

"Naw-w-w . . . but I figure, high-class folks like you, you might have a little something to make it worth my while. And I know where everything is. You could spend days wandering around here by yourselves."

"We don't-" Kory began. Beth put a hand on his arm. Hadn't Ria said to consult experts? If this creature was on the level, he could save them from spending a lot of time here, and Beth had the feeling that the less time they spent at the Fair, the better.

"I suppose you have references?" Beth asked.

"Absolutely!" Out of nowhere Fox produced a large parchment scroll tied with a bright red ribbon. He yanked the ribbon free, and the scroll unrolled.

And unrolled . . .

And unrolled. . . .

Beth walked over and peered down at it. It was covered in writing from many different hands, some of them even in English.

"Much have I travel'd in the realms of gold/  
And many goodly states and kingdoms seen;  
Round many

western islands have I been/Which bards in fealty to Apollo hold.-J. Keats." She read. "He's the best there is at what he does, even if what he does sometimes isn't very nice.-W. Logan." "Down these mean streets a man must go who is not himself mean.-R. Chandler."

"Ri-i-i-ight," Beth said, sighing. "C'mon, Kory."

"No, wait!" Fox yelped, jumping in front of them. The scroll vanished. "I'm one of the good guys! And you-you're those folks that saved the Sun-Descending Nexus, aren't you?"

There was a hiss as Kory's sword cleared its scabbard.

"Who asks?" the elven knight demanded in a low dangerous voice. Beth stared at him. Hadn't he said it was dangerous to draw steel at the fair?

Fox jumped back in terror or a good imitation, ears flat and eyes wide. "I've got friends-in the World Above. Friends of yours, too." He held his hands wide in a gesture of harmlessness.

"Names," Kory said, his blade still pointed at Fox's throat.

"Keighvin Silverhair-well, he's not really a friend of mine, but I do know somebody who knows him. Tanim. You know-he races cars at Elfhome Fairgrove?"

The names meant nothing to Beth, but they seemed to mean something to Kory. He sheathed his sword again and held out his hand. "The references again."

This time, Fox produced, not a scroll, but a perfectly mundane envelope, with the logo of a Holiday Inn on it. Kory opened the envelope and withdrew a single sheet of paper. Beth read over his shoulder.

"To whom it may concern: Fox is okay. -Tanim."

The words flared bright with magic, and slowly vanished from the page. Kory handed the paper and the envelope back to Fox.

"Very well. But I know your kind, kitsune. The fox kin are tricksters all," Kory said sternly.

"Yeah, but me, I got a soft spot in my heart for suckers," Fox snickered. "And you did say you'd pay."

Kitsune were Japanese fox-spirits, tricksters like Coyote or Raven. But the pranks they played were often harmless, and there were legends of them helping people in need, or so Beth had read.

"I said no such-" Kory stopped himself. "What do you want?"

Fox drew himself up with an elaborate display of unconcern. "Well, I couldn't help noticing when you rode in that you've got some fine trade items with you. Like . . . chocolate?" The kitsune licked its chops with a long pink tongue. "There's this girl I know. She's just crazy about chocolate, and I kind of thought . . ." He looked hopeful and abashed all at once, black-tipped ears swiveling out to the side. Beth wondered if that fur was as soft as it looked.

"If we give you chocolate, will you take us where we need-where we want to go?" Beth asked, catching herself just in time. One lesson that had stuck with her from all her fairy-tale reading was that the Fair Folk could be as literal-minded as any computer, and positively reveled in the chance to lead you into

disaster by doing exactly what you said.

"Hey, pretty lady, I told you: I'm on the side of the angels. Give me chocolate, and I'm yours to command!" Fox said eagerly.

Beth turned back to Bredana and fumbled with the buckle on the saddlebag, reaching inside and pulling out one of the big Hershey bars. They'd brought smaller ones, but it didn't pay to be stingy. She tossed it to Fox, who examined it carefully, held it under his nose as if it were a fine cigar, and then tucked it away inside his jacket, regarding her brightly.

"We need to find an information specialist," she said carefully. "Someone with a lot of access and resources, who can do research on a project of ours and come up with answers. Trustworthy and reliable a plus."

"Woo-hoo!" Fox said. "You don't want much, do you? A research geek who stays bought. I might-might!-know someone like that."

"We don't care what you know," Kory interrupted. "You offered to guide us through the fair to where information about such a person can be found."

"O-kay, Mister Spock-meaning no offense, milord-" How Fox could grovel and look impudent at the same time was a mystery to Beth, but somehow the kitsune managed it. "If that's what you want, that's what you get." He bowed elaborately again, hand over his heart, tails lashing. "Follow me."

They followed Fox into the Fair, past a large sign that read "No Violence Beyond This Point." That explained why Kory had been able to get away with drawing his sword in the parking lot, at least.

The Market was a swirl of distraction and color. Beth held tight to Kory's hand, fearing to lose him in the crowds. This wasn't like Elfland, where, weird as it was, everything seemed to be drawn from the same basic set of givens. The Sidhe were fond of experimenting with their forms, changing shape and size and color to suit a momentary whim, but here, a thousand totally-different realities rubbed shoulders. She saw men in medieval armor as elaborate as Kory's, and others in what she could only think of as space-armor, with blasters at their sides. There were anthropomorphic animals, things that looked like they'd walked right out of the Cantina scene of Star Wars, creatures whose bodies had the bright flatness of two-dimensional cartoons, and others that seemed to be humans (dressed in everything from feathers to blue jeans), or robots, and some who were both, like the woman whose body seemed to be made of golden rings, the featureless face dominated by a glowing turquoise bar where the eyes should have been. She moved with the grace of a dancer, and Beth craned her head to watch until she disappeared from sight.

But the fair-goers, exotic as they were, paled to normalcy beside the stalls of the vendors and the wares they sold. Half the stuff was so weird she couldn't even imagine what it was, other wares were so prosaic it was somehow an even greater shock-like the bookstall displaying a collection of paperbacks that wouldn't have been out of place on the shelves of any Barnes & Noble. The air was filled with smells-cooking food, fresh fruit, perfume, incense, wood smoke-and she heard scraps of music ranging from medieval to heavy metal.

Meanwhile, Fox led them on a twisting trail among the booths. To call their progress labyrinthine would be a grave insult to labyrinths everywhere. She lost all sense of direction after the first few turns, and could no longer tell where they were in relation to where they'd left the elvensteeds.

It was all too much. Beth clutched tighter at Kory's hand, feeling a familiar sense of vertigo and panic begin to overwhelm her. Everything was closing in, crushing her. . . .

No! Beth Kentraine, you are stronger than that! You've shopped at Macy's during the Christmas rush, by the Gods. You are not going to be gotten the better of by one lousy interdimensional Bazaar of the Bizarre!

She took a deep breath and held it, willing the panic to fade. Fox appeared at her side, looking worried.

"You okay?" he asked anxiously.

Kory stopped, looking at her questioningly. She could see fear in his eyes-whether for her, or of the Fair, or both, she wasn't sure. Beth let her held breath out slowly, willing calm.

"It's a little much," she said, and was pleased that her voice was steady.

"There's no place like this place anywhere near this place, so this place must be the place," Fox answered gaily. "Chin up, pretty lady. We're almost there. And you look like you could use a drink."

"A good stiff one," Beth muttered to herself.

They'd been moving in toward the center of the Fair, where tents replaced the booths and were mixed with more permanent structures.

"Up ahead," Fox said, pointing.

Surfeited with wonders, and used as she was to the Under-hill habit of co-opting bits of the World Above and turning them to their own uses, she still wasn't prepared for what she saw when she looked where Fox was pointing. At the end of the lane was a large stucco building in a Moorish style. Its wooden double doors were studded with large square hobnails, and over the door was a blue neon sign that said "Rick's Cafe Americain."

It looked exactly like the Warner's set.

"Everybody goes to Rick's," she and Fox said in chorus. He looked hurt, as if she'd stepped on his punch-line.

"Casablanca used to be one of my favorite movies," Beth said darkly. Humphrey Bogart, where are you when we need you?

"Hey, I didn't design it," Fox protested. "But this is what you guys said you wanted."

"A place to find the specialist we need?" Kory asked suspiciously.

"Rick knows everything that happens at the Market, and a lot of other places, too," Fox said. "He'll know where you can find this researcher-or someone else there will."

Beth looked at Kory and shrugged. She guessed a bar was as good a place as any to start looking, especially when you weren't quite sure what you were looking for.

As they watched, the doors opened, and a large white rabbit stepped out, blinking at the daylight. He

was wearing an elaborate waistcoat, with an ornate watch chain hooked across the front. He pulled a large gold watch from his pocket and gazed at it, then hurried off muttering to himself.

"Come on," Beth said.

"Uh-uh. This is where I leave you," Fox answered. "I'm not . . . well, let's say that Rick would prefer I didn't come inside after what happened the last time. You know how it is."

"The letters of transit are hidden in Sam's piano," Beth said cryptically.

"And Rosebud was his sled," Fox answered, mixing movies with gleeful relish. "Well, see you around."

"Be sure of that, if you've led us astray," Kory answered.

Fox vanished with a pop, like a soap bubble in a cartoon. A moment later, just his head reappeared, floating in midair like a fanciful balloon. "And don't say I didn't warn you," it said, and vanished.

"Although he didn't," Kory footnoted. "Though the Market itself is warning enough, I think."

"I thought I told you not to say that!" Fox reappeared, shaking a finger at them warningly and vanishing again instantly.

Beth shook her head, sighing. "Is everything here like him?" I don't think I can deal with Life As Sitcom.

"We'll see, won't we?" Kory answered. He took her hand once more, and the two of them walked up to the door.

It took a moment for Beth's eyes to adjust to the gloom, but once she did, they widened. The inside had no connection to the tumble-down exterior, nor to the movie Casablanca. It was several times larger than the outside, for one thing. For another, it looked like the unnatural liaison of an MGM musical and a Turkish bordello.

The central area directly ahead was filled with small round tables swathed in immaculate white linen, most of them occupied. Beyond them was a dance floor that looked as if it had been carved from one giant slab of blue goldstone. Its surface glittered like a starfield, and behind it stood a bandstand with an old-fashioned stand mike and a glistening white piano. To the right, the wall was lined with a series of curtained alcoves, their gold draperies shimmering. Some of the curtains were drawn back-Beth couldn't see the occupants very well, but she could see glowing eyes in a variety of colors-and arrangements-and pulled her gaze quickly away.

To her left was the bar-a long glowing sweep of something that looked like purple mahogany. Behind it stood the barkeep, in white dinner jacket and black bow tie, rubbing the surface with an immaculate polishing cloth. He looked just like Humphrey Bogart-if Humphrey Bogart had bright blue skin, long pointed ears and a ponytail.

"That must be Rick," Kory said. Beth nodded. Okay, it's official. I've sprained my Sense of Wonder. . .

As they stood there, two men passed them, leaving. One was huge, muscled like Arnold Schwarzenegger. He had bright red hair and a beard, and was dressed in bearskins and a long red cloak. His companion barely came to his elbow, as small and slender as the other was huge, and dressed all in



gray, down to his hooded cloak.

"I told you we shouldn't have come here, little man," Redbeard said.

"Ah, where's your sense of adventure? Even a barbarian like you-" the rest of Greycloak's rejoinder was lost as they exited.

Funny. Those guys look almost familiar. . . .

"Come on," Kory said. He led Beth to the bar, where they found seats between a red-headed woman carrying a sword and dressed in a bikini that seemed to be made entirely out of silver disks and a six-foot ferret wearing a gold collar and drinking tea in the Russian style.

"What'll you have?" Rick approached them.

"Water," Kory answered, pushing a gold coin across the gleaming wood.

"Lemonade," Beth said. "And information."

"Ah. Drink I've always got." The barkeep brought two tall glasses and a black bottle from beneath the bar, making the coins vanish at the same time. He poured both glasses full-but while Kory's glass was full of clear still water, Beth's was filled with lemonade, sliced lemons, and ice.

"Neat trick," she said.

"It passes the time," Rick said, smiling Bogie's crooked smile. His teeth were long and white and very pointed. "Oh, by the way. A friend left this for you. Said you'd be wanting it."

Beth stared at the blue ceramic ashtray for a minute before the penny dropped. She giggled. "Fox didn't lead us a-stray. He led us to an ashtray. . . ." Incurable punster: do not incorrigible.

She missed the little critter already. Almost.

"And information?" Kory asked.

"Well, now, that depends," Rick drawled. "On who's asking, and what for. Don't believe everything you've heard about this place."

"What I heard is that here we might be able to find a research specialist. We are looking for information."

"If you can't find it in an Elfhome, that must be some information," Rick said. "Well, this is the Cafe Americain. You may find what you're looking for. 'Scuse me." He moved quickly down the bar toward a new customer.

Beth picked up her lemonade. Frost was forming on the glass. She sipped. Tart and sweet, not too much sugar, just the way she liked it. "I wonder what he'd have done if I asked for coffee?" she asked idly.

"Brought you a cup," Kory said. "Or if you had asked for Coca-Cola, or the Red Wine of Hengist, or ambrosia, or human blood. The laws of other realms do not apply here."

"Um," Beth said. An anarchist's paradise-no law but your own common sense. But freedom was a double-edged sword. If you could do anything you wanted, you could manage to get yourself into real trouble, too, with no one and nothing to get you out.

Several musicians had moved onto the stage and were setting up their instruments-a full-sized concert harp, a cello, violins, and a flute. They were all dressed in the height of 17th-century fashion, in lace, pink satin, and powdered wigs, but not one of them was human. There was a badger, a frog, something that looked more like an owl than not-although it had hands and fingers-a sheep, and some others whose species she couldn't place from what she saw. Once everything was arranged, they began to play. The music matched their garb, stately and baroque. Several couples got up from their tables and moved onto the dance floor.

Rick didn't look like he was coming back their way any time soon. "Why don't we go get one of the tables?" Beth suggested. "I'd kind of like to watch the floor show." She picked up her glass.

\* \* \*

The entertainment at Rick's was certainly eclectic. The chamber-music group was followed by a black-leather-garbed crooner doing vintage rockabilly, but in a language Beth didn't know. His face was long and lupine-not quite a wolf, but not human either. More like a B-movie werewolf than anything else, Beth decided.

"You the folks lookin' for help?"

The speaker had slipped into a vacant chair while Beth was watching the stage. She looked-though by now Beth doubted anything here was exactly what it seemed-like a teenaged girl, and though it was hard to hear beneath the music, Beth thought she spoke English with a pronounced American accent. She had fire-engine-red hair with a silver streak in the front; it hung in an unkempt shoulder-length mop, and her eyes were the bright foil-green of Christmas paper. She was wearing a white T-shirt, a black vest, Levis, and motorcycle boots with spurs. Strapped to one leg was a battered and clangingly futuristic firearm.

"We're looking for information," Kory answered warily.

"Same dif." The girl signaled a waitress, who hurried over and set a drink in front of the girl. The drink was pink, with a paper parasol stuck in the top, and it smoked. The waitress hovered pointedly until Kory handed over another gold coin.

"So. Why don'cha tell me a little about yourselves?" The girl picked up her drink-she was wearing white leather driving gloves-and sipped daintily, wincing. "This stuff'll kill you."

"I am Sieur Korendil of Elfhame Misthold, and this is my lady, Beth Kentraine."

"Pleased ta. You can call me Cho-cho. What kind of information?"

"Can you help us find it?" Beth asked.

"Depends. You're Seleighe Court, right? I don't do business with the other guys."

"Would you believe us if we said we were? If we were of the Dark Court, we'd lie," Kory pointed out.

"You lie to me, buster, and you don't get a chance to do it twice," Cho-cho said. "I got connections." For a moment she seemed to shimmer, and Beth felt a flash of cold, as if someone had opened the door to a walk-in freezer. "But we'll take that as a 'yes.' Now. Here's the giggy. You tell me what you want, the more details the better, and I tell you if I can supply it. Then we argue about the price."

"Fair enough, Mistress Cho-cho," Kory answered. "Beth?"

Beth took a deep breath. Telling Ria her problem had been hard enough, but telling this total stranger was downright embarrassing.

"Kory and I want to have a baby together. More than one, actually."

"Mazel tov," Cho-cho said, sipping her drink. "There's more?"

"It takes magic. But the only methods we've been able to find are . . . Unseleighe," Beth said delicately. "We're looking for another way. So we need help. Research help."

"Huh. You wanna find something out, ask a librarian. Or somebody with a library." Cho-cho smiled, as if at a private joke.

"Do you know someone possessing such resources who would be willing to help us?" Kory asked.

"You need another drink," Cho-cho said. She signaled the waitress and turned away from them to watch the stage.

A waitress brought their drinks. The wolf-boy left the stage, to be replaced by a torch singer and her accompanist. The singer was wheeled out onto the stage in a large crystal fishbowl, her silvery tail glinting in the houselights. Her accompanist was a satyr-Chippendales dancer above, goat below. His horns were gilded, and his eyes were elaborately painted in the Egyptian style. The mermaid reached out of her bowl to grasp the mike and began to sing: "Stormy Weather."

Cho-cho sat through a medley of Cole Porter hits in silence. Finally she turned back to them.

"I got a line on a guy," she said. "If he don't know it, he can find it. Whether he'll help, that's between you and him, but he's got a kind of soft spot for humans with problems, and he's on the side of the angels, more or less. What you pay me don't cover what you'll owe him. I can tell you where to find him, that's all."

Beth glanced at Kory. His face was unreadable.

Was this a good idea? A stranger who could help, but might not? On the other hand, she didn't see anyone else lining up to help them. She nodded ever so slightly.

"And your price for this information-his name and his location both?" Kory asked.

"What've you got?" Cho-cho asked with interest.

"Gold?"

She snorted. "I can make that myself."

"Coffee?"

"I look like a wire-head to you, Mister Korendil?"

Kory shrugged. Neither of them knew what a "wire-head" might be, but it seemed to eliminate coffee as a bargaining chip. "I take it then that you would find neither chocolate nor Coca-Cola suitable either?"

For a moment she looked wistful, then shook her head firmly. "Can't use 'em."

"You must have something in mind," Beth said, playing a hunch.

"Sure. Depends on if your friend'll go for it, though."

Kory regarded the girl inquiringly.

"Safe passage through the elven lands."

So it all comes down to "Letters of Transit" in the end, Beth thought wryly. She wasn't sure how big a deal that was, and Kory's face gave nothing away, but Beth thought he'd twitched, just a little.

"And I to stand surety for whatever you do there," Kory said through gritted teeth.

"I don't want to do anything there," Cho-cho said. "All I want . . ." She stopped. "I just want to go home. They need me there."

"Wherever 'home' is, there are other avenues to reach it," Kory said. "From here, you can go anywhere."

Cho-cho shook her head. "You know how it is. 'You can't get there from here'? Believe me, I've tried, for longer than the two of you have been on this earth, kids. The only clear way is through the elven lands . . . and I'd rather not mess with the Dark Court. We got a history, y'see."

Everybody here seemed to have a history of one kind or another. "And where is home?" Beth asked.

Cho-cho grimaced. "You pay for that info, too, if you really want it, and I don't think you can afford it."

"You ask a high price for your help," Kory said.

"You don't have anything else I want," Cho-cho said simply. "Maybe someone else here wants what you got. And maybe they don't have anything you want. Your choice."

Impasse. The two parties stared across the table at each other, neither willing to give in.

"If I were to give you a letter of safe conduct-under guard-to my lord, Prince Arvind of Elfhome Misthold, you might plead your case to him. More I will not do. Nor," Kory added, smiling a wolflike smile, "can I guarantee he will hear you, should he know more of you than I."

There was a long pause. Beth held her breath, afraid that Cho-cho would get up and walk away. "It isn't much," the girl grumbled.

"Nor is what you offer us. Only hope, no more."

"Okay," she said, putting both hands on the table. "We have a deal. You don't mind if I get the goods up front, do you?"

"I would expect nothing less," Kory answered.

Cho-cho snapped her fingers, and an iridescent lizard-maiden with improbable gauzy butterfly wings came over to the table. She had a tray slung around her neck, like the cigarette girls in old-time nightclubs. Beth couldn't see what it held.

"Pen, ink, paper, and seals," Cho-cho said.

It must have been an ordinary sort of request, because the lizard-woman produced the objects without hesitation from among the contents of her tray. Cho-cho pointed, and she set them in front of Kory. He dipped the pen into the inkwell and wrote: the letters sparkled and seemed to sink into the vellum as he inscribed them flourishingly. When he was done, he took off his seal-ring and picked up one of the disks of wax. He placed it on the paper and touched it with a finger. It softened and glistened, suddenly hot, and he pressed the ring into it until the wax began to harden.

Cho-cho reached for it. Kory didn't let go.

"Now you."

Cho-cho sighed. "Okay. This guy I know . . . you know anything about dealing with dragons?"

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Beth asked, quite a long time later.

They were standing in the middle of . . . nothing. Grey river mist surrounded them, thick and warm. It smelled like jasmine. The ground beneath the elvensteeds' hooves was covered with thick white sand. It sparkled whenever the sun broke through the mist above.

It was morning-again. They'd passed through so many different time zones that Beth wasn't completely sure how much time had passed. Elves didn't need sleep, of course, but she had the jet-laggy feeling that it was two million o'clock in the morning. If she fell asleep, Bredana would see to it that she didn't fall off, but Beth was hoping for a real bed. And soon.

Cho-cho had given them a name-Chinthliss-and drawn them a map. Or more precisely, she'd drawn an arrow on a map, but the arrow always pointed in the direction they needed to go. Ahead of them stood a Gate. Kory had examined it. It held only one destination, and Kory thought it led directly into the dragon's lair. Apparently this Chinthliss didn't mind being easy to find, and Beth knew enough about the Underhill way of doing things to know that meant he had power-power enough to deal with any enemies who might come calling.

He also seemed to have a sense of humor.

She looked at the sign that stood beside the Gate again. It was battered and weathered. Painted on it in English in big black letters were the words: "I'd turn back if I were you. Signed, the Management."

"Fair enough," Beth said aloud. "But we aren't going to."

The Gate itself was huge—two stories high, and wide enough to drive a matched team of semis through—and solid bronze. The decoration seemed to be more Oriental than anything else, flowers and birds and branching trees.

"But we are going to be very careful," Kory said seriously. "Dragons are very particular about matters of etiquette. It would not do to annoy him."

"Best behavior and company manners," Beth agreed. She yawned, unable to stifle it.

They dismounted, and led their horses forward past the sign. There was a large square red button at doorbell height at the edge of the frame. Beth was pretty sure it hadn't been there a moment ago. She looked closer. There was writing on it, one word: enter.

"Press 'Enter,'" Beth said. Something with this kind of a sense of humor couldn't be all bad, could it?

Kory pressed the button. With a shudder that seemed to shake the world, the great bronze doors swung inward, opening into mist. Kory reached out and took her hand, and slowly they walked forward, leading the horses.

They were in a hall. Its scale made the doors they'd just come through look petite. The walls were yellow, lined with enormous pillars painted Chinese red, and the floor was black. Burning torches in bronze baskets lined the walls, their glow almost lost in the chamber's vast dimensions. The air smelled of incense. Several football fields of distance away, a long flight of shallow stairs led to a curtained archway. On each step stood a large porcelain cache pot, each filled with a full-sized flowering tree. They were completely alone, and nobody seemed to be rushing to welcome them.

"Now what?" Beth asked in a whisper.

"Now we offer gifts and wait, most respectfully, for that is the first rule when dealing with dragons." Kory turned to Mach Five and opened his saddlebags. He began piling the trade goods they'd brought on the floor in front of them. Beth emptied her saddlebags as well. Four six-packs of Coke, twenty pounds of Hershey bars, and several large bags of whole-bean Jamaica Blue Mountain coffee. They looked very odd sitting in the middle of the floor of a dragon's temple.

"Great Chinthliss," Kory said after a few moments, "please grace us with your presence. We have traveled far to seek your wise counsel."

The curtains opened, and a slender man stepped out and slowly began to walk down the stairs. He was wearing an impeccable Armani business suit in a deep rich bronze, and instead of a regular necktie, a bolo tie around his neck, held closed with a bronze jewel at the throat.

Uh-oh. Looks like he's sending in the high-priced lawyers.

As the man came closer, Beth could see that he had skin the color of old ivory and brilliant amber eyes. His gleaming black hair was almost waist-length, brushed straight back from a high forehead and a deep widow's peak, and his topaz eyes gleamed from beneath heavy lids. He looked vaguely but not entirely Oriental. More like . . .

A brow like Shakespeare and eyes like a tiger . . . Holy Mother, we're having tea with Fu Manchu!

"Enchanté, madame," he said, bowing over her hand. His shirt was linen, with French cuffs, and the cuff

links and the slide of the bolo tie both were in the same design: a curled bronze dragon with gleaming amber eyes. He smelled faintly of burning cinnamon. "How lovely to make the acquaintance of one so fair."

He turned to Korendil, who inclined his head respectfully. "Lord Chinthliss."

"He's the dragon?" Beth blurted, unable to stop herself.

Chinthliss regarded her, one eyebrow raised. Though his expression was bland, Beth could swear he was laughing at her.

"Does my appearance disappoint you, fair lady?" he asked mildly.

"I was expecting someone taller," Beth said, startled into bluntness by lack of sleep.

"Like this?"

The man was gone, his form dissolving like mist. In his place stood a dragon. A very big dragon. A gleaming bronze dragon big enough to fill the entire hall. His tail snaked up the stairs, its tip hidden behind the curtain, and his mantled wings brushed the walls. He lowered his head—it was the size of a bus—down to Beth's eye level, and regarded her with glowing yellow eyes. Tendrils of steam curled from his nostrils, and Beth could feel heat radiating from him as if from a stove.

"Um . . . yeah," she said weakly. "That'll do."

The dragon bared its teeth in a draconic grin.

"Excellent. I would hate to disappoint so fair a guest." The dragon was gone, and in his place stood the Oriental gentleman once more. "But you have come a long way and are weary from your journey. Please. Allow me to offer you the poor comforts of my little house. We can discuss your business after you have rested." He snapped his fingers. Two women appeared, dressed in full kimono. Except for the fact that they were slightly transparent, they looked as if they'd just stepped out of a Japanese scroll painting. "My servants will see to your animals."

The geisha took the elvensteeds' reins and led the horses toward the wall, vanishing before they reached it.

"Come." Chinthliss beckoned, smiling.

They followed him back up the long flight of stairs. Beyond the curtain was . . . a palace. High windows opened onto vistas of exquisite gardens that seemed to stretch into infinity. The walls were covered with painted murals done with such skill that it was hard to tell where the real garden ended and the painted one began. Beth tried not to gawk.

"I trust you will find these poor accommodations to your liking," Chinthliss said, stopping in front of another set of double doors. These were of sandalwood, carved and oiled until they gleamed like gold. They opened at a touch.

"Thank you," Beth said. "You're very kind."

The dragon smiled. "And now I will leave you. Do not hesitate to summon any of my servants to see to

your needs." He bowed.

Beth stepped inside, Kory following. The suite was decorated with as much lavish ornamentation as the rest of the palace, but was obviously scaled to human size and needs. There were Western-style couches and chairs, a bookcase filled with books, and at the far end of the room stood an enormous canopy bed. Golden dragons twined about its ebony posts, and the hangings were all of scarlet silk embroidered in gold. In the center of the room stood a table filled with covered dishes. Whatever they contained smelled wonderful.

"My," Beth said.

"We are safe, for now," Kory said. His sword and armor had vanished, and he was dressed in more ordinary clothes. He approached the table and lifted one of the silver covers.

"Hey, look at this!" Beth had gone through the doorway to the right of the bed. She was standing in a bathroom that any Roman emperor would have killed for. A tub big enough to do laps in stood in the middle of the room. "Big enough for two," she said invitingly, when Kory joined her.

"Yes." Kory put an arm around her. "Why not? It would be churlish of us not to accept what is offered." He walked over to the tub and touched one of the taps-gold, in the shape of a leaping dolphin. Water immediately began jetting from it, filling the tub with hot water and perfumed bubbles. "And then you will eat and rest," he said firmly.

"And after that, business."

Beth couldn't remember the last time she'd slept so well and so deeply. She awoke in the morning-or at least, after long slumber-to the smell of bacon and eggs, and sat up in bed to see more of the semi-transparent servants laying the table for breakfast.

"Good morning," Kory said, sitting down on the bed beside her. "Did you sleep well?"

Elves didn't sleep-not under normal conditions, at any rate. More time for them to get into trouble, Beth had always thought, but lately she'd started to wonder what it was really like to have all that free time. It was almost as if Kory had a secret life, one she couldn't be any part of.

She yawned and stretched, banishing all such vague morning thoughts. "Did you have a good night?"

"The tea was hot, and the books were entertaining," Kory answered seriously. "And I had a great deal of time to think. Dragons are . . . experts at solving the problem we face. He can help us, I think, if he will."

"But what will he want for his help?" Beth said. Kory stood, and she swung her legs over the edge of the bed. "That's the real question, isn't it? Whether we can afford to pay?"

"For your happiness-for Maeve's-I will pay any price, but-"

"But some prices are too high," Beth finished firmly. Nothing that would endanger the elves, or anyone else for that matter. "Well, we'll see."



One of the nice things about magic was that the food was always hot, Beth reflected. They were just finishing-bacon and eggs, blueberry pancakes with real maple syrup, fresh-squeezed orange juice, herb tea-when there was a knock at the door. It opened, and instead of one of the little flowerlike geisha, the travelers were presented with the awesome sight of a Real English Butler in full formal livery.

"Good morning, Lord Korendil, Mistress Bethany. May I trust that you have found everything to your satisfaction?" His accent was as English as the BBC.

"Of course," Kory said graciously. "And we are looking forward to speaking with your master at his earliest convenience."

The butler bowed. "I believe Lord Chinthliss is in the conservatory at this hour. If you would care to accompany me to his receiving room, I shall inform him that you are awake."

Chinthliss's receiving room bore a strong resemblance to the library of an English country gentleman. There was an Oriental rug on the floor, and the oak-paneled walls were lined in books. A massive desk with a top carved from a single slab of green malachite dominated the area before the windows, which gave a magnificent view of a formal garden. If the view didn't match that available from the other windows, Beth didn't mind. This was magic, after all.

As they had been left to their own devices, she wandered around the room. There were some surprises: the elaborate stereo system tucked into one corner-

Nakamichi. Nice. I wonder how he runs it down here without electricity?

The silver-framed photos on the walls were another thing that didn't quite fit in with Beth's notions of a feudal draconic sorcerer: most of them were of race-car drivers, and signed.

Tannim Drake . . . Brian Simo . . . Doc Bundy . . . Fox mentioned someone named Tannim was a friend of Chinthliss . . . can't see Fox driving a race car, somehow.

She looked again at the black-haired young man, caught in the act of giving a grinning thumbs-up in front of his car. The words "Fairgrove Test Driver" could be seen on his coveralls. She'd heard of Elfhame Fairgrove. I guess Eric and I aren't the only ones who've fallen in with elvish companions.

Hanging near the picture of Tannim was a carved rosewood shrine, its doors standing open. Inside, on a small purple velvet pillow, stood another incongruous item: a Ford key, with a Mustang logo key chain. Obviously this was an item the dragon cherished. I don't suppose I'll ever find out the story behind all this.

The door of the study opened, and Chinthliss entered. He was dressed as he had been before, in the height of Western fashion, and this morning had added a set of lightly-mirrored designer shades to his ensemble. You could have dropped him anywhere in Hollywood and not raised a single eyebrow.

"My young friends. I trust you are now refreshed from your journey?" He crossed the room and seated himself behind the vast desk. "And now, what is it that I can do for you? Please, be frank."

How can I be Frank when I'm already Beth? she thought, but while she would certainly have answered Fox that way, Chinthliss seemed far too dignified to descend to the level of a punning contest. She and Kory sat on the chairs arranged in front of the desk.

"I- I'm not sure where to begin," Beth said hesitantly. She glanced at Kory. He shrugged minutely.

"I always find it is best to begin at the beginning," Chinthliss told her.

Begin at the beginning, go on till you get to the end, then stop. Humpty-Dumpty's advice to Alice echoed through her mind. C'mon, Kentraine. You've made harder speeches. Beth took a deep breath and began.

Haltingly, she explained the whole story-about meeting Kory for the first time, her desire to start a family with him, about Maeve, and wanting her to grow up with brothers and sisters around her. It seemed to take a long time to tell, and Beth found herself rambling. Finally she stopped.

"And you, Sieur Korendil?" the dragon asked. "Do you concur?"

"All that she says is true," Kory said. A look of wistfulness crossed his face. "To have children-children of our own . . . that would be a blessing such as I had never hoped for, before I met Beth. Yet some prices are too high to pay."

"Perenor didn't think so," the dragon observed.

"Perenor was wrong," Kory said flatly. "To create new life, yes. But not at the expense of the suffering and death of others."

"Agreed," the dragon said. "And I'm delighted to tell you that my library does contain the information you seek."

"So all we have to do is get inside," Beth said.

Chinthliss raised his eyebrows, and said nothing.

He's waiting for us to offer him something.

Beth thought hard. What could she possibly offer someone of Chinthliss' resources? He didn't need money, that was for sure, and she doubted there was anything the elves could do for him that he couldn't do for himself.

She had an idea.

"That's a pretty nice music system you've got there."

Chinthliss preened. "A gift from a friend."

"Kind of hard to get CDs here, though, isn't it?" she asked idly. "Oh, well, I guess Amazon can ship just about anywhere, these days. And there's always MP3s."

"Alas." Chinthliss looked regretful. "I regret to say that even with all my arts, it has so far been impossible for me to get Internet access here. Computers, you see . . ." He shrugged.

Gotcha! Beth crowed silently.

The horse trading began in earnest.

Chinthliss insisted they remain his guests for the rest of the day, but the following morning saw Beth and Kory on the road once more, headed back for Elfhame Misthold. Without the need to make the side trip to the Goblin Market, the trip home should be relatively short and uneventful.

"This is great!" Beth said. "Chinthliss' library contains every-thing ever written about cross-species reproduction-and he'll let us spend as much time there as we need."

"Once we have met his price," Kory reminded her. "A computer that works Underhill-how are you ever going to deliver such a thing?"

"If his Nakamichi works there, a computer will, too. Computers are mostly plastic these days, and the newest models don't need a phone line to hook up to the net." Beth grinned, sensing victory within her grasp. "All I need to know is where to shop and what to buy. As for finding that out . . . I'm going to consult another expert."

EIGHT:

IT'S A SATURDAY NIGHT

AT THE WORLD

Just as promised, the elvensteeds returned Eric and Ria to the World Above the same day they'd left-or, rather, very late that same night. Eric had never been so grateful for Lady Day's autopilot abilities: he'd done a lot more playing-and -dancing-after the Bardic competition. And it had been a competition as much as a performance, he'd found to his chagrin. Adroviel had led all the performers back out onto the stage to take their bows before the company-and then presented Eric with the golden laurel crown.

After that, the evening had been pretty much a blur, though alcohol wasn't to blame for that this time. But, as Eric had discovered, ambient magic could have much the same effect. . . .

He barely remembered saying good night to Ria at the door to her Park Avenue apartment, and remembered nothing at all after that until he awoke in his own bed with Sunday morning sun shining down on him.

Jumbled unreal memories of leaving Lady Day in the parking lot behind the building, of tiptoeing in past the sleeping Hosea and somehow getting his boots off before he flung himself in bed, surfaced as he lay looking at the ceiling. He was still wearing his Court clothes, and investigation proved that he'd gone to bed with both sword and flute.

But it'd been a heckuva party.

Just so long as there isn't another one any time soon, he thought, stretching. Visits to Underhill are fine, so long as they're just that . . . visits.

He checked the bedside clock as he rolled out of bed: 11:30. Not too bad for the morning after a late

night. He could hear Hosea moving around the apartment. He'd better pull himself together so they could hit up a few of the better gigging sites. There'd be another audition soon, so Hosea could get a performer's license of his own, but not until the middle of August, still a couple of weeks away.

And August means the Sterling Forest Faire will be opening. I wonder if I should make arrangements to play up there for a couple of weekends? It would be fun to introduce Hosea to the Rennie world, and with a little Bardic magic, some of Eric's outfits would fit the Appalachian Bard.

Thinking about Bards made Eric remember Dharniel's comments last night. He wondered how Hosea would take to the idea of being taught by Eric-there was a lot more about his past he'd have to come clean with Hosea about, if he did. He wasn't sure how he felt about that.

I can think about it later.

He stripped off his Court clothes, flinging them into the back of the closet, grabbed his robe, and headed for the shower. When he came out a few minutes later, wet and dripping, he felt a lot more "grounded on the Earth plane," as Beth's friend Kit always used to say.

"Morning," Hosea said, as Eric wandered into the kitchen. "Must've been a pretty fine party last night." He held out Eric's laurel garland.

"Um . . . thanks." Eric took it. The leaves were made of pure gold, twined with a silver ribbon on which elvish letters burned with blue fire. Not your ordinary sort of party favor.

How do I explain this? How do I explain any of this? Suppose Hosea doesn't want me for a teacher?

He tucked the crown under one arm awkwardly.

"There's coffee brewing. Looks like you could use a cup. Oh, and someone named Margot came by and dropped off something for you. Looks like a letter."

Although with Margot one can never be sure. Eric cracked wise, if only to himself. He'd been Overhill long enough now to have gotten back his coffee habits-and had already needed the caffeine more than once. "I'll look at it after I get dressed," he said, and made a less-than-graceful exit from the conversation.

Dressed, caffeinated, and with the last evidence of his Underhill sojourn tucked safely out of sight, Eric adjourned to the living room, where Hosea was reading a book. He set his cup down on the coffee table and picked up the envelope.

It said "Eric" on it in bright purple calligraphic ink, and the envelope was liberally dusted with spray-on glitter. Definitely a Margot touch. It wasn't sealed. He opened it and pulled out a glittery violently purple sheet of paper.

"Calling the Usual Suspects: Lammas Party Next Saturday! 7:00 till Sanity intercedes! Bring yourself, bring a friend, bring munchies! Venue: the Basement!"

Every few weeks most of the building's tenants got together for a sort of informal mixer down in the building's basement. While only a minority of Guardian House's tenants were Wiccan, the eight festivals of the Wiccan year fell approximately 45 days apart, making a convenient schedule for parties.

Eric passed the flyer to Hosea. "You're certainly welcome to come-the building is mostly artists, so we tend to show off our latest work, play a little music, unwind a bit."

"Sure," Hosea said, passing it back. "Be mighty nice to meet a few more of the neighbors."

\* \* \*

Hard to believe I was in Elfland just a week ago today, Ria thought, staring down at the mound of work on her desk. All the glamour-in the oldest sense of the word-seemed pretty far away when she was staring at the latest pile of paperwork on her desk. And she'd cross-her-heart promised to show up at a party Eric's friends were having at Guardian House later tonight.

Not her usual sort of entertainment; Ria's tastes ran more to the thoroughly civilized, such as ballet and opera. But there was no denying that Eric's friends were likely to be an engag-ing crowd . . . and that Eric was the main attraction.

Their relationship was an interesting one . . . doomed, you might say. Eric was a thoroughgoing do-gooder and idealist, believing, like Spider-Man, that with great power came great responsibility. Ria was more of a pragmatist: stone-cold dead cuts recidivism by 100%.

And they were opposites in so many other ways, too. She thought Eric was too trusting. He thought she was paranoid. She liked a mannered, organized life. Eric Banyon was the original free spirit. She thought that discipline was the most important thing about making your way through life. Eric thought that Love conquered all. LlewellynCo-a billion-dollar multinational-was her entire life. Eric had no idea what he was going to do with his life once he got out of Juilliard. Ria hobnobbed with presidents and kings. Eric hung out with elves and street musicians.

Insurmountable. But somehow they were making it work-so long as each of them took care not to step too far into the other's life. But how long could they keep up this balancing act? Eventually Eric would be done with his schooling, and she'd be done with her work on the East Coast. What then?

You're daydreaming like a schoolgirl, Ria. She sighed, shaking her head, and reached for the file in front of her.

The phone rang. Ria reached for her desk phone before she realized her cellular was ringing. She'd set it to roll over calls from the apartment. But who could be calling?

"Ria Llewellyn."

"Ria? It's Elizabet."

Elizabet Winters was the Healer who had saved Ria's life. In mundane life, Elizabet was a psych therapist with the LAPD, dealing with crime victims and other trauma cases. She and her apprentice and adopted daughter, Kayla Smith, had brought Ria back from coma and insanity in the wake of the battle for Elfhame Sun-Descending.

"Elizabet!" she said warmly. "How wonderful to hear from you. Are you in town?"

The other woman chuckled. "No such luck. I'm stuck behind my desk with an ever burgeoning caseload. No, I'm calling about Kayla. I wanted to let you know that she's decided to take you up on your offer. I think its fair to warn you that the child still has champagne tastes."

Ria laughed. "So she's decided on a college and a major? Where?"

"Columbia," Elizabet said. "She got the acceptance letter last week. They've got a good computer school. She's thought the matter over carefully and decided she wants to train to be a Web designer."

"Well, she'll never lack for employment," Ria answered. More to the point, Web designer was a solitary profession with odd hours. Though Kayla's great Gift was Healing, you couldn't set yourself up as a free-lance medic without running into legal trouble, and even if Kayla'd had the patience, taking a medical degree to legitimate her skills would have been nothing more than a quick trip to early burnout or even death. A Healer and Empath needed a lot of time alone to process the pain from those she touched. There were going to be a lot of times when she'd really need to get away from people altogether, and Web designer would be a career where she could tailor both her hours and her interactions with others.

"And certainly I can cover her tuition. Just have the billing office get in touch with me. Which dorm will she be in?"

"Well, that's another thing I wanted to talk to you about." Elizabet sounded hesitant. "Columbia doesn't really have a lot of student housing, and I'm not really sure I'd be all that comfortable with Kayla around a couple of hundred other teenagers. She's a great kid, and of course she wrote the book on street smarts, but I think sometimes that we just tend to forget that she is a kid. I was hoping more for a situation where she'd have some adult supervision."

I think I know where this is going. Of course Elizabet was right-dropping an Empath into a cauldron of teenaged angst would be like dropping a firecracker into a tank of gas, personality issues aside. And Ria owed both Kayla and Elizabet so much that anything she could do in return would never be enough.

"I'll be happy to keep an eye on her," Ria said. "I've got a huge apartment that I hardly ever see. I'll be glad to have her stay with me."

Elizabet let out a sigh of relief. "I was hoping you'd say that," she said. "I know that babysitting a teenager is nobody's idea of fun . . ."

"Kayla's hardly your typical teen. And street-smart or not, she's never seen anything like New York before. Here, I'll give you my home address. Just crate her stuff up and ship it when you're ready. I'll be sure to meet her plane."

"You're a doll, Ria!"

They chatted for a few minutes more about various things, and Ria gave Elizabet the address of her Park Avenue apartment-and be damned to the co-op board if they don't like it; I can always buy the building!-and several emergency phone numbers. She also made a promise that they both knew was empty: that she'd do her best to keep Elizabet's young apprentice out of trouble. Kayla was drawn to trouble as the moth to the flame.

What am I getting myself into? Ria wondered as she hung up the phone.

What am I getting myself into? Eric wondered, not for the first time that week. He still hadn't been able to bring himself to mention the idea of becoming Hosea's mentor to Hosea; every time he rehearsed the

words in his head they ended up sounding arrogant and stupid. But the longer he delayed, the guiltier he felt. Tonight. At the party or after. For sure.

They'd made the rounds of the usual spots this afternoon. The take was a little lower than usual-it was August, and a lot of Gothamites were fleeing the city for cooler climes-but still respectable. Hosea had insisted on knocking off early; he had a recipe he wanted to try for the party tonight. He'd called it "pocket dumplings," but when he described them, Eric recognized the recipe for Cornish pasties. Makes sense. Just about everyone from that neck of the woods hailed from the British Isles originally. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if there wasn't a Grove tucked away somewhere in those hills . . .

So they'd gone shopping, and then Hosea had firmly shooed Eric out of the kitchen. "I've seen what a kitchen looks like once you're done with it, Mister Bard. You just do your part and eat what I cook."

Eric had wandered around the living room for a while, unable to settle. He thought about going for a walk, but the idea held little charm-Manhattan in August was hazy, hot, and humid, and he hated the thought of leaving his spell-driven air conditioning.

I wonder how Jimmie's doing? He hadn't seen her in the last couple of weeks; she'd been working on Friday when they'd had their get-together. But Paul had told him her schedule, and she should be home now. He decided to go see her, maybe cadge a cup of tea.

A few minutes later he was standing in front of her door. He knocked gently, and after a few minutes heard her walking down the hall. She opened the door.

"Eric. How are you?" She tried for a smile and missed. Eric tried to keep from looking as shocked as he felt. Jimmie looked like something the cat had dragged in-deep puffy black circles under her golden eyes, and lines in her face that hadn't been there a month earlier.

"I've come at a bad time," he said.

"No." She opened the door wider. "Come on in. Really."

He stepped past her, into the hall. It was lined with shelves full of books on every conceivable subject-Jimmie Youngblood was a voracious reader.

In the living room window, an elderly a/c wheezed and thundered, working hard to cool the room. Eric walked over to it and touched it lightly. He reached out with his power, asking it to remember the days when it was new. It instantly began to purr quietly, and the temperature dropped appreciably.

Jimmie sighed in relief. "Thanks. You could make real money doing that."

"If I ever need a second job," Eric said. "But are you sure this isn't a bad time? 'Cause frankly, Scarlett, you look like hell."

Jimmie shrugged. "Going from days to nights is always hard, and I haven't been sleeping well. It's not the nightmares. That charm you did for me worked fine, and they haven't come back. I've just got this feeling of impending doom. Every morning I wake up expecting to go into the bathroom and see a banshee doing laundry in my sink."

Eric smiled at the feeble joke. Legend held that those who saw a banshee washing her bloody garments were doomed to die within the fortnight. "But neither Greystone or the House has noticed anything?"

"Nothing," Jimmie answered tiredly. "I'm starting to wonder if I'm turning into one of those cranky old ladies who goes around prophesying the end of the world."

"Not you," Eric said gallantly. "Are you sure there isn't anything I can do to help? I mean, I know I'm not a -Guardian-"

"You wouldn't want to be," Jimmie interrupted, cutting him off. "Once you get the Call, your life doesn't belong to you any more. You never know where you're going to be sent, or what you'll have to do. And it's not like there's an instruction manual for being a free-lance occult do-gooder. Sometimes I wish there was." She walked into the kitchen and came back a few moments later with two tall glasses clinking with ice. "Tea. Or as Grandma used to say, 'sweet tea.' "

Eric took his glass and sipped. It was sweet-sweet and cold and delicious, tasting faintly of mint.

"The secret, so she told me, was to put the sugar into the hot tea, so it dissolves completely. Then add the mint, wait for it to cool on its lonesome, and chill. I sure do miss her. She came up North to take care of us kids after Mama died, and never stopped complaining about Yankee ways until the day she died."

"You've never said much about your family before," Eric said.

"That's because I don't have one anymore-well, outside of Toni and the guys. And you, Eric. You've been a real friend. I'm glad the House chose you," she said, sitting down on the couch beside Eric.

"Me, too," Eric said. He sipped his tea. "Hosea's cooking for the party tonight, and suggested I could be of the most use by making myself absent." He hesitated, wondering if he should mention that he might be taking Hosea on as an apprentice. "When a Guardian trains their successor . . ." he began.

He was interrupted by a healthy snort of laughter from Jimmie. "Oh, my! I just wish we did! But that's not the way it works for us. If we're lucky, we get to meet our successor and pass on the Call in person, but that's about it. Usually it arrives like a bolt out of the blue, and then it's sink or swim time."

"Doesn't sound really efficient," Eric said, probing gently.

Jimmie grinned, savoring a private joke. "Who are we to argue with the Powers that Be's way of doing business? But seriously. There's no way to train for this job. You can either handle it, or someone else comes along pretty quick to -replace you, on account of you taking a quick trip on the hurry-up wagon. Of course, you can spend a long time fooling yourself. I was pretty stubborn when my Call came. Thought I was losing my mind. It's different for everyone. Paul stepped right up like he was born to it when his Call came-but then, he'd been involved in the occult for years. I was just a dumb street cop." She drained her glass in several long swallows and set it down on the floor beside the couch. "And I sure wish I could shake this case of the blue-devils. I even took your advice . . . I did something I swore I'd never do."

Eric raised his eyebrows inquisitively. Jimmie sighed.

"I tried to get ahold of my brother. All I had was a P.O. box address from about a dozen years back. I wrote to it. But he never wrote back. I could use my contacts on the Force, maybe; see if he's Inside somewhere. But I don't really want to rake up old bones at the Job. Y'know, sometimes it doesn't seem like it when the Post gets going, but there's nothing a good cop hates more than a bad one."



Eric waited, sensing there was more to say. But if there was, Jimmie drew back from it.

"He didn't even resign. Just disappeared when Internal Affairs came calling. Damn near broke Dad's heart."

And yours, Eric thought, but didn't say so.

"So what's the deal, Eric? You look like somebody with something on his mind besides my little problems."

"Yuh got me, podnuh," Eric said. "It's not really a problem. It's just . . . Hosea came to New York looking for someone to train him as a Bard. And I've got an awful feeling I'm it."

"Can you?" Jimmie asked, cutting to the chase.

"Yeah, well, technically . . . yes. My teacher thinks so, anyway."

They sat in silence for a few moments. Eric could almost hear Jimmie thinking it over.

"So, don't you like him?" she asked.

"Sure I do," Eric said quickly, leaping to Hosea's defense. "He's a great guy. It's just that . . . what if I screw up?"

He'd never been responsible for anyone but himself, not even Maeve. That was what it came down to. She was Kory and Beth's. Not his. Saving the world was one thing (though he wasn't over-confident about his abilities there, either, if truth be told), but crises tended to boil up and blow over pretty quickly. Taking on an apprentice was a long-term commitment to another person-and at Juilliard, he'd had ample chance to see the harm that a bad teacher could do.

"What if you don't-screw up, I mean?" Jimmie asked reasonably. "Spend all your time worrying about what might happen, and you'll never get anything done. Good advice. I ought to take it sometime," she said broodingly.

"I'm sure you'll figure this out eventually," Eric said. It sounded like hollow comfort, even to him. "Maybe it's all blown over and this is just the aftershocks. Meanwhile, why not come to the party this evening? Shake off that gloom'n'doom feeling?"

"I should," Jimmie said. "I will. Wouldn't miss the chance to sample your friend's masterwork."

She forced a smile, and the talk turned to other things.

The basement was already full when Eric and Hosea came down, balancing two large cookie sheets covered with warm, golden-brown pasties. Alex was there, talking computers with Paul, and Margot and Caity were spreading a paper tablecloth over the top of the washing machines, converting them to a makeshift buffet for the evening.

The basement of Guardian House ran the entire length of the building. Part of it was walled off, forming the "magical bunker" that Toni had told Eric about in his first days in the building, and there was even an

apartment down here-a small studio, its only access to the outside world a high narrow strip of windows along one wall. No one lived there; it'd been vacant since her predecessor's time, Toni had told him once, and was now used for storage.

Eric introduced Hosea to the others. Tatiana-in full war paint and more trailing shawls than Isadora Duncan-camped and vamped at him, cooing about "big, strong men" until Hosea actually blushed. Seeing that, she relented, and went off to get them drinks from the bar-by-courtesy, though aside from a couple of bottles of wine, there was nothing stronger than fruit punch there.

By the time Ria arrived, the party was in full swing. Someone had brought down a boombox, and a World Music sampler-mostly ignored-vied for attention with the fragmented sounds of various musicians trading licks. The live music usually came later in the evening, when everyone had mellowed out and finished exchanging gossip and news. Hosea's pasties had vanished early on, but Toni had brought empañadas-a Puerto Rican -specialty-and Paul had brought a couple gallons of the Famous Punch (a mixture of exotic tropical fruit juices, savory and non-alcoholic). Eric had a glass of it in his hand when he "felt" Ria arrive, and went upstairs to guide her down.

"Cozy," she said, looking around the basement. "Done in early catacomb?"

She was wearing a pale gray silk business suit and looked like the well-tailored heroine of an Alfred Hitchcock movie. She had on a pair of green jade earrings that played up the green of her eyes, and her ice-blonde hair was held back by a wide clip of the same material.

"Think of it as a trendy after-hours club," Eric said cheerfully. "C'mon. I'll get you a drink."

"I brought my own," Ria said, brandishing a large bottle of white wine. "After the day I've had, I could use a drink."

"Trouble?" Eric said, leading her over toward the buffet.

"More in the line of chickens coming home to roost. You remember Kayla, Elizabet's student?"

"How is she?" Eric asked.

"Starting school at Columbia this fall. And living with me while she does."

Eric was startled into laughter. "The punkette and the Uptown Lady-how'd you get rooked into that one?"

Ria looked faintly cross. "Elizabet asked me, as a favor. She doesn't want Kayla living in the dorm, and wants somebody local keeping an eye on her. L.A.'s a long way from New York."

"And you're elected," Eric said.

"I volunteered," Ria corrected him. "But as for what I'm going to do with her when I get her here . . ." She sighed, shrugging. "How bad can it be? But I've got to say, what I know about teenagers you could engrave on the head of a very small pin."

"Well, she's not exactly your ordinary teenager," Eric said, imagining Kayla in Ria's posh uptown apartment. Let's just hope she doesn't decide to redecorate. "Kayla's a good kid. And like you said: how bad can it be?"

"I'm sure I'll find out," Ria said darkly. "And pretty soon, too: Elizabeth's going to send her out here as soon as she can get a cheap flight so she can settle in and get her shields up to speed."

Though Los Angeles was a major city, it was far more sprawling than New York was. Manhattan's population density would pose special problems for an Empath and Healer.

"You know you can count on me for help. Babysitting, and so forth." He expertly peeled the wrapper off the neck of the bottle and twisted the cork out, pouring a plastic cup half-full for Ria.

"I'll remember that," Ria said. "And if you're good, I won't tell Kayla that's what you said."

"Truce!" Eric cried, throwing up his hands in mock surrender. "The last thing I want is to have Punky Brewster mad at me. C'mon, I'll introduce you around."

The tenants were mostly cool-there were only a couple of remarks of the "you're that Ria Llewellyn?" sort-and finally Eric steered her over to where Hosea was.

He was leaning against the wall, his banjo slung across his chest, intently trading riffs with Bill, a guitarist and sometime member of various Soho bands.

The two of them waited politely until the musicians had finished, then Eric caught Hosea's eye. "Hosea, Bill-I'd like you to meet Ria Llewellyn. She's a friend of mine."

There was a moment as Hosea and Ria sized each other up, each recognizing the power in the other. Then Hosea held out his hand.

"How do you do, Miss Llewellyn. Eric's said a bit about you, all good."

"Pleased to meet you," Ria said. "Are you still looking for an apartment?"

"Yes, ma'am," Hosea said. "But at the prices you cityfolk are charging, you'd think I wanted to buy the place, not just live there."

Even the most run-down studio apartment in a bad Manhattan neighborhood rented for \$600-800 a month, and some Gothamites were paying a couple thousand a month for a place smaller than Eric's living room.

"I may have a solution, at least a temporary one. LlewellynCo is going to be putting up some new low-cost housing on the Lower East Side as an anchor point for redevelopment of some pretty grungy neighborhoods. We're relocating the current tenants, of course, but it's going to be November or so -before the building's actually condemned. Meanwhile, the place is standing half empty. I'd been going to put in a security guard-idle real estate being the devil's workshop-but if you'd like to move in and keep an eye on the place until we raze it, you'd have a place to stay-free-and I wouldn't have to worry about squatters moving in and making trouble for the remaining tenants." She smiled hopefully at Hosea.

Wow. She sure played that one right, Eric thought in admiration. He knew Hosea wouldn't even consider taking charity, but Ria'd figured out a way to offer him a free apartment that he'd still be paying for, in a sense-and she wasn't lying when she said she'd need someone looking after the place.

He watched Hosea carefully turning the offer over in his mind, considering it from all angles. Finally he

smiled. "That'd be a kindness, Miss Llewellyn. I've been taking up Eric's couch for too long already. I expect he'd like his living room back."

"It's no problem," Eric protested. A guilty twinge reminded him he still hadn't suggested to Hosea that he take him on as a pupil, and part of him realized that Hosea having his own place would make that easier. Emotions between teacher and student could sometimes run high, and it was better not to add that dynamic to the fact of living under the same roof.

"Why don't you come down to the office on Monday?" Ria said, fishing a business card out of her jacket. "I'll make sure Anita has the keys; she can run you over there and get you settled in. There should be enough cast-off furniture there to take care of you, otherwise we can just rent some for a few months. You don't want to be sleeping on the floor. I've been there-some of the roaches are big enough to saddle and ride."

Hosea grinned, tucking the card into his shirt pocket. Unwanted insect life was no problem for a Bard-a few tunes, and the critters tended to go elsewhere. But he only thanked her again for her kindness.

The party broke up around two. Ria had left earlier, pleading a heavy workday on the morrow. Eric and Hosea stayed to help with clean-up-despite her promise to attend, Eric hadn't seen Jimmie Youngblood anywhere tonight-and then headed upstairs.

"Y'know," Eric said tentatively, once they'd gotten into the apartment, "there's something I've been meaning to bring up with you, but I didn't know just what to say."

Hosea stopped and regarded him placidly. "Ayah, you've been looking as broody as a hen with one chick for nigh on a week. Guess it'll be easier now that I'm moving on."

"It's not that," Eric said quickly. "It's . . . when I went to that party the other week, I got a chance to talk to my old teacher. I knew you were looking for somebody to train you as a Bard, and I thought he might be able to recommend somebody."

Hosea waited, listening intently.

"He did. Me."

He saw Hosea wait for the punch line, realize there wasn't one, and consider the matter. "Would you be willing to do that?" he asked in his slow mountain drawl. "'Cause I don't think you could pass me the shining without you was willing, and I can't think of any way I could pay you back, leastways not for a long while."

"Don't even think about paying me," Eric said firmly. "You don't pay this back. You pay it forward. The question is, do you want me to teach you, if I can? I've never done anything like this before."

The anxiety with which he waited for Hosea to answer surprised Eric. Somewhere between here and Maeve's Naming Day, it had come to matter to him very much that Hosea think Eric worthy of being his teacher. He valued his new friend's opinion that much.

Hosea grinned. "Then I guess we've got a lot to learn together, Mister Bard." He stuck out his hand. "Let's shake on it."

Eric took his new student's hand. "Done deal. I'll teach you everything I know, however much that turns

out to be. And I guess I'll be learning a lot of things, too."

Patience is the first lesson a teacher learns. A memory of Dharniel's voice echoed in his mind. "We can start as soon as you're settled into your new digs."

On Monday mornings Eric didn't have any classes until after noon, and he usually took advantage of that fact by sleeping late. "Morning person" was not in his job description, and even busking with Hosea, they generally skipped the morning rush-hour crowds.

This morning was different.

Screams woke him-no, not screams. Scream. The House itself was screaming, a soundless air-raid-siren wail of protest. And beyond that, audible to his ears and not his mind, the sound of a door slamming, over and over.

:Scramble! All units scramble!: he heard Greystone shout in his mind. He lunged out of bed and flung himself into the living room, clawing his hair out of his eyes.

Hosea wasn't there. The front door was slamming itself rhythmically and springing open again.

:Greystone!: Eric mind-shouted. There was no answer.

He couldn't stop the House's alarms, but he could shut them out with a spell of his own. He did so automatically, and as it faded to a thin wail of protest, he apported the first clothes that came to mind-the jeans and T-shirt he'd been wearing last night-and ran for the door. It banged open and stayed that way as he passed through it.

Several of his fellow tenants were standing in the hall in various states of dress from business suits to nudity, all talking agitatedly at once. Most of them seemed to feel there'd been either an explosion or an earthquake, unlikely though the latter was for New York. Someone-he didn't stop to see who-was holding a broadsword, its blade glowing a deep black-light purple.

Eric lunged down the stairs, barefoot, taking them three at a time. He was heading for the lobby. Whatever the source of the disturbance was, it was there. He could feel it.

But when he reached the ground floor, all he saw was Hosea, standing there in bewilderment. He had his duffle bag and his banjo with him.

Of course. He was going to pick up the keys from Ria today.

The wailing was louder here, loud enough to pierce his hush-spell. As Eric reached the lobby, Toni came charging out of her apartment. She was wearing an apron and carrying a baseball bat.

"Get back in there!" she shouted behind her at her two boys. The door slammed shut the way Eric's had.

"What?" she demanded, staring around wildly, looking for the threat.

"All I did-" Hosea began.

Footsteps on the stairs behind Eric told him that the other Guardians were coming. Paul had obviously been in the shower when the alarm came-his hair was still full of shampoo and he wore nothing other than a terry-cloth bathrobe. José had been asleep-he was wearing a pair of striped pajamas and looked as confused as Eric felt. As for Jimmie, she arrived with gun drawn, looking as if she hadn't slept yet.

"All I did-" Hosea began again. He took another step back from the door.

"Enough. Quiet," Toni said, though not to them. Eric breathed a sigh of relief as the wailing ceased.

:I dunno, Boss. It's quiet as church on Sunday out here. Gotta be something inside: Greystone said, cutting Eric in on his side of the conversation.

"What's going on?" Jimmie demanded. The four Guardians seemed to commune silently for a moment.

José ran a hand through his disordered hair. "I've never heard anything like that in my life. It even woke the little ones," he said, speaking of his beloved parrots.

"As well as everyone else in the building, Sensitive or no," Paul said tensely. "You might have a little explaining to do, Toni."

"What was-or is-it?" Toni demanded, more sharply this time.

Jimmie slowly lowered her gun. Eric heard the click, loud in the stillness, as she put the safety on.

By now several of the tenants had reached the first floor. Without seeming even to notice the gathering in the lobby, they hurried past them and out the front door, to cluster in a tight knot on the sidewalk staring anxiously back at the building.

"Well, if that don't beat all," Hosea said, gazing at the door with surprise. "It was locked when I tried it just a moment ago."

"Locked?" Jimmie said. "It's never locked from the inside."

The exodus of tenants had ceased and the door had swung closed again. Jimmie walked over to the door and grasped the handle. It opened easily. She stared at the others in confusion.

"Try it again," she said to Hosea, stepping back from the door.

He glanced back at Eric, who nodded.

As Hosea approached the door, they all felt the House tense, as if preparing to give voice again.

"Wait," Toni said. Hosea stopped, his hand inches from the door. "You try it," she said to Eric.

Shrugging, Eric walked over to the door. He hesitated for a moment, steeling himself for the psychic equivalent of an electric shock, but there was nothing. The door opened silently and easily. He opened and closed it several times. Nothing.

"No one else had any problem; neither Bard, Guardian, nor civilian. Only this young man," Paul said.

"I think we'd better find out why," Toni answered grimly. She glanced out at the cluster of people on the

sidewalk.

"You figure out what to tell them, and with Eric's permission, we'll convene a council of war at his place-in, say, about fifteen minutes?" Paul said.

"Sure. No problem. I'll put up some coffee." And maybe get my heart started again. "C'mon, Hosea. No point trying to leave now."

\* \* \*

The hallway outside the apartment was empty when Eric and Hosea reached it. Eric's door swung open peremptorily as soon as they reached the top of the stairs, but, to his relief, stayed still and allowed him to close it himself. He didn't bother to lock it. He'd just had a taste of how very efficient the House's security systems were.

"Just the way I'd want to start a Monday morning," he said, sighing. He looked at Hosea with what he hoped was a reas-suring smile. "I know you're going to have to go over it again when the others get here, but . . . what did you do?"

Hosea looked troubled, and when he spoke his Appalachian drawl was thicker than Eric had ever heard it. "Nothing I ain't done most every other morning. I figured I'd just take my traps with me when I went down to Miss Llewellyn's office, and that way I wouldn't have to double back to get them. So I locked up, same as I always do, and when I got to the front door, it was locked. And all of a sudden, something started hollering in my head." He shook his head ruefully. "I hope Miss Hernandez ain't too put out with me. That woman's got a temper on her when she's bothered, and that's the certain truth."

Eric regarded Hosea, puzzled. He knew the other man was telling the truth-and the whole truth, as he knew it, at that. Unfortunately, it didn't answer any of Eric's questions.

"Why should everyone else be able to leave and not you? Why this time and none of the others?"

It was a question still unanswered half an hour later, as Eric, Hosea, and the four Guardians-with Greystone listening in from his perch outside the window-gathered in Eric's living room. Toni had given the other tenants the cover story that there'd been an explosion in the boiler that provided the building's steam heat, but that it was all taken care of now and the building was perfectly safe. The explanation would do as long as nobody thought too closely about it, though of course, those who had sensed the House's alarm for more or less what it was would have to be told something more. And the six of them were no closer to the truth than they had been downstairs.

"So what was different about this time?" Jimmie asked Hosea.

The country Bard shook his head in bafflement. "Nothing I know of. I was going to go and get settled in to my new place, and then come back here to pick up Eric-you know, so we could go busking in the subway?"

"Wait a minute," Jimmie said slowly. "What 'new place'?"

"I'm moving out. Miss Ria, Eric's ladyfriend, she offered me a place to hang my hat for a few months, an-"

"That's it," Paul said, interrupting him. "It's got to be. It's the only thing that's changed. This time you weren't just going out for a few hours. You were leaving."

The six of them looked at each other.

"Well, now we know that much," Toni said sourly. "Not that we know anything at all."

"We know that the House doesn't want Hosea to leave," Jimmie said slowly. The four Guardians looked at each other. "And we know what that means."

"No we don't," Eric said. "At least, the two of us don't."

Jimmie and Toni looked at each other, and again Eric had that sense of unspoken communication. After a long moment, Jimmie answered him.

"You know that the House picks its tenants for its own inscrutable reasons. If it wants you, you can stay. When it doesn't want you, you go—you have to. But sometimes, it really wants somebody. And when it does, it encourages them—strongly!—to stay. My guess is that your friend here wasn't taking the hint. So it stopped hinting—and yelled."

"But there are four of us," José said, as if continuing a different conversation. "There've never been more than four. Why him? Why now?"

The House wants Hosea? As a Guardian? Eric thought blankly. José couldn't mean anything else.

"It's not as if there's a hard-and-fast set of rules about this sort of thing," Paul offered, looking thoughtful. "There are four of us, and as we know, that's a lot of Guardians to gather in one place. Why not five?"

"No vacancies?" Toni suggested. "The place is full, Paul. Every apartment's rented, and they're all good people. Who am I supposed to evict?"

"There's that studio in the basement," Eric said. "You could clean that out. We'd help."

"Just a doggone minute, here," Hosea said. "What's this all about?"

"I think," Eric said slowly, "that it's about you joining the Occult Police. Becoming a Guardian."

"I can't do that!" Hosea protested. "I ain't a-a—" He groped for the word. "A root doctor like you folks. I got me a little shine, sure, but I'm a Bard—leastways, I'm gonna be one as soon as Eric here gets to training me. Right now I don't know much of anything."

The four Guardians looked at each other again.

"Well," Paul said, "it does look like you're going to have the time to learn whatever it is you're here to learn, my young friend. Because no matter for what purpose the House wants you, I truly don't believe you'll be allowed to leave until you agree to stay."

"As much sense as that makes," Jimmie offered.

"The basement apartment's not much, but I can get it cleaned out and painted by the end of the week,"



Toni said. "Then it's yours."

"I don't want no charity," Hosea said, looking stubborn. "I've got a place to go to, all ready and waiting for me. I don't have to stay here."

Oh, brother! Eric thought. No wonder the House'd had to shout, if that was how Hosea had been responding to its gentler suggestions.

"You may be stubborn as a pig in mud, but I guarantee, this place is stubborner," Jimmie said. "Don't pick a fight you can't win, Hosea."

"Por favor," José begged. "For the sake of my little ones. And to spare me another awakening like this one."

Toni was looking at Hosea critically. "Well, maybe you're wrong, Jimmie. As far as I can tell, he hasn't been Called." The others nodded agreement, seeing something Eric couldn't. "But the House wants him to stay. Mr. Songmaker, would you consider doing us all a very great favor and staying on until we can get this sorted out? The rent won't be much for that small a studio, and I've got a certain amount of latitude in what I charge, anyway. Eric tells me you'll be getting your busking license soon, and I can wait for the rent until then. Besides, if you do stay, I won't have to wake José up any time I need some heavy lifting done," she added with a grin.

Hosea still hesitated.

"Do it," Eric said firmly. "I don't want another wake-up call like that one, either. We need the time to figure this out."

"I hate to disappoint Miss Ria that way," Hosea said tentatively.

"She'll survive," Eric said. "You aren't irreplaceable there. But it looks like you are here."

"Well . . . okay," Hosea said. "I accept your kind offer, Miss Hernandez. And I'd just like to say that I'm sorry for putting you good folks to all this trouble on my account."

"Don't mention it," Jimmie said, smiling crookedly. "Battle, murder, and sudden death our specialty. And I'm just as glad to know that we aren't going to have to find out what kind of crisis requires five Guardians on tap."

"It's settled, then," Toni said briskly. "C'mon, Hosea. You can help me empty that place out and figure out where to stow all that junk." She got to her feet.

"I guess I'll go knock on a few doors and reassure our Sensitives that the Last Trump hasn't blown," Paul said, also getting to his feet.

Toni and Hosea left, and in a few moments the others followed.

"Hey, Jimmie? A word?" Eric said, as she prepared to follow them out.

Jemima Youngblood stopped and turned back to Eric, closing the door.

"What's really going on here?" he asked. "Is Hosea a Guardian now, or what?"

"I wish I knew," Jimmie said, sounding as puzzled as Eric felt. "I've never heard the House alarms go off like that for anything else-not even the time it suckered that child molester into the basement so we could deal with him quietly, or the time one of our other tenant's guests found his ritual tools and decided it'd be fun to conjure up a demon. But . . . you recognized Hosea as-what? a fellow Bard?-the first time you laid eyes on him. Well, it's the same for us. One Guardian always knows another. And as far as that recognition factor goes, Hosea isn't a Guardian. I just wish I knew what the House knows that we don't."

Yeah. Me, too, Eric thought. "Oh, well. At least he'll be close by for his Bardic training."

"Look on the bright side," Jimmie agreed. She glanced at her watch. "Nine-thirty. And I'm working four to midnight this month. If I don't get my head down soon I'm not going to be worth much at all."

"You'd better go on and get some sleep, then," Eric said. He opened the door for her. "Sleep well."

"Thanks," Jimmie said. "And thanks for convincing your stubborn friend to take the path of least resistance. I'm not surprised the House had to yell to get his attention."

"We'll try to avoid that in the future," Eric agreed.

But how? he wondered, long after Jimmie had left.

NINE:

#### PUT YOUR HAND INSIDE THE PUPPETHEAD

Bonnie Wing and Kit Duquesne were friends of Beth's from the old days back in L.A.-Bonnie was a scriptwriter for animated series, and Kit had been a show runner until deciding that the Hollywood pressure cooker wasn't for her. By a flukey stroke of luck, a spec script of Kit's had been auctioned about the time she was deciding to get out, and she'd used the money to put a down payment on a down-at-heels New York apartment building that faced Inwood Hill Park. With her lover Bonnie, Kit had moved back East and started fixing the place up.

Beth, Kory, and Eric had stayed with the two of them last year when Beth and Kory were getting Eric settled in to his new digs, and Beth had welcomed the opportunity to renew her friendship with the two women. Beth and Kit-a tall regal blonde, equally adept with ritual blade and rattan sword-had been in the same coven back in Los Angeles, and Kit had started another one when she'd moved back East; Kit was the closest thing to a real-life Rupert Giles of Buffy the Vampire Slayer fame that Beth knew. If anybody could solve the problem that Chinthliss had set them, it was Kit Duquesne.

"Beth-and Studly!" Kit stared at them in surprise through the crack in the door. There was a rattle of chains and deadbolts, and then she opened it all the way. "Come in-when did you get back?"

"We're just in town for a day or so. We left Maeve with Kory's family, but we did bring pictures," Beth answered. "Sorry to just drop in like this. . . ."

"No! It's great to see you both! I'll put on the tea. Bonnie's on a deadline, for BattleMages or Teddybear

Bikers from Hell or some damn thing. She'll be out in about an hour."

Kit walked off to the kitchen, leaving them in the large sunny living room for a moment. Two futon couches were angled to take full advantage of the high windows, and a large air conditioner wheezed and rattled as it did battle with the August heat. Hallow, a very large gray tabby, slept atop it, oblivious to the noise. Two more-a tiny black kitten (new since Beth's last visit) and a regal long-haired white cat (Mistwraith)-drifted over to inspect the newcomers. Kory knelt down, and the kitten, taking this for an invitation, promptly swarmed up his arm and settled itself on his shoulder, purring noisily.

"Do you really think she can help us?" Kory asked quietly, straightening up and offering his fingers to the kitten on his shoulder, which promptly bit down with an expression of blissful contentment.

"I hope so. I don't know of any Sidhe with the kind of experience we need," Beth said.

"And how," Kory asked her, "will you phrase the question?"

"Talking secrets?" Kit asked, walking back in carrying a tray. "Bonnie's been baking-she always does when she's putting off work-and you reap the fruit of her procrastination. Ah, I see you've met Beltane. Don't let her bully you. Hallow is terrified of her," she added, indicating the sleeping tabby.

She set the tray down on the large handmade coffee table in the center of the room. Mistwraith instantly hopped up to investigate, and was set on the floor-several times-by Kit.

Maeve's baby pictures were brought out and admired, herb tea and orange muffins were served and consumed, and idle chitchat about the building, Bonnie's work (in addition to her various cartoon gigs, she also wrote a comic called The Elite, which was starting to gather a following), and various events mainly of interest to New Yorkers occupied several minutes.

"Now," Kit said, putting down her empty mug. "What's the deal? It can't be love of the Big Apple that brings you here twice in three months. Are you and Studly Do-Right here on the lam again?"

Beth smiled. "No, but we do have a problem we need some help with. It's kind of a long story."

Kit sat back on the futon couch. "We've got all day."

Beth looked helplessly at Kory. Coming here had seemed like such a great idea, right up until the time came to tell Kit why she was here. Kory was right. Figuring out what to say was going to be harder than she thought.

"We need to buy a computer system for a dragon," Kory said simply, "and we're not sure what kind will work in his kingdom. Beth thought you might be able to help."

Beth's jaw dropped.

"Uh-huh," Kit said, poker-faced. There was a long pause. "What does a dragon need with a computer?"

"Dragons prize novelty and innovation above all things. Also, he wishes to 'surf the net,' " Kory added, with the pride of one who has mastered an unfamiliar vocabulary.

Kit looked at Beth. Beth smiled weakly. Somehow, telling the simple truth had not been on her list of approaches to the problem of getting Kit to help them.

"Joke?" Kit asked, when it became apparent that Beth wasn't going to say anything.

"No joke." Beth sighed. In for a penny, in for a pound. . . . "Kory, it might help if you showed her."

Kory glanced at her, eyebrows raised, then dispelled the glamour that made him look like nothing more exotic than a very tall human. Beltane purred harder, and Mistwraith jumped up into his lap.

Kit stared at Kory and said nothing-very eloquently-for several minutes. "Bright Court or Dark?" she said at last.

"Bright," Kory said, sounding faintly miffed.

And that's a hell of a first question for someone who ought to never have seen an elf before, Beth thought.

"That's all right, then," Kit said. "And you aren't planning to start a War of the Oaks in Central Park, or anything like that?"

"Why does everyone ask that?" Kory wondered plaintively.

"It's a book," Beth explained. "Several books, actually. No, we're just passing through, Kit, honest. Most Sidhe don't want to have anything to do with New York. There's too much Cold Iron here for them."

"Uh-huh," Kit said again, still in that noncommittal tone. Whether she believed them or not, Beth still wasn't sure. "So, you want a computer that will work in Elfland? It won't be cheap, I can tell you that."

"No problem," Kory said.

The story of whatever experience it was that had made Kit so ready to believe in elves would be a tale for another time. Kit didn't go into it and Beth wasn't sure she wanted to ask right now; Kit simply accepted Kory and moved on to a series of questions about the computer. Beth wasn't sure whether she was disappointed or not. Over the years, she'd kind of gotten used to people being weirded out by the idea of Real Live Elves, and here Kit was taking it far more calmly than she'd taken the news that Beth was going to have a baby.

And if Beth had hoped for more dramatics from Bonnie, she was to be disappointed there as well. When Bonnie finally emerged from her office (looking ruffled and distant, most of her mind still obviously on her writing) and saw Kory-who had seen no reason to restore his human-seeming-she barely blinked. Bonnie was petite and dark, her classic Oriental beauty making her look fragile and innocent. This impression usually lingered with new acquaintances until they saw her fight.

"SFX?" Bonnie asked Kit in the shorthand of long partnership.

"Nope. True gen: Sidhe," Kit had replied. By now she was surrounded by reference books, in which she was looking up this and that esoteric factoid.

"More of them?" Bonnie asked in disbelief, as though she were talking about tourists or butterflies.

Dearly as Beth would have loved to chase down that remark, she was not to be given the chance. Bonnie had her workout bag over her shoulder, and was obviously on her way to the dojo. "Grins. Bang-boom. Later?"

"Yeah. Gonna take 'em down to see Ray. Deep pockets for this one. Script done?"

"Bang. Boom," Bonnie said. "Kiss-kiss." She waved to Beth. "Late. Toodles." Explanation delivered, she left.

"'Ray?'" Beth asked, eyebrows raised.

"Friend of mine," Kit said. "Tenant, too. Knows way more about all this stuff than I do, but that's not the point here. I know enough spelltech and psionics to figure out that side of it, but I know jack about computers. Meanwhile, we can decide what to do about dinner. Bon eats out on class nights, so we don't have to wait for her."

Over dinner preparations, Kit told the two of them a little more. Ray-Azrael Arcane if you were being formal-lived on the floor below Kit and Bonnie and built special-needs computer systems-and if Beth's project wasn't a special-needs system, Kit said, she didn't know what was. She'd inherited him from the previous owner of the building, and as far as she knew, he never left his apartment. He wouldn't be available until a few hours after sundown, Kit explained, so they made spaghetti and garlic bread, in between bouts of rescuing Hallow from Beltane and insuring that Mistwraith -remained a white cat and not a tomato-colored one.

Beth found herself relaxing, because now the big secret was out and nobody seemed to care-and Kory had the Sidhe knack of easy charm, which he exercised in full measure.

"Is that name for real?" Beth said, returning to the subject of their evening's appointment following a luxurious dessert of strawberries in crème fraiche. Kit had wanted to serve them tiramisu, but the coffee and chocolate it contained would have been deadly to Kory.

"It's on his rent checks. And you're a fine one to talk, Miss If-It's-Tuesday-I-Must-Have-A-New-Alias," Kit teased.

Kit was one of the few people who Beth had kept in touch with following the Griffith Park Massacre, and one of the few who knew anything about the real situation of Beth's life, though of course Beth had been careful about what she'd told her. Now, she wondered if she'd needed to bother. Kit obviously didn't boggle at elves. "That's different," Beth said defen-sively. "I didn't have a choice."

"Yeah, sometime you're going to have to tell me the whole story-the whole story-about that. It just seems a little too X-Files to believe-you know, the government being after witches?"

"Psychics, really. And you're a fine one to talk. You don't even blink at seeing Kory, and you think a government conspiracy is too weird?"

"Not too weird. Too done-to-death. You'd think even the government would be bored with conspiracies by now," Kit amplified, tossing strawberry hulls for the cats to chase. "If you want conspiracy theory, talk to Ray. He's up on all of them from Gemstone to Trapdoor."

"Is he Wiccan?" Beth asked, because Kit spoke as if she knew him well.

"He's . . . eccentric," Kit said measuringly. "But systems -designers can afford to be. I think he can help you, and he owes me a favor. Beyond that, there are things that woman was not meant to know. It's late enough now. Let me go call and see if he's around."

"Curiouser and curiouser, as Alice said," Beth commented to Kory when Kit had left the room.

"I suppose it is presumptuous to ask sorcerers to be commonplace," Kory said musingly. "Like Bards, their lives are their art."

"Eric's normal," Beth said, stung by the implication.

"In Bards, such normalcy is eccentricity beyond compare," Kory pointed out inarguably. "I love and value him, but Eric strives for the commonplace as others quest for dreams and far enchantments-much as if I were to drive a taxi and live in Queens."

"I'd love to see that," Beth muttered under her breath.

"The doctor is in," Kit announced, returning from her call. "C'mon. I'll take you down."

After what both Kit and Kory had said, Beth thought she was braced for every possible sort of Earth-plane weirdness-or at least, for the sort of theatrics and eccentricity she'd grown used to from her New Age acquaintanceship. But Azrael's bizarrerie was of an entirely different order.

There was a keypad lock affixed to his door in place of the usual sort of key and cylinder lock, and Kit tapped out a quick nine digits then pushed the door open into darkness. The hall lights illuminated a long hallway with floor, walls, and ceiling painted matte black. Kit ushered them in and closed the door behind her.

"Don't mind this. The light hurts his eyes, so he keeps the place pretty dark." She led them down the hall and into the living room, which was lit by a faint red glow.

It, too, was painted flat black, making Beth feel as if she were floating in a vast empty space. It was disorienting, but comforting, too-on a level far below consciousness, she was aware that nothing could harm her here. Despite its outré appearance, this was a safe place, a good place.

As her eyes adjusted, she could make out more details of her surroundings, and spared a pang of envy for Kory's natural advantages-elf-sight could see everything as plain as if it were broad day. There were several computers racked against the far wall, but all the screens were dark; the green and amber status lights giving the only sign that they were powered up. She could make out a sectional sofa-also black-that lined two walls, and the window was covered with heavy blackout drapes, drawn against the mild summer night. Despite this, the air was cool and fresh-somewhere a very quiet air conditioner and ozone generator must be running. The only illumination came from a strip of red neon that ran all the way around the ceiling.

"Hello, Kit. You must be Kory and Beth. Welcome."

And in all this, he wears dark glasses, Beth thought in disbelief, seeing their host at last. The self-styled

Azrael Arcane got to his feet and came over to them, leaning heavily on a silver-headed cane. He was indeed wearing dark glasses: square-lensed, faintly antique-looking things, whose lenses appeared entirely black in the weird scarlet light. He had long straight hair, as pale as Kory's-though in the neon it looked candy-apple red-that fell straight down his back, and was wearing an open-collared Poet Shirt beneath a dark suit of the Earlier Victorian period. He was barefoot. The whole effect was exotic in the extreme.

He held out his hand for Beth to shake. Seeing the darkness of her skin against his, she realized what the eccentric lighting was designed to conceal-Azrael Arcane was an albino.

No wonder it's so dark in here. If his albinism is acute, he's practically blind in strong sunlight. Well, that explains a lot.

I think.

Maybe.

He shook hands with Kory as well, who had resumed his human disguise, and motioned them toward the couch. "Sit down, please. Kit tells me you need to consult about the specs for a special needs computer system. Environment or user?"

"Environment," Beth said, remembering that Chinthliss could look perfectly human when he chose, and so would not need something that could be operated by someone the size of a small aircraft. "What we really need is a top of the line, newer than tomorrow system that's totally self-contained. No outside power source, no hookup to phone lines-" let Chinthliss figure out his local ISP; that part wasn't her problem "-and it has to be stable in . . ." She faltered. Just how did you describe the physical conditions of Underhill without describing Underhill itself?

"In Between-the-Worlds conditions," Kit supplied smoothly.

"You want to run a computer in a Circle without interfering with the raised power?" Azrael asked. "Why not just do your computing after you take the Circle down?"

"We can't," Beth said quickly. "This is a sort of . . . permanent Circle." She looked at Kory, who nodded agreement.

Now why didn't I come up with that explanation earlier? Not that Kit would have bought it for a New York minute. Elves would have had to come into it somewhere.

But Azrael didn't seem inclined to pry, taking the explanation-and the parameters-at face value. "Well, it can be done, of course," he said, sounding puzzled. "But it will take a lot of space, and a lot of money, and it'll eat batteries like nobody's business. Your best bet might be a small gas--powered generator-"

"This must be done without Cold Iron," Kory said. "As much as possible."

Azrael glanced at Kit, and some unspoken communication passed between them. "You like a challenge," she reminded him.

"Hm. Well, some of the new Lithium-Ion batteries have a pretty long life, or you might want to run it off solar; the new ones run on what comes through on a cloudy day. If you use solar cells to charge your LION pack, you can recharge while you're not using the computer. Is iron-free your only restriction?"

Beth glanced at Kit, who seemed to know where Azrael was going with this and was able to translate. "That's all. We don't have to worry about planetary influences with the other metals."

"And price is no object?" Azrael asked. "We're talking thousands, here. Several thousands-possibly several ten thousands, even waiving my usual exorbitant fees."

Kit looked at them.

"None," Kory said firmly. "And we will be happy to pay your fees as well."

There was enough kenneled gold on deposit in a special bank account that Elfhome Misthold used for its World Above purchases to cover almost any need, and when funds ran low the elves could always ken more gold. There was no fraud involved, for the gold was good-true metal, not faerie gold, to vanish when the spell dissolved.

"No, this is a favor to Kit. Okay. If you can give me a day or so to make some calls, I can give you a set of plans for the cage, and a shopping list for the computer. Your best bet is probably to hit up Comdex next month and pick up something there. You said top of the line?"

"The newest and most fancy," Beth said, on secure ground when it came to shopping. "But . . . what cage?"

"A Faraday Cage, of course," Azrael said. "Named for the magneto-optic effect in which the polarization plane of an electromagnetic wave is rotated under the influence of a magnetic field parallel to the direction of propagation."

Beth blinked, having gotten lost somewhere around "magneto-optic." Azrael smiled and took pity on her.

"Michael Faraday was a nineteenth-century inventor who discovered that an electrical discharge, such as lightning, would flow outside and around a metal cage to go to ground. This is the reason airplanes and cars can be struck by lightning without harm to the occupants: they're a type of Faraday Cage. But when you build one out of copper or some equivalent neutral conductor and run a current through it, it cancels out all electromagnetic field energy. Cages of this type are used to shield delicate electronic equipment from stray EMF fields, and when J. B. Rhine was doing his ESP experiments at Duke University back in the last century, he discovered that his subjects' accuracy tended to skyrocket when they were placed in a Faraday Cage, leading to the theory that psionics-and, by extension, magic-involves some kind of manipulation of electromagnetic or bioelectric fields. What this means for you is that the computer's magnetic field and sphere of influence will stay inside the cage, and the magical energy will stay outside the cage, and never the twain will meet."

"But won't that kind of insulation keep the computer from connecting with the Internet?" Kit asked.

"Possibly. I couldn't say for sure unless I saw it up and running in its host environment. The simplest solution is just to run a copper ground to your landline, but it might need to be tweaked with. You'll probably need to run a few tests to see how well your system connects-it will, however, run without disrupting the magical environment, so long as it's in the cage and the cage is powered up."

"Can it really be so simple?" Beth marveled.

"Only in the sense that it can be conceived and described. After that, you're talking money-large



cartloads of it, and that's where you run into trouble. Most magicians have more interest in the Great Work than in getting rich. Governments commonly have large cartloads of money, but have trouble attracting competent magicians. Magic is anarchic by its very nature-Do What Thou Wilt Shall Be The Whole Of The Law doesn't get along very well with beancounters in suits. Any competent tyrant with any awareness of the Unseen World starts out by restricting access to it: Hitler didn't round up all the Adepts he could get his hands on in the 1930s-from astrologers to Freemasons and everything in between-just to be mean. He saw them as a threat to his power. Fortunately, these days nobody takes magic that seriously. Something to be thankful to the New Age fluffy bunnies for."

"Some people do," Beth said, repressing a shiver.

"Well, there's Sun Streak and Stargate and things like that, but those projects seem to be focusing more on psionics, fortunately. So long as they're concentrating on natural Talents, and not on Adepts, they should lose interest eventually. And if they do decide we're a nuisance, probably all they'll do is make study of the Art illegal. We've been underground before. We'll survive."

"Except for the people who get caught," Beth said tightly.

"That's right," Azrael said levelly. "Except for those who get caught. But I'm sure Kit warned you both about my hobbyhorse, and I don't think I'm going to transgress the bounds of hospitality by riding it tonight. You'll forgive me, I know." He smiled at them engagingly, and Beth found herself liking him more and more.

"I think-in the long list of people the government is likely to build internment camps for-that occultists come way, way down the list," Kit said.

Beth and Azrael exchanged glances of wordless disagreement. Both of them thought that Adepts were much higher on that list than Kit seemed to-and when you came right down to it, it didn't matter if they were at the top of the list or the bottom, if they were on the list at all.

"Well, that's enough for tonight, ladies and gentleman. I've got places to surf and people to annoy. I should have that stuff you need by tomorrow night, and after that, it's up to you," Azrael said.

"That seems fair," Kory said.

"More than fair. You've been a great help. Are you sure there isn't anything we can do in return?" Beth asked.

Azrael smiled. "Sure there is. When you get it up and running, let me know how it works, okay?"

"We will," Beth promised.

After Hosea left to go and clean out the basement room, Eric paced around the apartment, still edgy. There was no real point in trying to go back to sleep-not with the adrenaline surging through his system. He fielded a couple of calls from friends who lived in the building-mostly they wanted to compare notes on what he thought had happened. Finally he decided he might as well get his stuff together and go on over to the school. At least at Juilliard, he'd face a different kind of annoyance. And maybe he could shake his feeling that there was trouble on the horizon-distant still, but surely coming.

Must've picked that up from Jimmie. But the Guardians are supposed to have some kind of Distant Early Warning System, and it doesn't seem to have gone off. Every attack of the blue megrims doesn't have to herald the end of the world-I guess it's true what Freud said: sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.

He was on his way out the door when the phone rang again. At first he just looked at it, unwilling to answer it and field yet another set of vague yet apprehensive questions. All the psychics in the building knew perfectly well that there hadn't been trouble with the boiler this morning, but even if he wanted to tell them the whole truth, he wasn't sure what it was. So far, this morning was a story without an ending. None of the Guardians, or Eric for that matter, knew why the building wanted Hosea, or for what-and Eric wasn't sure if the discovery that Guardian House could act independently of the Guardians wasn't the creep-worthiest part of the whole thing.

After the fourth ring, though, he turned back to answer it. Might as well do his damage control now as later.

"Eric? I was afraid I'd missed you!"

"Bethie?" She wasn't quite the last person he'd expected to be calling him, but she was certainly in the bottom ten. "Where are you? Is everything all right?"

"We're at Kit and Bonnie's up in Inwood. Everything's fine, actually, for a change. Kory and I are off to Comdex tomorrow to buy a computer system for a dragon-we took Ria's advice, and it worked out great!"

She sounded happy and excited. Beth was in better spirits than Eric had seen her for quite a while-more like the old, pre-everything self, bubbly and effervescent.

"Wait-wait-wait-slow down. You're buying a dragon?"

"A computer for a dragon," Beth corrected, laughing. "His name's Chinthliss, and he can help us-Kory and me-figure out how to have kids. He's a friend of someone named Tannim, at Elfhame Fairgrove, he says-you know, with the race cars? All he wants is a computer system that will work Underhill, so he can surf the net, and Kit's friend Azrael figured out how to make it work-all you need is a Faraday Cage and some really big batteries-this is going to be great!"

Beth was burbling, and well she might, if this Chinthliss had solved the problem of her and Kory's future offspring. How had that been Ria's idea? He'd have to ask her.

Are you sure you can trust this Chinthliss? Eric wanted to ask, but kept himself from asking. She'd said Kory was with her, and Kory would cut his own throat before he let Beth wander into any perils Underhill. If the two of them had cut a deal with this dragon, Chinthliss must be all right.

"So where are you going to find this computer?" Eric asked, when Beth ran down a little.

"Comdex. That big trade show they hold in Las Vegas every September. Kory says he thinks there's a hame there-some of the Seileighe Sidhe took over an Unseileighe casino, if you can believe that, so we'll have a Gate right there. And then we bring the stuff back through to Chinthliss' place, and he'll give us the information we need! He said so! Oh, Goddess, I can't wait to get home and tell Maeve she's going to have a little brother or sister!"

Eric smiled, listening to her cheerful prattle. At least things were looking up for someone. He wasn't quite

sure where that thought came from; his life was doing okay. This thing with Hosea would work out, he and Ria were doing fine, and nobody was even trying to kill him lately.

"Well, that's great," he said, a little lamely. Beth picked up on his tone at once.

"You sound a little down. Things working out okay at your end?"

"Oh, sure," Eric said hastily. "I just got up way too early this morning. It looks like Hosea's going to be living here-there's a studio apartment available in the basement, and he's getting it cleaned out now. He's okay with my teaching him, too. I'm the only one who's worried about that."

Beth laughed. "Banyon, sometimes you worry way too much! You'll be a great teacher. You wouldn't want to contradict Master Dharniel, now, would you?"

"Perish forfend," Eric said, smiling in spite of himself. He found that deep inside he was actually looking forward to the day he could introduce his new student to his old master. "Hey, I hate to cut this short, but I've got class and I don't want to be late. You guys going to be around this evening? We could get together, maybe."

"I wish we could, but Kory and I are going back to Everforest in an hour or so and then out to Lost Wages, and then from there to Chinthliss'. Come see us when we get back?"

"If I can," Eric promised.

"Gotta run," Beth said. "Love you!"

"Love you, too," Eric answered. He stared at the phone for a long minute after he hung up. Beth's good news ought to have made him feel better, but the strangely unsettled feeling he'd had all morning didn't want to go away. He hadn't wanted to burden Beth with his own problems, but ignoring them didn't make them go away, either.

Just what did the House want with Hosea . . . and why?

She'd thought she'd been afraid before, but it was nothing to the terror Jeanette felt now, clutching at Aerune as he rode through the shadows of this unearthly place. She could feel the T-Stroke burning through her veins, pulling her down into darkness. She fought its effect frantically. If she lost consciousness here and fell from Aerune's horse, she did not know what would happen to her.

They were no longer on Earth. Somehow she knew that, though there was little she could see. Aerune's cloak whipped back over her, blinding her, as the stallion moved from a trot to a canter, and the chill surrounding her fought with the fire in her blood. She could see a full moon above them, horribly distorted, and around the horse's legs shadowy pale things yelped and gibbered, leaping into the air to attack the riders and falling back in defeat.

Then the moon was gone in a blinding flash of light, and they rode across a sun-hammered desert of cracked clay beneath a dark brass-colored sky. Furnace heat struck like a blow, and in the sky above, black shapes wheeled and screamed.

Then darkness again, and on the horizon, torn by the black peaks of mountains, a distorted, blood-red

sun filling half the sky. The air was thin here, and Jeanette found herself gasping for breath. Her lungs burned with the need for oxygen, and the sky above was black, filled with unwinking stars.

Then air and light-the foggy dimness of a swamp filled with giant trees festooned with corpse-pale moss. Aerune's stallion splashed and skidded through the slime, and with each step it filled the air with the stench of rot. She looked down, and saw that the black water was filled with writhing white worms, each longer than a man. She shut her eyes tightly then, and did not open them until a shock of cold told here that they were again elsewhere.

-An arctic plain, the snow only marginally whiter than the sky overhead. In the distance, a vast structure of black stone, and the sound of a strange high-pitched refrain: Tekeli-li! Tekeli-li!

-Darkness more absolute than blindness, the only sound the stallion's running hooves.

-Cold again, the stallion running faster, along a thin shining bridge only inches wide. Stars above and below, shining dimly through veils of violet haze. Ahead the bridge ended, and the stallion gathered itself to spring, leaping out into nothingness. She screamed then, the sound thin and flat as the world shifted once more.

The stallion slowed to a walk.

They were in a forest. It was dark, but this time the almost-comforting dark of night. Everything was lit by faint greenish moonlight, though she could see no moon. The trees were like nothing she'd ever seen: black and smooth and leafless, looking unpleasantly like polished bone. The ground was covered with a low white mist that reached to the horse's knees concealing everything beneath it. She felt flushed and nauseated as the drug worked through her, and Jeanette knew she had only a few minutes of consciousness left. The trees wheeled dizzily around her, and she could not tell whether that was an effect of the drug, or whether they really were moving.

When they finally left the forest, Jeanette could see the source of the light. Far in the distance, at the top of a peak that rose up out of the center of the bone-wood, stood a tall gothic castle, shining with a baleful moth-green light. Try as she might, she could not see it clearly; walls and towers seemed to meet at impossible angles, and it wavered in her sight like a heat mirage, though the night was damp and cool. The castle grew to fill the entire world, burning brighter and then blindingly bright.

And then there was nothing at all.

Consciousness returned in slow stages. For a long time she drifted back and forth, aware enough to know she was awake, but unable to remember why that might be odd. Finally, a single fact floated to the front of her mind, pulling awareness with it like a train of boxcars.

She'd taken T-Stroke.

Aerune had kidnapped her.

The T-Stroke hadn't killed her.

She was somewhere in Elfland.

Aerune's castle?

Jeanette opened her eyes, rolling over in the same movement and crashing to the floor as she fell off the narrow bed she had lain on. The pain completed the process of her awakening, and the last few hours settled back firmly into memory. She looked around.

She'd been lying on a narrow shelf cut into a wall. She was in a small room, much taller than it was wide. Twelve feet up there was a door set into the wall; a latticework of iron bars through which light spilled. The walls and floor were made up of large gray stone blocks, like every dungeon in every movie ever made. Torches burned in iron brackets on the walls, but the light was white and directionless, too steady to be coming from the flickering orange flames or the doorway above.

It's like a stage set.

She got to her feet and quickly sat down on the bed, her heart racing with excitement and fear. She'd gambled and won: by the very fact that she was alive, she knew she was one of the lucky 10%-she'd survived her dosing, and now, by rights, she should be able to manifest some sort of paranatural power.

But what? She felt no different. All the test subjects had used their powers instinctively, but she felt no instinctive pull to do anything out of the ordinary.

What was true was that she was dying. All the subjects who had received T-Stroke had died in a matter of days or hours. She felt a small thrill of triumph at cheating Aerune of his victory by dying, but quickly stifled it, unwilling to look beyond this moment to her own death. If Elfland existed, then so must Hell, in some form or another, and Jeanette knew that Hell was her destiny for what she'd done in life. To distract herself, she resumed her study of her cell and herself.

The clothes she had come here in-jeans, jacket, boots-were gone: she was barefoot, wearing a sleeveless grayish knee-length tunic of some coarse stiff fabric. There were chains and shackles set into the walls, and she walked over to inspect them, hefting the fetters in her hands. By rights they should have been black iron, and they were black, but the sheen and smoothness told her they were not iron. If anything she'd read about elves was true, cold iron would burn them like a red-hot poker, so the metal must not be either iron or steel. Pewter? Silver? More mysteries. It did explain the absence of her clothes, however. Everything but the T-shirt had iron in it-the studs on her jacket, the toe caps of her boots, the hooks and eyelets on her brassiere, even the snaps and rivets on her jeans. All steel, and thus taboo in this place-or should be. How much of what she'd read in old books could be trusted, and how much was sheer fabulation? Trusting anything she thought she knew could be fatal.

She did know one thing for sure and certain, however. Aerune had not brought her here just to lock her up and leave her to rot. And there was only one thing that made her valuable: her ability to manufacture T-Stroke.

But what did a faerie lord want with a drug that gave humans psionic powers? Jeanette frowned, puzzled. Elves had magic powers-she'd certainly seen enough hard evidence of that from Aerune-so she couldn't imagine why they'd need what T-Stroke could do for them. T-Stroke didn't give anyone magic powers, anyway; it gave them psionic powers-a fine distinction, but a real one. While magic could play cut and paste with the laws of physics, psionics were essentially bound by them: with psychic powers you might be able to read minds or see the future-or heal-but you couldn't turn lead into gold, raise the dead, or teach a pig to speak English. And while natural psychics might manifest several different psychic gifts in varying strengths, her T-Stroke-created Talents only seemed to be able to do one particular thing, which must make them doubly inferior to an elven magician-though it was also true that Aerune had wanted her

test subjects, inferior or not. Back in December he'd been grabbing them before she or Robert could get to them, though presumably he could do everything they could do and more. She'd never found out why; she supposed she'd find out now.

She knew she should be more afraid than she was, but all Jeanette felt was numb. Shock, she thought-that and the certain knowledge that she would die soon whether Aerune tortured her or not. Death was such a final answer-and however much she feared it, she couldn't escape it-so why not embrace it as much as she could?

Because she was too afraid to, that was why.

Just then there was a rattling sound from the doorway above. She looked up, just in time to see the doorway sink majestically downward through the stone like a descending elevator cage, until the opening was level with the floor.

Two trolls-they couldn't be anything else-gazed through the bars at her.

Their smooth shiny skin was the greenish color of tarnished copper, and a wave of stench like rotting frogs rolled into the cell from their presence. They were about five and a half feet tall, alike as twins, and cartoonishly muscled, with shoulders nearly as wide as they were tall, and arms that dangled below their knees. Their faces were like a caricature of Early Man: flat noses, massive jaws, and heavy beetling brows from beneath which their eyes glowed with the silvery redness of beasts'. The long tips of pointed ears extended for an inch or two above their flat skulls, and dull lank hair the color of old moss began low on their foreheads and straggled down their backs. They were dressed in a parody of medieval costume: knee-length chain mail shirts beneath black tabards with a crimson blazon, bronze bracers laced onto their huge forearms, and shaggy boots that seemed to have been crudely made from imperfectly-emptied bears. Each of them held a seven-foot billhook in his hand.

One of them reached for something she could not see from inside the cell, and the portcullis rose with a rattle of chains.

"Come out, little girl," the other said, leering. His voice was low and hoarse, like granite boulders mating. His teeth were huge and yellow, like a horse's, but with long upper and lower fangs. Jeanette could smell his breath six feet away. It smelled like rotting meat.

"Bite me," Jeanette said sullenly. No matter how unnatural they looked, they were only another incarnation of big, stupid street muscle, the sort she'd dealt with when she ran with the Sinner Saints. They answered to a master-Aerune-and to show them either fear or deference would be a bad mistake.

The troll looked puzzled, trying to decide whether to be angry. He shifted uncertainly, gazing at his partner.

The other troll walked into the cell. He was not so much tall as massive-must weigh close to a thousand pounds-Jeanette estimated. He bowed, holding the billhook to one side and resting the knuckles of his free hand on the floor.

"Mortal lady. The great prince Aerune requires thy presence, and we are sent to escort thee into his presence." The words were subservient, but his manner wasn't.

The smart ones are always trouble. He made her feel like Elkanah always had-as if he knew something she didn't, as if all the knowledge and power she possessed would be useless against that secret wisdom.

She got to her feet.

"Okay. Fine. Let's go."

She stepped past him, out into the corridor. The stone was rough beneath her bare feet, and cold. Torches lined the walls, but again the illumination was flat and directionless, as if the torches were only a sort of window dressing, and not the real source of the light. Barred doorways, such as the one she'd come through, lined the walls all the way to the ceiling. From some of the higher ones, liquid trickled down the wall, staining the gray stone to black. There was a faint whiff of latrine, perceptible beyond the ripe rankness of her guards. She felt queasy and ill, as if she were coming down with the flu, but put it down to a combination of emotional shock and T-Stroke. She steeled herself against showing how she felt; any show of weakness could be fatal, and she still had to face the main event-Aerune.

The dumb one led the way, and the smart one followed. They went up a winding staircase, the steps sized for trolls and not humans; Jeanette was aching and breathless by the time they reached the top. Here the workmanship on the stones of the corridor was finer, the doors of solid wood.

They walked for at least half an hour, seeing no one, as the corridors slowly changed, becoming more refined and upscale, until at last Jeanette was walking across smooth mosaic floors between walls of carved alabaster hung with tapestries. She felt less sick now, though all around her there was the same sort of waiting tension that heralded the storm. There were guards here and there along the way-elven knights, this time, not trolls, wearing elaborate jeweled armor and holding long silver pikes. At the end of one corridor, her captors stopped before a pair of them. The elves' faces were invisible within their helmets, but she could see the faint red spark of eyes deep within the shadows.

"Here is the woman whom Lord Aerune has summoned, lord," the smart troll said.

The elven knight bowed silently, and gestured for her to advance.

"Be good, human girl," the smart troll said. "Or the prince will give you back to me to do with as I choose." Despite the unspoken threat, Jeanette had the odd feeling the words were kindly meant.

"And if you can't be good, be careful," she said in return.

"Silence!" one of the elves snapped.

This time both members of her escort preceded her, obviously unable to imagine that she would run (they were right, but she still thought they were stupid). They walked only a short distance before stopping before a pair of gigantic doors that seemed to be carved of one giant sheet of black jade. As they approached, the doors swung open, and she followed her guards into Aerune's throne room. Once inside the doorway her escort stopped, and waited for her to go on alone.

The throne room was enormous-big as a sound stage or a church, and empty save for Aerune. The walls were carved in the semblance of a forest, copies of the same black trees she had seen upon her arrival, their carved branches rising to form a vault above the room.

The floor beneath her feet was the glassy dull silver of liquid mercury, treacherously smooth. In the center of the room, atop a round three-step dais of the same smooth black material as the doors, stood a throne. It was black, massive, and intricately figured, but somehow it was not quite there, as if parts of it curved off in directions the human eye was not equipped to perceive.

And on the throne sat Aerune.

This was the first time Jeanette had gotten a really good look at him, and once again her heart twisted at the sight of his beauty. Save for the helmet-for Aerune's head was bare-he wore the same full ornate field plate armor as his guards, but of a silver so dark it seemed black. On his head was a black crown set with cabochon rubies that glowed as brightly as if they were lit from behind, and on his black-gloved hand he wore a matching ruby ring.

All her life Jeanette had dreamed of a moment like this, when she could cast aside the bonds of Earth and walk the halls of Faerie. And now that the moment had arrived, she could think of only one thing.

He can't be serious.

Everything that she'd seen was just too overblown, too derivative, too much. It was all done with money to burn, but it still looked like an episode of Dr. Who. It had no heart to it. Actually, Dr. Who had heart; it didn't take itself seriously and it was on a bargain budget, so heart was all it had, but it had a lot of it. No, this looked as if some avaricious goon with all the money in the universe had decided to copy Dr. Who on an infinite budget without the least understanding of what made the BBC series live for its fans. This place was hollow-the exact opposite of creative.

So now you know why they call them The Hollow Hills. Good going, Girl Detective.

"So, mortal girl. At last you face your ultimate desire-for I am Death, and Pain, and the end of all things."

Jeanette wasn't sure whether to laugh, cry, or just stamp her foot in frustration. She'd ruined her life, killed hundreds, to get here . . . and this was all there was? This fanboy weenie from hell?

And worst of all, she was still terrified. And he was still beautiful as the morning.

As she stepped onto the floor, something lying at the foot of the throne raised its head. She hadn't seen it before because it was so black; it looked a little like a wolf crossed with a Doberman, if the result were the size of a small pony and had eyes that glowed a featureless red. It opened its mouth and yawned, -exposing ivory teeth and a blood-red tongue, then put its head back down, joining the other creatures coiled at the foot of the throne in sleep.

"Lord Aerune," she said, reaching the foot of the shadow throne and looking up at him.

"Come, little alchemist. Kneel at my feet, and I will tell you how you may serve me."

Despite herself, Jeanette stumbled forward and up the steps of the dais to kneel at his feet. One of the hellhounds growled as she approached, and Aerune held out his hand to silence it.

"Know, first, that all your comrades are dead, including your former master. The slave Elkanah, whom I sent to retrieve you from the human world, is undoubtedly dead now, and by your hand."

Tell me something I don't know, Jeanette thought sullenly. She'd hated Elkanah, and feared him, but part of her was happy for him. He was dead. He was free. No one should have to live with the memory of being Aerune's pawn.

"Very well," Aerune answered, a hint of displeasure in his voice. "I shall tell you that I shall destroy your pestilent, arrogant race, and your work shall be a weapon in my -arsenal. If it can kindle the power of the



Starry Crown in such fleeting creatures of mud and stench, then what more may it do for the Children of Danu? Armed with its power, we will nevermore fear your Cold Iron, nor your foolish violence. And my Aerete shall be avenged."

There was genuine sorrow in his voice, and when Jeanette dared to look up, she could see that his face was set in lines of bitter grief.

"Once," Aerune said softly, "the world was ours. There was no Dark Court, no Bright-only the Immortal Sidhe, the firstborn of Danu. Your kind was less than the beasts-animals whom we raised up from the rest of the brute creation and taught to serve us. And for many years you understood your place and kept to it. But you became presumptuous-and to our eternal doom and sorrow, there were those among the Sidhe who helped you to rise from the dust where you belonged. Aerete the Golden was one such-guardian to your tribe, aid and protection against all who would harm you, though I offered her my heart and my crown. Yet even would I spare you for her sake, turn aside when you incurred my just wrath . . . yet you slew her with your deathmetal, and I will never rest until all your race has paid the price in full measure for slaying her whom I loved-my soul-twin, my mate, the only creature who could lift my being from the darkness and eternal night. . . .

"And you yourselves shall be the instrument of my vengeance-you and your endless inventiveness."

"I won't," Jeanette said. Tears were running down her face-fear for herself, grief for Aerune's loss. She knew what it was like to be denied the chance to be through a cruel trick of fate, and she felt his sorrow as if it were her own. But she could not help him kill again. "I won't make T-Stroke for you. I won't shoot up your guinea pigs."

Shockingly, Aerune laughed, and reached down to tousle her hair as he might pat the head of an unruly dog.

"Do you presume to know my mind, or to tell me the extent of my power? I do not need you to create more of your poison-I already have enough of your Crownfire to ken enough to drown the world. And as for proving its worth . . ."

He raised a hand and gestured. The doors to the throne room swung inward once more, and Jeanette blinked. This time they were gold and jeweled. This was what living in a world made with magic was, she realized: a universe in which there were no certainties, even those extending to the continuity of the world which surrounded you.

Two of Aerune's armored knights entered, dragging a third between them who struggled and snarled curses in some unknown language. The bright silks he had worn were in rags, and his body bore the marks of a world-class beating, but he was still defiant. As he approached Aerune's throne, the hounds raised their heads and growled, watching him intently. And somehow his speech turned to English, so that Jeanette could understand what he said.

"Kneel before your master: Prince Aerune, Lord of Death and Pain!" one of the knights said.

The stranger fought like a wet cat as they forced him to his knees. He spat at Aerune, and one of Aerune's guards backhanded him with a metal-clad fist. The impact of the blow was a sound like wood hitting wood, and blood sprayed across the mirrored floor. Jeanette felt pain shoot through her, leaving her weak and shaking, with a throbbing headache. But the stranger remained defiant.

"Prince of nothing! Oathbreaker and fool! Know that I am Aliagrant Tannoeth, Knight and Magus of

Elfhame Thunders-mouth, herald and cupbearer to Prince Seithawg and the Lady Cyndrwin, traveling beneath a ward of truce across lands held by no lord! Release me at once-or risk my lord's terrible vengeance!"

"Such passion," Aerune murmured. "Such foolishness, here in the stronghold of your enemies, but I forget: you are but a boy. Do you truly think Aerune is bound by the treaties that bind the Dark Court to the Light, or that your people will know what fate has befallen you? Shall I fear Seithawg, whose father's father I slew, or the lennan sidhe who rules beside him? Or shall I fear Lady Aniause to whom you ride, and who will seek for you in vain once word reaches her that you have vanished? There is danger in the Chaos Lands. All know that. But in your pride you would dare them, and so you have found . . . me."

From his expression, Aliagrant was not hearing anything he liked. It was as if Jeanette could feel his fear, like silent music. And Aerune was right-he was young. Even if the elves were immortal and eternal, Jeanette could tell that much about him.

"So. You see I speak no more than the truth. Bow down and swear fealty to me, boy, and perhaps I will allow you to live."

But afraid and in pain though he was, Aliagrant still would not submit. "Kill me, then!"

"Perhaps in time. Meanwhile, you will serve me-in one fashion or another."

Once more the doors opened, admitting two more . . . creatures.

One looked like The Old Witch from the cover of EC Comics: an ancient, ugly, hunchbacked woman, dressed in rags. Her nose and chin were hooked, her toothless mouth fallen in upon itself. One eye was white and bulging, the other a narrow slit. She carried a tray upon which stood two objects: a jeweled wine cup, and one of the brown plastic bottles of T-Stroke that Jeanette had in her jacket pocket back at the van.

The hag's companion was small, barely the size of a child, but with a distorted, misshapen form . . . and very long arms. It wore a laborer's smock and ragged pants, and upon its head there was a soft cap of bright scarlet, as bright as the blood of men. It looked like it had wandered out of the background of some Hildebrandt painting. It looked like a hobbit on crack.

"Don't do this," Jeanette whispered, cowering and shivering against the foot of the throne. She could feel Aliagrant's pain radiating from him like heat from an overstoked stove, and in the middle of everything else, she had a horrible intuition that the T-Stroke had worked-and what the Talent it had given her was.

Aerune stepped down past her and over to the hag. He picked up the brown bottle and poured a generous dose into the wine, then stirred the mixture with a long golden spoon. Then he picked up the cup and gestured to the redcapped hobgoblin.

It scampered over to where the two elven knights were still holding the boy on his knees. The redcap crouched behind him, pulling his head back with one hand and forcing his jaw open with the other.

Then Aerune stood over him and poured the contents of the cup into his mouth. The boy choked and tried to struggle, but the redcap was far too strong for him. Wine ran down his chin and onto his chest, but he ended up swallowing more than half of the mixture.

"You see?" Aerune said, turning to Jeanette. "I have no need of your assistance." He gestured to the

knights, who released their victim.

Aliagrant began to scream, joined half a beat later by Jeanette. She was burning, she was dying-she felt what Aliagrant felt, and the pain was hideous, it felt as if she was drinking Drano, and far worse than the pain was the terror of an immortal creature being sent down into death.

For Aliagrant was dying. She could feel it more surely than she could feel her own body-the flesh withering and dissolving as his body burned away to nothingness.

And then it stopped. Blessedly, it stopped.

Barely able to focus, she looked up fearfully, scrubbing her face dry on her bare forearm. All that was left of Aliagrant was a mess on the floor, as if a mummy were in the process of crumbling away into ash. As she watched, the body crumbled further, then dissolved altogether, leaving only a smear of dust that sank into the mirrored floor, leaving no trace behind.

"Interesting," Aerune said impassively. "What calls up magic in your race destroys it in mine-and that, you will have observed, my mortal alchemist, is fatal." Aerune sounded more interested than put out by that fact. "Still, its effects are entertaining-are they not, Urla? Far more so than elfbane or caffeine."

"Yes, Great Lord," the redcap answered. It had a high hoarse voice, like that of an evil child.

"And it still works on humans-on precisely those humans who will have to be eliminated to ensure that my race may once more assume its rightful place as their overlords-the magic users, the Crowned Ones, whose ancestors mingled the blood of their race with my own. Why should they not be useful in death?"

He looked back at Jeanette, smiling gently. "I never needed you to make more of your wizard's potion. I needed to find out what you knew, and to keep you from falling into the hands of my enemies to become their weapon. And now I see that the sorcery you have worked has made you useful to me beyond that." His smile grew wider and more razored. "You think that this T-Stroke will save you from me, that it will grant you a quick and easy death beyond my mercy, but in truth, for all your arrogance, you know so little about my kind. How can the sands of your life run out if Time itself does not run Underhill? No, you will live as long as I choose, and serve me. But not in that unpleasant form . . ."

He reached for her, smiling, and when he touched her, Jeanette began to scream.

TEN:

(I'LL STOP THE WORLD AND) MELT WITH YOU

The day that had started out so badly did not improve. Eric was inattentive in class, and Levoisier took a sadistic delight in giggling him for it. He was sloppy in rehearsal, fumbling around like a novice, unable to keep time with the other musicians or make his entrances on cue. Finally he gave up. The world wouldn't come to an end if he cut his last class. And besides, Eric wanted to see how Toni and Hosea were coming with the basement apartment.

The phone was ringing as he got into the apartment, and when he looked at the counter, it registered 27 previous messages.

"Eric," he said, picking it up.

"Eric!" Ria sounded absolutely frantic. "Where were you? I've been trying to reach you all afternoon!"

"Not everybody's cellular," Eric said irritably. "Sorry. Bad day. What's up?"

"Kayla's coming. Today." Ria made it sound as if Kayla was a combination of the Black Death, the Four Horsemen, and the IRS. "And I'm stuck in this damned meeting-in fact, I'm supposed to be in there right now-and I can't get away. I don't know how long I'll be. Her plane's coming in at three; I've sent a car for her, but I don't want her coming back to an empty apartment. Could I have the driver drop her at your place? I swear I'll be there as soon as I can."

Eric had never heard Ria sound so rattled. It struck him that she owed Kayla and Elizabeth a great deal. Taking care of Kayla properly on Kayla's arrival in New York was probably as important to Ria as being a good teacher to Hosea was to him, and she was probably just as uncertain of her ability to do it right.

His black mood vanished. "Hey, Ria. Don't worry about it. Have the guy drop her off here. We'll order pizza and watch DVDs until you get here. Promise."

"Thanks." He heard Ria breathe a deep sigh of relief. "I hate to ask, but could you possibly call Anita for me and tell her? She'll phone the car. I have got to get back in there!"

"Sure," Eric said. "Knock 'em dead." The phone went dead before he'd finished speaking.

Well, that takes care of the rest of the day. He looked up the number and made the call to Anita, then went to look over his DVD collection, wondering what sort of movie Kayla would like. "Hey, Greystone," he said aloud. "Company for dinner."

Hosea came in about half an hour after that, looking very much like someone who'd spent a hot August day cleaning out a non-air-conditioned basement.

"Better hit the shower," Eric advised him. "A friend of mine's going to be here pretty soon. Name's Kayla. She's a Healer. Going to be going to school up at Columbia-but not living here," he added, noting Hosea's faint look of alarm. "I'm just taking care of her until Ria can pick her up."

"Ayah, a shower sounds good. I feel like I've been juggling pianos," Hosea said ruefully. "But I got all that lumber moved out of there, and after I scrub it down with lye soap, I can paint it up spicker than span." He shot a curious look at Eric. "A Healer, say you?"

"That's right," Eric said. "But I'll let her tell you about it herself. Wait till you meet her."

Hosea headed for the shower.

:They're comin' 'round the far turn: Greystone told Eric about five minutes later.

"That was quick," Eric said. He thrust his feet into sandals and headed for the street.

The car was just pulling up as he reached the sidewalk, which felt very much like walking into an oven at this time of day, as the concrete gave back a day's worth of stored heat. Ria'd sent her personal car: a maroon vintage Rolls Royce limousine. The driver-in matching livery, right down to the archaic jodhpurs and riding boots-climbed out and walked back to open the passenger door.

Kayla wasn't waiting for him to get there. Eric saw the door swing open and a . . . vision . . . in glitter and Spandex stepped out of the car.

The last time Eric had seen Kayla, the sixteen-year-old had been heavy into punk, right down to the safety pins in place of earrings. But two years was an eternity in a teenager's life.

Things had changed.

She still had the black leather jacket-and was wearing it, in defiance of the weather-but now it seemed to glitter in places. She was wearing artistically-damaged fishnet stockings, and on her feet were spike-heeled pointed-toed ankle boots with more straps than a Bellevue special. Between the ankle boots and the leather jacket was a black lace tutu, the layers of black lace tulle glittering with purple and black sequins and standing almost straight out.

Kayla reached back into the car to grab her backpack, and blew the driver a kiss before striding across the street to Eric. As she approached, Eric could see that she'd carried out the glitter-Goth look in all aspects: her hair was dagged and shagged, dyed flat black with indigo and fuchsia streaks. Her face was powdered dead white, eyes heavily lined in kohl and mascara, and mouth painted a glistening red-black. Silver batwing earrings dangled from her ears. Under the jacket, she was wearing a very tight, cropped tank top with a black velvet rose pinned to the neckline.

"Hiya, Eric," Kayla said. She held out a hand. She was wearing fingerless lace mitts-black, of course-and her nails, still cut back almost to the quick, were painted black with a dull silver glitter overlay.

"This is a new look for you," Eric said. A lot more high-maintenance than the old one, but he guessed Kayla'd finally gotten used to the fact that she had a home and a family, and didn't have to scabble on the streets just to survive. He waved to the driver, who'd followed Kayla across the street.

"Are you Eric Banyon?" the man asked.

"That's right," Eric said.

"I just wanted to make sure the little lady got where she was going," the driver said. "I've got a daughter about her age." He smiled and went back to his car.

"Sheesh," Kayla muttered, embarrassed.

"Hey, you know Ria'd have his head if he let anything happen to you," Eric said. "C'mon, let's get upstairs. It's hot out here, and you must be about to fry."

"Nice place," Kayla said, looking around the apartment. She set her backpack down on the floor and peeled off her black leather jacket. Her shoulders glittered with a mix of makeup and sweat. "Nice air

conditioning," she added a moment later. "Gotta say, Eric, you do know how to land jelly-side-up."

Hearing voices, Hosea came out into the living room. He was wearing jeans and a new white T-shirt, his shaggy blond hair still damp from a hasty shower.

"Hey," Kayla said appreciatively, "you didn't tell me Chippen-dales was in town."

"This is a friend of mine," Eric said. "He's staying with me until his place is ready. Hosea Songmaker, meet Kayla Smith."

Hosea stepped forward and held out his hand. After a moment's hesitation, Kayla took it. If he noticed her outlandish costume, he didn't indicate it by so much as an eye blink. Eric could see the look of concentration on her face as she made sure her shields were in place-any touch was intimate if you were an Empath-but then he saw her relax and give Hosea a genuine smile.

"Any friend of Eric's is a friend of mine," Hosea said firmly in his slow pleasant drawl. "Pleased to make your acquaintance, Healer Kayla."

"And yours . . . Bard," Kayla said after a short pause. "Hey, Eric, you didn't say you were collecting 'em."

"Just a happy accident," Eric said. "Hosea came to the city looking for someone to show him the ropes, and I guess I'm elected."

"I couldn't ask for a better teacher," Hosea said. "But you must be plumb tuckered out from all that traveling, Miss Kayla. Would you care for something cold to drink? There's lemonade, fresh-squeezed, and every kind of water you can imagine."

So that's why we've got all those lemons.

"Lemonade, please," Kayla said. She glanced toward the sound system. "Mind if I check out the tunes?"

"Mi casa es su casa," Eric answered in bad Spanish. "Feel free. I don't know how long Ria's going to be-she said she'd get here as soon as she could, but-

"But Ria's a busy girl, yadda," Kayla said. "Glad you kids are getting along," she added absently, drifting over to the wall of CDs.

"You know you look like Tinkerbell on drugs, don't you?" Eric said to her back.

Kayla turned and flashed him a smile. "Gotta blend in with the natives, right?"

Eric didn't really expect Ria any time soon, so after checking with Kayla about her preferences-he already knew Hosea's-Eric phoned down to the pizza place for three large pies with everything. The three of them sat and ate pizza while listening to Kayla's music selections. Her taste was more eclectic than Eric had anticipated, everything from salsa and classic rock to grand opera.

"I'll try anything once-twice if I like it," she said, in answer to his quizzical look. "So, Hosea, how'd you find out you were a Bard?"

"Eric told me," Hosea said, swallowing a mouthful of pizza. "I just thought I had a little shine, but I guess

there's a name for everything. And you?"

"Oh, I brought somebody back from the dead, and things went on from there."

As soon as the Portal closed, sanity returned. The geas that Aerune had placed upon him along with the silver antlers was gone; Elkanah's mind was clearer than it had been in weeks. He saw it all now. The Sidhe lord had used him as a Judas goat-let him think he'd escaped, let him think that searching out Campbell was his own idea, though it had been Aerune's magic that had led him to her and then led him back here, to a place Aerune could claim her easily.

He'd been a fool. A pawn.

And to top it all off, the bitch had poisoned him. Elkanah could feel the T-Stroke burning through his system. In a few hours, he'd be dead.

But there was something he had to do first. Not for Campbell's sake. But because there were innocents in the line of fire, and because those innocents had to be saved . . . or at least warned. He staggered toward the van, fighting the wave of drug-fuelled oblivion.

He did not reach it before he fell.

Another Monday night in Paradise, Jimmie Youngblood thought, piloting her blue-and-white through the traffic snarls of Lower Midtown. She felt better than she had in weeks-hell, months-as if the wave of Impending Doom had finally broken, or at least as if some part of her mind had finally reached an accommodation with whatever unspoken warning had disturbed her for so long. She felt released, but unsettled. Maybe Eric had been right: some problems just went away, and you never knew afterward exactly what they'd been.

Her radio woke to life, spitting out a jumble of ten-codes: someone had set a van on fire near the Lincoln Tunnel, local units please assist. She checked and confirmed she was the closest unit, turning her vehicle in that direction. The dispatcher would alert the fire department, but she'd get there first.

As soon as Jimmie saw the smoke, she could feel something tangled up with it, like an astral riptide undercutting reality. Power. Someone down here was using magic-bad magic. It brought all her uneasy feelings rushing back-and worst of all, there was something oddly familiar about the source.

Bomb? Phosphorus grenade? Salamander? Someone isn't having a lucky night.

She barely remembered to give her 10-20 when she arrived. Traffic was already snarled behind the charred wreckage-even at ten o'clock at night the Lincoln Tunnel was busy. She pulled her unit around to block the tunnel completely, hearing the wail of other sirens in the distance. Fire Department and Traffic Control, right on schedule. But she was the first on the scene.

She climbed out of her unit, staring at what was left of the van. It wasn't just burning. It had been torched-the tires were melted pools of rubber on the blacktop and the van itself was too charred for her to know what its original color had been. No need to worry about the gas tank exploding-from the looks of things, it already had.

Or else whatever brought it here didn't need gas to make the engine run. . . .

Worst of all, she knew that something had gotten out of it alive. She could see puddled footsteps where the blacktop had melted in the street, as though something very hot had just . . . walked away. Something that reeked with Power like a spill of fresh blood.

No time to call the others in on this. She had to find that thing before it hurt anyone else. That there were no casualties already was a minor miracle. She grabbed her nightstick and her vest and followed.

The blocks around the Tunnel were a wasteland of urban decay spawned by the new Conference Center, which was a mixed blessing. With the Javits Center empty, there were few pedestrians around to get in her way, but a lot of empty lots, parking garages, and derelict cars to provide cover for her wandering perp. The tracks stopped at the edge of the concrete pavement, but she could still see signs of his handiwork.

Here, a charred stump that had been a living tree. There, a half-melted basket full of trash, still burning. A smear of cinder on the side of a building, just where a tall man might rest his hand. And all around, the reek of baneful magic like a choking cloud-magic born of pain and death and suffering.

She stopped long enough to shrug into her Kevlar vest, though she doubted that something that would stop a bullet would stop whatever she followed. She had the sense that what she followed was wounded and in pain, but no less a danger for all that. She reached down to shut off the radio on her belt-no point in alerting her quarry, and no help she could summon in time would be able to face down what she followed. She'd made that mistake once. Never again.

Oh, Davey. You shouldn't have had to die for me to figure that out. She spared a brief thought for the other Guardians, but it would take too long to summon them as well. She had to contain what she followed before innocent civilians met the same fate as the charred van. She could smell the burning on the air.

Ahead of her was an alleyway, leading between two derelict buildings. Behind them was an empty lot, the building it had once contained gone to bricks and rubble-a favorite hangout for junkies and rent-boys. The alley was the only exit. Whoever it was-whatever it was, she had it cornered now.

There were no lights on the street. The only illumination came from the last dregs of summer twilight, and the sky glow from the city itself. She hesitated. Stupid to go in without backup. That's why they call it Tombstone Courage. . . . She forced herself to stop, to use her radio, tell them her position, tell them she was in hot pursuit of the arson suspect. It didn't matter now. By the time her backup got here, it would be over, one way or another. The dispatcher told her to wait, of course, but even as she heard that rational, sensible counsel, Jemima Youngblood knew she couldn't wait. Lives depended on her. She could already smell smoke.

She drew her gun and stepped into the alley, letting out her breath in a long sigh as she saw it was empty. But the fire glow painting the far end told her she was right. The empty lot was burning.

She hesitated, thinking again of warning Toni and the others that magic was afoot once more. She was reaching for her cell phone when the scream came, a scream of primal agony, of someone being burned alive.

She ran toward it, cursing her luck.



The screamer pirouetted like a top in the middle of the empty lot, wrapped in a shroud of flame, howling out his fear and pain to the night. He was burned past saving-she knew that already, from the black and ruined skin she could see through the flames that covered him-but she had to try. She knocked the shrieking dervish to the ground, beating at the flames with her bare hands while his skin flaked away like charcoal from a half-burnt log. His blood boiled on the surface of his skin, and before the flames were gone, the screaming stopped. He was dead.

"Jimmie."

A familiar voice, filled with pain and sorrow. A voice she had never expected to hear again. She looked up slowly, not wanting to see. Her searching hand closed over empty air-she'd dropped her weapon trying to put out the fire. She had a backup strapped to her ankle. Still kneeling, she reached for it, slowly, burned palms stinging and tearing.

"Jimmie. Little sister. What are you doing here?"

Her fingers touched the metal of the gunbutt.

"I'm a cop, Elk. Like you were, once." She held her voice steady by a great effort.

Elkanah Youngblood stood a few feet away. He was naked, his bronze skin covered with soot and fresh burns. Power radiated from him like light from the noonday sun, but he wasn't another victim. He was the source. All around him, everything that could burn was burning-weeds, garbage, wood.

Pyrokinesis. Without control, the fires that he set were burning him as well, eating him alive.

But that shows up early, in childhood, and Elk never-

"I have to tell you-" he said. "I have to tell-" He staggered toward her. His eyes were white, blind with heat. "You have to stop-" He moaned, a long sound of agony and despair.

"Don't come any closer!" She felt blisters break as her fingers closed over the gun. A .38 snubnose-useless at a distance, but not against a naked man at nearly point-blank range.

"You have to stop him!" Elkanah howled. "Jimmie-please Campbell-Aerune-Stop-"

He fell to his knees, reaching out to her as he died. Her scream melded with his own as the fire consuming him from within burst forth from mouth, eyes, ears . . . from his outstretched hand, still reaching toward her.

Burning everything he touched.

Burning the world.

The phone had rung about fifteen minutes ago. Ria was finally out of her meeting and on her way to Eric's. When it rang again, Eric thought it was Ria calling back, saying something else had delayed her.

"Banyon."

"Eric." Toni's voice, so hoarse and distorted that at first he didn't recognize it. "Is Hosea there?"

"Toni?" Something was horribly wrong-but what? He'd had no warning. He could hear the ragged sobs around the edges of her voice every time she inhaled. "Yeah, he's here, but-"

"Jimmie's . . . in Gotham General. It's bad. She's asking for him. How soon can he get here?"

"We're on our way."

The others were already on their feet, alerted by his face and voice.

"Jimmie's in the hospital. She's asking for you," Eric said to Hosea. Lady Day would get them there fastest. He sent a call to the elvensteed and felt her worried reply. "C'mon."

"I'm coming too," Kayla said. "I can help."

There was no time to argue. Eric headed for the door. Where was Greystone? Why hadn't he warned them that Jimmie had been hurt?

The three of them reached the front steps just as Ria was pulling up in the Rolls.

"What's wrong?" she demanded, seeing their faces. The elvensteed was waiting at the curb, quivering with urgency.

"Jimmie's hurt. We have to get to Gotham General as fast as we can," Eric told her. Lady Day was already sitting at the curb.

"We'll take the car," Ria said. "It'll be as fast as an elvensteed at this time of night."

"You go with Kayla. Hosea and I will meet you there," Eric said. The two men turned toward the bike. There was no time to bother with helmets, and Lady Day would keep them from harm if she had to jump through a Gate to do it. Hosea climbed on behind him without a word.

"Go fast," Eric whispered to his 'steed.

The world vanished in a gray blur of absolute speed. Eric felt Hosea clutch at him, but almost before he'd adjusted to the sensation of flying, the trip was over. Lady Day was standing at the front door of Gotham General, kickstand down.

"Hey! You can't park there!" someone said as Eric was climbing off. :Go home,: he Sent to the 'steed. :Wait there.: He turned to help Hosea off, steadying the big man as he staggered, ignoring the speaker.

"Hey . . . !" the voice trailed off weakly as the elvensteed drove off, eliminating the problem.

Eric turned to face the speaker-it was a man in surgical scrubs, obviously out for a quick smoke. "How do I get to the-"

:Burn Trauma Unit: Greystone's voice came in his head. :Paul will take you. Brace yourself, laddybuck. It's bad.:

Paul Kern was coming down the steps. He'd obviously been waiting for them. His face was haggard with grief.

"Eric-Hosea. Come with me. Hurry. I don't think there's much time."

"But what happened?" Eric asked, as soon as they were in the elevator. Gotham General covered several city blocks; getting where they were going couldn't be done quickly.

"Someone . . . burned Jimmie," Paul said starkly. "Maybe gasoline. The officers who brought her in didn't know. Thank God she listed Toni as next of kin-they aren't letting anyone else in to see her, and we didn't want to push without more information."

"You said she's asking for Hosea," Eric said.

"When she's conscious," Paul said tightly.

"Burn Trauma" . . . he said something burned her.

Eric looked at Hosea. The tall man's face was grim.

And she asked for Hosea.

José was waiting at the elevator. An expression of relief crossed his features when he saw them. "Hosea! Hurry!" he turned back to the floor. "She's this way."

"Won't they stop us?" Hosea said, following the others. The Burn Trauma floor was quiet, without the usual noise and bustle of a big city hospital. There were signs on the walls reminding nursing staff to follow sterile procedure and restricting visitors, and several of the doors had signs on them prohibiting entry without Clean Room protocols.

"They won't know we're here," Paul said. "Greystone and I are making sure of that."

And in fact no one did stop them. There was a nurse in the room as they entered, but she didn't even look up.

There were bags of saline and whole blood-and a morphine drip-hung around the head of the bed like a flock of toy balloons. A sheet concealed the body in the bed-Jimmie-tented up on a framework to keep any part of it from touching her. All Eric could see was her head, swathed in dressings, even the eyes bandaged. It was warm in the room-burn victims lost the ability to regulate their own body temperature, and a chill could be fatal.

The room was filled with the smell of cooked meat, which puzzled him. Finally Eric realized that what he was smelling was Jimmie, and had to fight hard to keep from gagging. He heard a strangled gasp from Hosea as his companion realized this as well.

Toni looked up. She was sitting on a chair beside the bed, bent toward Jimmie. "She was asking for you, before," she said to Hosea. "We don't know why." She got to her feet and came over to the others. "Would you sit with her awhile, Hosea? She might wake up."

Hosea nodded. His face was very white. But his steps were steady as he crossed to the bed and took Toni's place in the chair.

Eric had known it was bad before, when Toni called, but at the back of his mind there'd been the certainty that Jimmie would be getting better. Now, looking at Toni's face and the still figure in the floatation bed, he no longer thought so.

Jimmie Youngblood was dying. His friend was dying. And there was nothing he could do about it.

Bardic magic could work wonders. It could summon the power to allow creatures of magic-such as the Sidhe-to heal themselves. It could hasten the healing process for something that was going to heal anyway. But Jimmie wasn't going to heal. If he listened, Eric could hear the song of her life slowly slipping out of key, growing slower and more distorted by the minute, with nothing he could do to draw it back in tune. And if he could hear it, the Guardians certainly could, too.

But Kayla's a Healer! She can fix it! he thought desperately.

As if he'd summoned her with his thoughts, Eric heard a disturbance in the hall, and then felt a cold wash of Power soothing it ruthlessly away.

Ria.

The door opened, and Kayla walked in alone. Her black lace and glitter was even more jarringly out of place in the harsh dull light of the hospital room than it had been in his apartment.

"She's a Healer," Eric said, as the others turned toward this new intruder.

"Can you help her?" Toni asked Kayla. Eric heard the naked pleading in her voice, and knew what it cost Toni Hernandez to beg.

"I can try," Kayla said. Her face was pale and still beneath the mask of makeup, and the neon-bright streaks in her hair looked flat and unreal.

She walked over to the bed-slowly, as if moving through deep water. No matter how good her shields were, a hospital was no place for an Empath. She hesitated at the side of the bed, looking from Hosea to Toni.

"I have to touch her."

"I reckon you'd best do what you can." It was Hosea who answered. "You can't hurt her any worse than she's been hurt."

"What's her name? Jimmie?" If Kayla had other questions, she didn't ask them. Ultimately, they weren't important.

Jimmie. Dumb name for a girl. Go on, stupid. You can do it. Kayla spoke loudly in her own head to cover her own fear and Jimmie's pain. She could feel it even without touching her, even through the morphine, agony radiating like waves of heat from the summer streets. Damage, slow and deep. Trauma that the body couldn't handle. Pain, whether emotional or physical, was a cry for help-always. Elizabet

had taught her that.

Her hand was shaking in anticipation of pain to come. Kayla forced herself to reach out-slowly, gently, until her fingertips barely touched the bandages on Jimmie's forehead. Contact! Blue light crackled over her hand, like a spark jumping a gap. Like heat-lightning-fire.

Fire!

It filled Jimmie's body-memory: fire, its first chill wash, then pain, building on itself, melting Kevlar, searing her body as the metal she wore turned molten and sank into burning flesh, burning, burning . . .

Everywhere Kayla looked there was ruin-fluids seeping into tissues, running over bared muscle where the skin was cooked away, veins and arteries ripped open by boiling blood, tendons heated and shriveled, nerves blackened and twisted, or screaming endlessly for help that never came. Every time she fixed something, something somewhere else broke. There was no way she could be everywhere at once, no way she could give this ruined body what it needed, no matter how much of herself she spent. She felt herself sinking, dissolving into the fire, but somehow she was cold, so cold . . .

Suddenly the link dissolved. Kayla felt someone grab her, wrenching her away. She fought for a few seconds--desperate to help, to heal-

Hosea slapped her.

Not hard, but it made her open her eyes and draw a deep breath, safe behind her shields once more. She stared up at him, for a moment too stunned to realize what had just happened. Tears welled up in her eyes and spilled down her face, though she had no sense that she was crying, and she was shuddering with cold. Worse than any of that was the knowledge that she'd failed. There was nothing she could do to heal Jimmie-she could spend her entire life-force, drain herself to death, and she could not save Jimmie Youngblood. She stood in Hosea's arms, panting as if she'd run for miles.

"Kayla . . . ?" Eric asked.

She shook her head, closing her eyes. "It will take weeks," she mumbled, barely aware of what she was saying. "Weeks of pain. And she'll die anyway."

Think, you stupid cow! There's always something you can do.

To comfort the dying . . .

"Then there's nothing you can do," Toni said, grief in her voice.

"No. There's something I can do." Kayla pushed herself away from Hosea and took a deep breath. She hesitated, as if to say what she would say next would make it more real than it already was, create a single defined future from a fan of other outcomes.

But there was no other outcome.

"There's something I can do," she repeated. "I can make it quick. I can block the pain. I can let her go now, while she's still Jimmie," Kayla said.

She was able to look at them now that the worst had been said. Eric looked shocked, still not quite able

to believe that Jimmie was hurt. Hosea looked sad but determined. Of the other three, whose names she didn't even know, the woman looked angry, as if Death were something you could hit. The two men looked stunned, so closed off their auras were impossible for her to read.

"You can kill her, you mean," the woman said harshly.

"I can give her the choice. Hey, chica, it's more than you can do for her, isn't it?" Kayla snapped. She blinked, and felt more tears slide down her cheeks. Ruined my makeup, dammit, she thought distractedly.

The woman lunged for her, but Hosea stepped between them.

"No," was all he said.

"You said something about a choice, Kayla, is it? I'm Paul Kern, and these are my associates, Toni and José. I only wish we'd met under happier circumstances."

I wish we'd never met at all, Kayla thought mutinously. She gave Paul points for not offering to shake hands, though. He must have met people like her before.

"And I think Jimmie would like to have the choice you're offering her. What would you have to do?"

"I need to block what she's feeling, so that she can wake up. I can't do something like this without her consent. That'd be murder." Kayla ran her hands through her hair. "Can any of you tell me anything that will help?" she asked, her voice quivering slightly. "Jimmie . . . she's not normal, is she?"

Of the three of them, it was Paul who understood the question Kayla asked.

"If she can do anything to aid you, she will; Jimmie is no stranger to magic. She is a formidable magician in her own right, A Guardian, as we are, so perhaps in that sense she is not 'normal.' She, like us, is sworn to defend ordinary humanity from magical assaults."

"Only this wasn't magical. This was just a stupid, random, thing-done by one of those people we're supposed to serve and protect! And all her power couldn't save her from it," Toni said bitterly. "It isn't fair!"

Hosea retreated to sit at Jimmie's side again. Paul put an arm around Toni's shoulders and Toni leaned her face into his neck. Kayla made a conscious effort to shut them out, block their grief and pain so she could concentrate on Jimmie. For a moment it seemed almost impossible to do, then she felt a calming touch at the very edge of her shields, felt new strength and certainty flow into her. She looked up and met Hosea's eyes across the bed.

Of course. Stands to reason I'd land in the middle of a bunch of Gifted. Banyon said Hosea was a Bard, but he's not quite the same thing as Eric. . . .

"What can I do to help?" Eric asked quietly from behind her.

She tried to smile at him, to look more confident than she felt. Kayla hadn't expected anything like this to happen quite this fast. Just this morning she'd been in Los Angeles, and all of a sudden she was at St. Elsewhere, playing for all the marbles. Elizabeth's gonna freak.

"Just make sure I get back, okay?"

"You got it," Eric said soberly.

Kayla rubbed her hands over her arms, the lace mitts scratchy against her bare skin. She took a deep breath and turned back to Jimmie. This wasn't going to get any easier, and she owed it to Jimmie to do it as fast as possible. She focused her energy and her will, and let her fingers drift down to touch Jimmie once more. This time there was no crackle, no spark, just a cold blue glow, almost invisible in the harsh fluorescence that lit the room.

She worked quickly, deftly, with a control and precision she couldn't even have imagined a few years before. All the body's nerves led to the spine; Kayla climbed that column slowly, closing off the neural nexuses, keeping their messages from reaching Jimmie's brain.

It was more than dangerous. Close off the wrong nerves and she would stop Jimmie's heart, keep her lungs from drawing breath. Close down the neural pathways on a healthy person, and they'd lose all touch with their bodies, becoming capable of doing shattering damage without pain to warn them.

But Jimmie no longer needed warning.

Jimmie? Jimmie Youngblood? Where are you? Kayla Sent urgently.

:Here.:

A power as great as her own but far different swept through Kayla, and suddenly she was somewhere else.

A living room, its walls painted a cool blue. Packing boxes were everywhere, as if someone were moving.

Yeah. Moving out.

She turned around and saw Jimmie. The uniform was a surprise. They'd told her Jimmie was a magician. They hadn't told her Jimmie was a cop.

"Hi. I'm Kayla."

Jimmie smiled. "Nice to meet you, but the circumstances suck. Pardon the mess. I wasn't expecting visitors. You're not the new tenant, are you?"

It was hard to remember that all of this was an illusion, a metaphor for dying constructed from both their memories, lent its reality by Jimmie's trained will. Kayla clung to that knowledge-if she believed in the reality of what she saw, she might die along with her hostess.

But Eric won't let that happen.

"Is Hosea here?" Jimmie asked suddenly. "He's the one I was expecting."

"Sort of. He's in the hospital room with you."

"Hospital?" Jimmie asked blankly. "Who's hurt?"

This was common enough; a sort of partial amnesia that made dying a little easier. It was a pity they couldn't afford to let her go on dreaming.

"You are," Kayla said bluntly. "Something bad happened to you tonight. You're dying."

"Oh, my God." Jimmie put a hand to her forehead trying to remember, and for a moment the light dimmed to red, and Kayla smelled smoke. Something was burning.

"I've got to talk to Hosea!" Jimmie's voice was frantic. "It's important. There's something I have to tell him."

"It's okay. You'll have time for that," Kayla said soothingly, willing Jimmie to trust her, to believe. "That's why I'm here. Are you ready to hear the rest?"

Jimmie composed herself with an effort. She wasn't wearing her uniform any more. Now she was wearing armor, armor the brilliant blue of the fire in the heart of a sapphire. There was a helmet on her head, and a sword belted at her side. She glanced past Kayla to the door, as if there was somewhere she had to go, and soon.

And there was, but it wasn't a journey Kayla wanted to accompany her on.

"Go on," Jimmie said steadily.

"You're going to die. I guess that's the door you see. I can help you get through it. Without my help, you'll still die, but it might take a week, maybe more, and you'll be in agony the whole time, I won't lie about that. But if you want, I can help you go now. Tonight. I'm a Healer, but that's all the help I can give you. You're too badly burned for anything more."

She watched as Jimmie accepted that, weighing it in her mind. This was beyond creepy, Kayla decided, like talking to a ghost . . . only Jimmie wasn't dead yet.

"Yes. That would be the best way. But can you wake me up first?" Jimmie asked, her voice crisp and decisive. "I have a few things to say to the living before I go." Her mouth quirked in an ironic smile, and Kayla felt a pang of grief. This was a woman she would never get the chance to know.

"Yes. But not for long, so if there's anything I can tell the others for you, you'd better pass it on now."

Jimmie hesitated. "I don't remember. I must have reported for shift and gone on patrol. But I don't remember what happened then."

"It doesn't matter," Kayla said soothingly. Whether it did or not, it would be pointless cruelty to say it did.

:Kayla.:

Eric's voice, a thin whisper of sound from her outward ears.

"I have to go."

"Sure," Jimmie said vaguely. "How did I ever get so much stuff? I'll never get it all packed in time."



"You will." They always do. Kayla closed her eyes-

-and opened them in the hospital room. She didn't know how long she'd been gone, or what happened while she was gone, but when she opened her eyes again Ria was there, standing close beside Eric, looking furious and worried.

Kayla felt cold and tired, and as if she was going to throw up. She had an absurd impulse to say, I saw Jimmie. Don't worry about her; she's fine, and stifled it. She wasn't finished yet.

"She's agreed to go. She wants to talk to you first, Hosea. She didn't say why. I think she thought she had. I've got to clean the morphine out of her system to wake her up, and it'd be nice if someone turned off that damned drip." Her voice came out in an angry rasp; she was stretched thinner than she thought.

"I've got it." Ria stepped forward and placed her fingers on the tubing. The plastic grew cloudy, and the morphine stopped running into Jimmie's veins. "Anything else?"

"This is going to have to be fast, so no long good-byes, okay? She'll say what she has to, and then I'll help her go through the door. Ria, will you be my anchor?" Between them, she and Elizabeth had practically rebuilt Ria from the ground up: Kayla knew Ria better than anyone else in the room, and that familiarity would help her to find her way back.

"I will," Ria said formally.

Kayla reached beneath the sheet and took Jimmie's bandage-swathed hand. No harm in that, now that Jimmie could no longer feel it. She summoned up her power and let the glow spill through Jimmie's body, sweeping the drug from her blood. Almost at once Jimmie's breathing changed, becoming deep and hoarse.

"Elkanah?" she whispered.

The others looked at each other. Her brother, Toni mouthed silently, for Kayla's benefit. "We're here, Jimmie," she said. "Paul and José, and I. We've brought Hosea for you."

"Hosea." Jimmie's voice was slurred and seared, a damaged croak. "Hey, Toni, you didn't have to clean out the basement after all. He can have my place." She tried to laugh and started to cough, liquid and retching.

Kayla put a hand on her chest, and Jimmie's breathing calmed, but Eric could see the effort it cost the young Healer to ease Jimmie. "Hurry up," Kayla said tightly.

"Hosea?" Jimmie whispered.

"I'm here."

"Take my hand."

He glanced at Kayla, who nodded, then slipped his hand beneath the sheet to clasp, very gently, the bandage covering what was left of Jimmie's other hand.

"Would've liked to know you better. Liked to explain. Never any time for that. Eric knows. Sorry. Your problem now. Sorry."

As Jimmie spoke, something happened. Kayla ignored it, but Eric and Ria stared at each other, neither quite sure what it was. There was the sense of Power in the room, just out of their reach.

"Only four," José said in a broken voice. "Always four."

"We should have known!" Toni said in fierce despair. Paul put a hand on her arm, quieting her.

What just happened? Eric wanted to ask, but he was afraid he knew. There was a Power surrounding Hosea now, something Eric's Bardic magic barely acknowledged. The same power that touched Toni and the others. Guardian power.

:I didn't want to tell you,: Greystone said sorrowfully, mindspeaking to Eric alone. :It might have come out another way. But it never does. Your boy belongs to the House now. To the Guardians.:

"Good-bye," Jimmie whispered. "Thank you, all."

"Okay, that's it," Kayla said fiercely. "She can't take any more." Kayla closed her eyes, willing herself to touch Jimmie's spirit as she had before.

This time the apartment was white, as if freshly painted. All the boxes were gone. The curtains-gray-were drawn across the windows, and the bare wood floor was gray as salt-bleached driftwood. Jimmie's blue armor was the only color.

"I'm ready," Jimmie said.

Geez, did you have to just dump all that on him and leave? You couldn't have mentioned it while you were still walking around? "Okay," Kayla said aloud. She turned toward the door. It wasn't really a door. It was a symbol of what Kayla was about to do, severing Jimmie's spirit from her ruined body, setting her free.

Kayla opened the door.

And forgot. Forgot her life and everything that called her to it, forgot her responsibilities and her name, all for the sight of that Light which held within it everything that had ever been, and everything that might ever be. Jimmie walked past her, into the Light, and vanished. There was a moment of piercing brightness as her armor merged with the Light, and Kayla saw echoes of that brilliance, as if Jimmie had gone to join a great host of her kindred, welcomed by all who had gone before her.

Then she was gone, the body she had left behind starting to die, and Kayla was alone in the place that was a symbol of Jimmie's dying body. Kayla heard her mother's voice, calling for her from beyond the door, felt the love and the joy at their reunion. Her mother loved her, wanted her-everything else had all been a terrible mistake. She took a step toward the Light, following Jimmie-

-and felt Ria's fury, her implacable determination, dragging Kayla back into the world of the living.

No-no!

"No," Kayla whispered, but she was back now, and could not even remember what it was beyond the door, calling to her. She shook her head, took a deep breath, the images and memories fading from her mind.

"I'm okay."

One of the monitors started to keel. Ria silenced it with a chopping gesture, and all the equipment at Jimmie's bedside went dark.

"Good-bye, querida," José said softly. "We'll miss you."

Toni sobbed, a thick choked sound of fury and grief.

"We'd better leave," Paul said, his own voice far from steady. "I don't know how long Ria can hold her spell, but it's better if the hospital doesn't have any unaccountable time lapses to explain. Come on, Toni. We have to leave. Jimmie's gone. She isn't here now."

The ride back to Guardian House in Ria's Rolls was a -silent one. Eric was stunned, aching with grief and the abrupt senseless loss. Jimmie had been his friend. They'd been talking together, laughing together, only that morning.

Now she was gone. Dead. For nothing-no great battle, no great victory-just an accident of the kind that happened in New York a thousand times a day.

And she'd named Hosea her successor.

Eric glanced up at Hosea. The big man was withdrawn, contemplating something only he could see.

"Eric knows," Jimmie'd said back in the hospital room. The conversation they'd had a few weeks ago about the Guardians came back to him: "Once you get the Call, your life doesn't -belong to you any more. You never know where you're going to be sent, or what you'll have to do. There's no way to train for this job. You can either handle it, or someone else comes along pretty quick to -replace you. If we're lucky, we get to meet our successor and pass on the Call in person, but that's about it."

Does that make you one of the lucky ones, Jimmie? Eric wondered. Did you feel lucky? His eyes ached with unshed tears. Jimmie was gone. Everything they could have shared was gone. Over.

ELEVEN:

YOU WANT TO DRESS IN BLACK

The suite of rooms was an elaborate fantasia upon death; a medieval memento mori elaborated by a big-budget madman with a flair for detail. Paintings and statuary depicted every possible way a person could die, and a series of pictures painted upon the ceiling showed every stage in the dissolution of a corpse, a motif repeated on the mosaic floor, so that whether you looked up or down, you saw decaying bodies.

The bedposts were skeletons-elves might not sleep, as Jeanette Campbell knew now, but there were still some things they needed beds for-and the coverlet was jeweled and embroidered with more variations upon the gentle art of murder. Bed curtains of cobweb-fine black lace surrounded the bed, making it

look even more like a catafalque. Imprisoned within this suite of rooms, Jeanette had nothing to do but contemplate the death, in all its forms, that was forever to be denied to her. And boredom was an additional torment.

Invisible servants hovered around her to fulfill her every whim-fill her bath, bring her food, play music for her, dim or light the lamps. But there were no books for her to read, and all the music sounded like it came out of the Middle Ages: weirdly atonal and military, like funeral marches played on bagpipes. She'd asked for a guitar, but that request hadn't been granted, and she thought the invisibles might not know what it was, because when she confused them, they simply ignored her orders: they wouldn't bring her coffee either. When she got tired of trying to order them around-it was like dealing with a balky computer-she could look out the window at the unchanging night and the eternally moonlit forest below. It had been a real shock when she discovered that she could see the same moon in the same position from windows on the opposite sides of the room.

Other than that, she could sleep, or pace the floor-trying to avoid catching sight of herself in any of the enormous mirrors-or (as much as she hated her confinement) pray that Aerune wouldn't come again to let her out. She could study the death images until she'd memorized every detail. And then, for a change, she could nerve herself up to try looking in the mirrors without flinching.

The mirrors were Aerune's other joke-funny, with all the time she'd spent imagining what elves would be like if they were real and she could meet them, she'd never imagined they could be so mind-numbingly petty. It was one thing for Aerune to still be in mourning for a girlfriend killed, as far as Jeanette could figure out, about five thousand years ago, and to be intending to wipe out the human race in revenge. That was almost dignified. Romantic, Byronic, all those things that she loved and hated at the same time. But at the same time, to have him invent this whole elaborate sniggering joke, not only on the way she looked now, but on her humanity as well. . . .

That was cheap and petty, a symptom of an arrogance so vast it didn't only not care how it appeared to outsiders, it couldn't even imagine any point of view but its own. And that amount of self-obsession sort of took the edge off the whole romantic lost-love thing.

She went over to the stained-glass windows and pushed them open wide, leaning out as far as she could. Damp smells of forest and water welled up out of the night, and in the distance she could hear the sound of a river. But aside from minor variations, the landscape was as unchanging as a photograph. The moon (or moons) never moved, the sun never rose-sometimes the place went to a foggy twilight, but on no particular schedule-and somewhere at the edge of the forest, the world stopped and turned back on itself, and the only way to get somewhere else was through a Gate that only a Sidhe could work.

She had only the vaguest idea of how long she'd been here-even when Aerune took her out to hunt, she couldn't get an accurate idea of the time, and the time where she went didn't seem to have any relation to the time here-but she'd learned a lot during her captivity. About the nature of the Sidhe, about Aerune's plans, about magic itself. Once she would have given up anything she had to see and do the things she'd done. Now, she only wished she'd been spared the disappointment of finding out what she knew. She hadn't wanted to know that elves were so petty, so mean, so . . . empty.

The whole place seemed as if it'd been assembled as a scrapbook of Gothic Evil Through the Centuries, with the emphasis on the High Medieval period. There was nothing new here, nothing exciting-nothing, in fact, that she couldn't have made up for herself. Sure the creatures were weird-but no weirder than she could see in the movies. Sure the landscape was alien-but no more alien than she could see in a painting. Sure her surroundings were opulent-but you could get awfully sick of gold and jewels. Everything was grand, but nothing was comfortable. It was like trying to live in a museum.

She should have turned herself in and gone to prison when she'd had the chance. At least they let you read in prison.

But Aerune would have found her there, too. And Aerune still scared her, terrified her, frightened her on levels she didn't know were in her. He was trite, but he was also monstrous. She forgot what he was like the moment she left his presence—a form of self-preservation, she suspected—but when he was near she resonated to him, like a crystal goblet that someone had struck. And that hurt, like a dentist's drill that never stopped.

That was what the T-Stroke had done to her—turned her into an Empath, and she resonated to the physical and psychic pain of anyone she was near. She had no control over it. And she was drawn to magic, to Talent, to what Aerune called Crownfire, most of all. That was what made her so useful to Aerune. She could no more not sense the presence of Talent than she could hold her breath forever, and try as she might, she couldn't hide her reaction. All Aerune had to do was drag her within range of someone with Talent and she vibrated like a tuning fork. Every time he took her out of here, it was to find people like that.

And then Aerune killed them. Sucked up their magic, their potential, their Talent, and killed them.

And there was nothing she could do about that, either. She'd tried to kill herself. It didn't work. It hurt a lot, and it scared her, and it didn't work. She'd given up trying.

She'd also tried to refuse to do what he wanted, but all it got her was pain—and if she still tried to refuse, he would begin to kill people. Surely it was better to give him what he wanted? That way, only a few people died. Fewer.

Funny how I can't seem to stop doing things like that. So much for good intentions.

Time to try the mirrors again—that or throw herself out the window. She kept covering them up and turning them to the wall, but the invisibles always put them back again the way they'd been. Maybe she'd get used to what she saw in them eventually. She turned away from the window and crossed the room, her long heavy skirts swishing. She was dressed in what she guessed was Elvish haute couture, and it made every-thing even worse. These weren't her kinds of clothes. They didn't suit her, and she didn't deserve to be wearing them. They made everything worse.

She approached the mirror, eyes closed—after this long, she knew every inch of her prison and all its accessories well enough to navigate it blindfolded—and stood before the mirror for a long moment before she could force herself to open her eyes. A stranger stared back, looking like a caricature of the self she knew. This was what Aerune had made of her.

Her eyes were now wide, the bright unnatural green of a child's crayon, fringed with thick black lashes. Her body had been fined down to asexual slimness, stretched and remade. Her hair was long and thick and moon-silver, cascading down over her shoulders and back, giving her the look of some exotic bird. This was her the way she'd always wished she was, and that was the cruelest joke of all—that Aerune had taken her secret dreams and dragged them out into the light of day, making them dirty with his touch. She hated it, hated him, and hated herself most of all.

As she watched, the elaborate silk gown she wore began to flow and change like melting wax, darkening and molding itself to her body until she was clad head to foot in a sheath of form-fitting black leather covered with matching silver studs along the shoulders, arms, and legs. Around her neck was a heavy

leather collar with silver spikes, the kind a hunting dog might wear.

This was her hunting costume.

"No. Oh . . . no," she whispered, backing away from the mirror.

And then her image vanished as well, and Aerune stood within the ornate frame, holding out his hand.

"Come, my hound. It is time to hunt once more-and this time, I have a special treat for you."

She made a sound in the back of her throat-a groan of -utter despair. Useless to fight him, impossible to try. Hating herself, she held out her hand to him in response. There was a jarring wrench of translocation, and they were . . . elsewhere. Now she had a leash upon her collar, and Aerune held the end.

"Do you like it?" Aerune asked her.

She looked around herself, wondering where he'd brought her this time. Back to Earth, somewhere in daylight, in some sort of office building.

No, not an office. The halls were filled with teenagers, wearing clothes that hadn't been in fashion in a very long time. A school of some sort, she supposed.

No one saw them. No one would see them unless Aerune wished them to. But Jeanette could see-and feel-everything. Emotions buffeted her naked senses like gusts of wind-despair, murderous anger, fear and pain and joy so intense it made her reel drunkenly, bathed in the emotional storms of adolescence.

This was high school. Her high school.

Recognition brought horror. James K. Polk High School, sometime in the late eighties. The same time she'd been going there.

"Why did you bring me here?" she demanded furiously.

"To hunt," Aerune answered. "Do you wish to see yourself as you were? There you are."

He pointed. A girl was walking down the hall. Her mouse-blonde hair was skinned back in an unflattering ponytail, and she wore no makeup. Her skin was blotched with acne. She was wearing a cheap leather jacket that didn't fit very well and carrying an armload of books. Her head was down and her shoulders hunched, as though she expected somebody to hit her.

Me. That's me. But why don't I stand up straight? Scuttling along like that, it's practically like wearing a "kick me" sign.

She stared at herself, feeling the faint recognition of Talent thrill over her skin. It was no surprise; the T-Stroke would have killed her outright if she didn't have it. But it was stifled, suppressed, ignored. Covered over with a sullen anger that didn't look outside itself, that poisoned everything it touched.

Stupid. I was so stupid.

Jeanette watched as her younger self stopped in front of her locker, awkwardly juggling books as she reached for the padlock. A boy in a cream and gold varsity jacket strode toward her, deliber-ately

banging into her and spilling her books all over the floor.

Cary McCormack. Oh, god, I hated him!

As she bent to pick them up, one of the boys with Cary darted forward and slapped a sticker onto the back of her jacket. It was a promo sticker for a local rock band, and adult Jeanette thought it looked pretty cool. But she felt the flare of rage from her younger self like a spike in her guts as younger-Jeanette wheeled on her tormentor, hissing curses.

All of the boys laughed, even Cary, but she could see into them as well as she could see into her other self, and there was none of the gloating joy she expected to see-just worry and uncertainty, boys feeling their way into adulthood just as her younger self was. And stuffed into Cary's back pocket, a well-thumbed paperback novel, one that she had read and loved. He was watching her younger self anxiously, a little bit of him hoping for some other reaction than rejection and anger, an acknowledgement that he hadn't meant her any real harm.

He just wants to talk. But boy, is he going about it the wrong way!

But how could she expect more? They were children, all of them. They were still learning how to do all the things adults took for granted-make friends and alliances, fall in love, serve conflicting loyalties, react wisely to unfairness and cruelty, and all the rest of the things that were supposed to set adults apart from children. If she'd been willing to make an effort, she could have turned the whole situation around, made a joke, maybe even talked to Cary. . . .

But she hadn't. She'd pushed hard to make them enemies, because it was easier, because she was young, too. She'd made them into monsters and they'd done their best to be what she wanted.

But I could have wanted something else. I threw away my whole life and let them bring me to this just because I was stupid!

It was an epiphany, but she didn't like it very much. The best revenge wasn't revenge, it was living well, and she hadn't. She hadn't revenged herself on her childhood tormentors by turning into Aerune's hound-she'd finished their work for them.

The boys went on. Young Jeanette got her locker open and began picking up her books again. A clique of girls-the bright ones, the pretty ones-went by, pointing at her and sniggering, but inside each of them was the fear: am I like that? What makes me different? What if I'm not pretty any more? How do I do everything right when I don't know what I'm doing at all?

They could never have been her friends-their interests were too different-but they didn't have to have been her enemies. She hadn't had to notice them at all, one way or the other. That was the part that had been her choice.

"Can we go home now?" she asked in a hard voice.

"There is still the hunt. You know what I seek. Find it for me," Aerune answered implacably.

She looked at the kids still filling the halls. They all thought of themselves as fully adult-only she knew how much of their lives' journey was before them. Refuse to do what Aerune wanted, and those unfinished lives all ended here. She didn't remember a bloodbath happening in her high school years here, but that didn't mean Aerune couldn't arrange one now.

The few for the many, and no matter what she chose, Death would come to JKPHS today.

Defeated, she began the hunt, pacing through the halls at the end of Aerune's leash. For a while back in the beginning she'd used to hope that if she spent enough time back in the Real World the T-Stroke would catch up with her and burn her out, but Aerune had quickly destroyed that hope. While she hunted for him, his spells kept time from touching her, even here. There was no escape.

She had no way to block the pain radiating from the kids around her-this one was pregnant, that one's parents were divorcing, the other was trying drugs for the first time and was terrified he was going to hell-but if she forced herself, she could let it wash through her, sifting through it for what Aerune sought. Several times a pang of Talent made her stop and quiver, but a lot of kids had Talent that burned out within a few years at this age. That wasn't what Aerune was looking for, and god help everyone here if he didn't find something to make his Hunt worthwhile.

Then she felt it. Burning like the sun, heat and life enough to warm her cold bones, banish all the borrowed pain. Helpless, she turned toward it. Refuse to follow the trail, and the killing would begin.

One or two instead of a dozen. That's good, isn't it? Isn't it a better choice?

There were other wellsprings of Power here. She could feel them. But this one was the strongest, the closest, and so she could concentrate on it and not give warning of the others. It was all she could do.

It was lunchtime, so most of the classrooms were empty. She passed each one, seeing glimpses of a world as foreign and lost as ancient Atlantis inside. There were real tragedies here, and cutthroat social climbing more intense than anywhere outside of Hollywood, but at the same time, there was a certain innocence to all of it. That was why people always spoke of high school as the happiest time of their lives . . . if they managed to forget the pain.

She hadn't. She'd let it rule her. And this was the result. She'd become someone she didn't even know.

She followed the trail of Power to the school auditorium. No one was supposed to be in here, but it wasn't locked. James Polk had been a nice upper-middle-class school in a good district. Parents all congratulated each other about not having the problems with violence or vandalism found in other schools. She and Aerune went inside.

It was dark in here. The school had been built in the thirties, and the auditorium bore a more than passing resemblance to a theater, with balconies, stage, and thick red velvet curtains, now drawn back to reveal an empty stage. A few lines of Shakespeare were carved on the archway above:

*All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts . . . As You Like It, Act 2, Scene 7.*

There was someone sitting at the foot of the stage, leaning against it; a small untidy boy with an ever-present spiral notebook in which he had constantly been doodling.

That's Strange Stan Chandler. He ran away from home his junior year and nobody ever found out what happened to him.

Now she knew. She could feel his power, his creativity, that wonderful gift that the Sidhe lacked. She could see the life he would have had as if a movie were unrolling in her mind: high school, then art school,



then an apprenticeship at one of the major animation studios, then ground-breaking work in CGI and a series of brilliant movies that would bring a renewed sense of childhood wonder to all who saw them. . . .

And none of it was ever going to happen. Because Stan Chandler wasn't going to get a chance to grow up to be a wizard. Because Stan Chandler hadn't run away at all.

"So this is the one," Aerune said, as Jeanette died a little more inside. There was a ripple of Power, and she knew they were suddenly visible.

"Come with me, little one," Aerune said. "Come into my kingdom."

She saw Stan's face awaken with wonder, with hope, with incredulous disbelief and gleeful awe, saw him jump to his feet-a skinny kid with big ears and thick glasses, somebody that nobody would ever look at twice-staring at the elf-lord in amazement. And then saw suspicion replace wonder, saw the fear begin.

But by then it was too late. Aerune had reached him, taken his hand. And the world melted around the three of them like a disrupted reflection, to re-form as Aerune's throne room.

Jeanette backed away-he'd dropped her leash, now that his prize was in his hands-but she could not block out what came next. Somehow Aerune reached into Stan, finding the reservoir of his Talent and draining it away, into himself.

It hurt. She covered her ears, but that didn't block out the screams. Or the pain. She crawled up the steps of Aerune's throne and huddled against its coldness, begging and praying that the pain would soon be over.

For both of them.

A long time later she became aware that people were talking above her head-Aerune and someone else. This was rare, but not unheard of, and she tried not to listen. If Aerune noticed she was here-if Aerune noticed she was here and didn't like it, he would transport her to some other place. If she were lucky, she'd wind up back in her room. If she weren't, it would be some place like an open grave, or a swamp filled with maggots, or a bright place where things she could never remember clearly afterward did . . . something. Something horrible.

But she couldn't shut out the voices. Because while one of them was Aerune's, the other was human, from her own world and time.

"Oh, we're moving forward, Lord Aerune. People are willing enough to believe in you after Tunguska and Roswell and Grover's Mill. I'm sure you don't mind if they think you're space aliens-'elves' is a little hard for folks to swallow these days, but it doesn't matter what they call you, so long as it gets the job done. And psychic space aliens are even scarier than the other kind, if you get my drift-especially once they start encroaching on humanity."

Whoever he was, he wasn't afraid of Aerune. Jeanette listened in amazement. It was almost as if they were . . . allies.

"I believe I do, Mr. Wheatley. But I trust that your inner circle is quite aware that the invaders are not 'space aliens,' but the Sidhe?" Aerune asked.

"Indeed they are, Lord Aerune. The bodies you've provided have been quite helpful in that respect. But

I have to ask-when are my boys going to have a live specimen to play around with? We can go just so far with sweeps and drills."

She didn't dare move, didn't dare look up or draw attention to herself in any way. Aerune was talking like Earth was being invaded by elves in all directions, but as far as she knew, the only one who wanted to invade Earth was Aerune, and he couldn't get any of the other Sidhe to play along.

So he'd gotten this human to help him present elves as a threat to humanity, so that elves would see humans as a threat. Couldn't this Wheatley see that if Aerune's plan worked, he'd be as dead as everyone else? How stupid could bureaucrats be?

Aerune was speaking once more.

"I am aware of your concerns, but I must counsel patience. You may continue to use the special equipment I have provided to search out those members of the Bright Court who live among you, passing as your own kind. Properly handled, even their discovery can bring about the war we seek. Meanwhile, I shall endeavor to provide you with captives who will be properly . . . unconciliatory, but it will require time."

"Yeah. The last thing we want is to grab one of those Bright guys who'll go all reasonable and multicultural on us. We need a real fighter," Wheatley said cheerfully.

"All in time. And what of your plan to move against those of your own kind with Power?" There was a gloating note in Aerune's voice that made Jeanette shudder.

"Well, there we're seeing real progress," Wheatley said, gloating. "We've consolidated a number of those dumb-ass gov-ernment psychic research programs under our agency umbrella-Anomaly, Trapdoor, Arlight, and so on-and we're massaging the results to make it look not only as if psionic powers are widespread and reliable, but that the Spookies present a real threat to the power structure. You'll have the screening programs and internment camps you want within five years, or my name isn't Parker Wheatley. When you come right down to it, the Psionicist Threat is the perfect social control: fear of a minority that's invisible, that you can't prove you don't belong to. We can put down anybody we need to by saying they're psychic once this gets rolling."

"I am glad you are pleased-" Aerune broke off suddenly, and Jeanette realized with a pang of sick despair that he'd noticed her after all. She scrambled back off the edge of his throne, hoping to beg for mercy. But the floor swallowed her up as if it were water, and then she was falling, falling down into the night.

By unspoken agreement, they all gathered back in Eric's apartment on their return from the hospital, huddled together like the survivors of a disaster. For a long time no one spoke. Finally Paul got up and left, returning a few minutes later with a bottle of Scotch and a large silver cup.

"I'd been saving this for a very special occasion. There's none more important than saying good-bye to a beloved comrade. We'll hope it's unique." He poured the calleach full-it took half the bottle-then set the bottle down on the floor, very gently.

"Here's to Jimmie Youngblood. Warrior and friend. I will miss her." He drank, and passed the cup to Toni.

"I loved her," Toni said, her voice stark in its grief. "Waes hael, girlfriend. Go with God."

The cup passed, each person saying their own good-byes.

"She gave me more than I ever gave her. I wish we'd had more time." Eric took only the barest sip, but his farewell was no less heartfelt for that.

Kayla was next. "I didn't know her. I wish I had. Death bites."

Ria followed, giving nothing but a simple toast and passing the cup. He ought to get up and make some coffee, Eric supposed, but it didn't seem worth the effort. He sat on the end of the couch, the smoky taste of the Scotch on his lips, and mourned the future that would never be. It was one thing to die fighting for something that mattered, giving up your life so that the innocent could live on in happy ignorance of their peril. But that wasn't how Jimmie had died. She'd died in an accident—a stupid, pointless, meaningless fluke, as random as if she'd stepped off the curb and been hit by a car. After all she'd done, all she'd suffered, all she'd given up to be a Guardian, her death should have had more meaning than that. It was as if God had just lost interest in her and blotted her out.

It wasn't fair. He bowed his head, not caring if the others saw his tears.

"If Jimmie had to die for me to become a Guardian, I don't want the job," Hosea said thickly. "She was a righteous lady, and I won't ever be able to fill her shoes." He drank deeply, passing the cup to José.

"Good-bye, my friend. You should not have had to die for so little."

Greystone had joined them, his wings held high and tight over his back as if he wished to shut out the events of the night.

"Farewell, mo chidr. We can't always choose our fights, but you never ran from yours. Fare you well." He accepted the cup from José and drained it.

There was a long moment of silence. "The first time I saw Jimmie," Paul said softly, "it was raining. She was standing outside of the House—no umbrella—looking like a wet cat, and about that mad. . . ."

But talking about Jimmie didn't make the loss of her easier to bear. It made it worse. They were whistling in the dark, choking on their own despair, each wondering when their own painful pointless death would come. Why live? Why do anything, when your death would be nothing more than a ripple, counting for nothing, quickly forgotten. If life meant so little, if death was so cruel, why not hasten the moment? If you could control nothing else, if there were no true choices in life, why not choose death and get it all over with? There was no way to win against it. Everybody died, and no death meant anything in the long run.

"A test." Aerune's voice came out of nowhere, rousing Jeanette from her aching daze. She could see nothing, could barely feel the surface on which she lay. Everything hurt; her eyes burned and her throat was raw with screaming, but worse than that was the terrifying blankness in her mind. She could not remember where she'd been, or what had happened to her, since she had been in Aerune's throne room.

Worse, she felt as if the information lurked somewhere beneath the surface of her mind, and to recover it

would drive her mad.

But it did not do to ignore Aerune when he was speaking. He was still angry with her. She could tell.

"What test, my lord?" she asked. She reached up and felt her face. Her eyes were open, but she still saw nothing. Blindness? Darkness? Or some kind of spell? Asking would only bring her more trouble.

"Of your abilities. I will bring you to a place where there are many of those whom I seek. You will find me the strongest concentration of them. And I will use their power to give Mr. Wheatley the proof he so ardently desires."

"Yes, lord." She staggered to her feet, groping for stability in the darkness. When would she stop caring about what he used her to do? When would she go numb, or mad, or just die? When would he be done with her?

"Come, then."

She felt a whisper of air, and then the tingle of magic as Aerune opened a Portal. She stepped through.

The assault on her unshielded senses was as if a million people were shouting at once in a language she didn't understand. She staggered, blinded now by the wash of physical and psychic pain, choking, gasping for breath. She fell against the side of Aerune's elvensteed, felt his armored leg against her back. He moved his mount away from her touch and she fought to stay on her feet. If she fell, he wouldn't let go of her leash.

She forced her eyes open. Night. Trees. City lights. Hot summer air, the smell of car exhaust and hot asphalt and the distant wail of sirens. Aerune usually chose less populated places for his hunts—Cold Iron was deadly to elves, as well as screwing up their magic, and big cities were full of it. He wouldn't have come to a place like this without good reason.

Her heart hammered faster, racing, and waves of chill and nausea swept over her. Something was different this time, but she couldn't take the time to puzzle it out right now. Aerune wanted results, but how could she find one trace of Power among so many false clues?

She was in a park, near the edge. As she peered at the buildings across the street, she realized she knew where she was. New York. Central Park.

Almost home.

New York must have some kind of connection to Aerune's home base, somehow—he'd first appeared here when Threshold was doing field tests, and she didn't think he'd have noticed the tests if he hadn't been here, in the same world at the same time. New York must interest him somehow, and she didn't think it was because it was the center of the global business economy, or a great cultural center, or the home town of American publishing, or one of the biggest and most advanced cities on Earth.

No. That must really be the reason. Aerune wanted to take humanity down here, because if he took out New York, no place else could be any harder to destroy. If she were a Sidhe looking to build a beachhead in the mortal world, she'd pick some place like Minneapolis or Toronto to start with—smaller cities with fewer people. Or maybe someplace with no people to speak of at all, like the Great Plains, or Russia, or Antarctica. But obviously Aerune felt differently.

Arrogant. Stupid. And powerful enough that it probably didn't matter, in the long run. Make a big Sidhe fuss here, in the Big Apple, and there'd be no way on earth the government could hush it up. He'd have all the panic he wanted-and the war he wanted, too.

But right now, Aerune wanted a Hunt.

Jeanette picked a direction at random and began walking, trying to get her bearings and cull information from the agonizing and bewildering wash of sensations that surrounded her. She needed to strike a trail, and fast. Aerune's patience was close to nonexistent at the best of times, and this was more than a test. Somehow, this was a trap.

Is what I overheard so important that I've got to die? That can't be it. He could kill me any time he wanted to. And who would I tell about Wheatley, anyway? Everyone in that place belongs to Aerune body and soul, even the High Elves. None of them would betray him. None of them would even care.

All the while, something had been trying to get her attention, like the high faint peal of a bell over the roar of a storming ocean, and she finally focused on it.

Power.

Enormous power. The thing Aerune sought-that he must have known was here, somewhere in New York, before he ever set her on its trail. She stopped in her tracks and turned this way and that, trying to get a bead on it.

North and west.

"That way." She pointed.

Aerune reached down and pulled her up behind him on the horse, riding in the direction she indicated. It drew her, swamping all other input. Not one Talent, but too many to count-an ocean of power, enough to drown in.

Enough to turn Aerune into a god.

And if she didn't help him find it, there were millions here for him to slaughter. He didn't even have to kill them one by one. All he had to do was take down the power grid, and thousands would die as the carefully-balanced machinery of the city ground to a halt.

And if she did help him find the Power he sought, how many more would die?

How could she make that kind of choice?

The elvensteed broke into a trot. They were near the river now, and Jeanette realized he was no longer waiting for her directions. Whatever the source, it was big enough-and close enough-that Aerune could sense it himself now.

They stopped on a darkened side street. She didn't know what time it was, but she knew it was late-there wasn't any traffic here, and most of the buildings around them were dark. On her left was a parking lot filled with motorcycles and an assortment of small cars-the lot itself unusual on the Upper West Side, where real estate space was at a premium.

And beyond the lot was the source of what had called her. An apartment building, with a few windows lit. Every apartment contained Talent of some sort, and behind one of those windows, a concentration of pure Power, and anguish so great that Jeanette tried to curl up where she sat, and only succeeded in sliding from the saddle to the ground, to huddle at the elvensteed's feet.

Aerune jerked on her leash. "Stop that." The Sidhe's voice was lazy; he sounded almost drunk on the pain that was killing her. "Do you not see? My other hound has done me one last service in his dying, striking a heart's blow against these petty mortals who would oppose my will. He has opened a path through their defenses; helpless in their grief, they will not sense me until it is far too late. In their destruction, the seeds of mortalkind's destruction will be sown as well."

He was gloating, Jeanette realized with numb indignation. But she could barely concentrate on his words, let alone react to them. The torment was too great, worse than ever before. It was as if . . .

She was dying.

In his impatience to tap into this concentration of Power-or perhaps because he needed all his own puissance to survive here-Aerune had loosed the spells that kept time from affecting her. The T-Stroke was working again, weakening her, burning her out.

If only the people in the building would keep Aerune distracted, keep him from noticing her again until it was too late. She hated herself for the thought, but she had no illusions left. She was a coward, a user, a destroyer. A victim, not a hero. Even if she dared to try to do something right, things only got worse.

All she could do-the only thing she could ever do-was try desperately not to be noticed. To escape, any way she could.

If only mortals knew what power lay in their despair.

Aerune could sense his hound's anguish-he fed upon it, increasing it as he did the pain of those who lay in the fortress beyond. It had been Jeanette's helpless rage and self-loathing that he had most loved about her. Her empathic power had only been an incidental thing, his use of it a way to pass the time and learn more of the mortal world while his long-range plans came to fruition. He had been surprised at her strength-no matter what he did, she did not surrender, did not come to fawn upon him with the helpless groveling love of his Court. With time enough, she would have realized what power her despair gave her, and that would be tiresome and inconvenient. Better to end it here, now, by allowing the poison she had taken to work its will upon her at last-or would it be more amusing to let her think she had escaped, then to snatch her back from the gates of Death?

Only a small part of Aerune's consciousness was occupied with that idle speculation. Most of it was engaged in siphoning off the rich banquet of power and grief that lay before him, slipping his subtle magics past the lax wards of the stronghold and turning the anguish of those inside back upon itself so that they could think of nothing else, and in their sorrow become utterly vulnerable to his attack.

For I am the Lord of Death and Pain, and all who sorrow and weep do me homage . . .

Aerune no longer felt the weakness brought on by the deathmetal surrounding him. Once he had drained these enemies dry, destroyed the last of their defenses, all that set them apart from the ordinary run of humanity would be gone, to flow through his veins, allowing him to strike them down with impunity.

Power to spare, power to waste, power to shield him from their monkey tricks and petty impediments . . .

Kayla's eyes ached with unshed tears. The power she'd expended tonight had left her exhausted, and there was nothing to show for it. The operation was a success, but the patient died, as the old joke went. Her head drooped, and she shivered, even though she'd reclaimed her leather jacket when they got back here and was huddled into it now. Everything in her urged her to give up, surrender, make an end to things now before life could hurt her any more than it already had. . . .

Wait . . . wait . . .

Her thoughts were groggy, as if she'd had a lot more to drink than just a sip of Scotch.

This isn't right.

It was hard to think. She was drowning in the others' grief, resonating to it like a water glass to a soprano.

Not just me . . .

Cautiously she lowered her shields, wincing at the uprush of grief that spilled past her barriers. Gritting her teeth, she reached past her immediate surroundings. The House itself was grieving-it, and everyone in it: the Sensitives who did not know the cause of their overwhelming sorrow; the magicians who set up wards against it in vain; even the other tenants, those who were only as sensitive as any artist. All of them mourned, turning inward, shutting out the world beyond their walls.

And something outside those walls was feeding on that pain, magnifying it and siphoning it off at the same time.

Kayla drew back inside herself, making her shields as tight as she could. But there was such a sweetness in surrendering to the pain, a dark joy in the knowledge that she could receive no greater hurt in life than that she had already received, that turning away from that submission was the hardest thing she had ever done.

"Hey . . ." Kayla said. Her voice came out in a croak. "Something's wrong."

Paul looked at her, his red-rimmed eyes bleak. "Everything's wrong. The good die and the innocent suffer, and there's nothing anyone can do about it," he said in a flat voice.

Kayla pulled herself to her feet, the dragging weakness-physical and emotional-making her stagger and reel. "No!" she said, louder now. "Something's wrong!"

The others ignored her as if she hadn't spoken. Sat, drained and grieving, emotional zombies.

I've gotta do something! Something to turn them out of themselves, away from Death, back toward Life. But Kayla was tapped out. She had barely enough energy to keep herself on her feet, and none to spare to heal them.

Music. Could that help?

I've got two Bards here, they oughtta be able to do something.

She looked at Eric. He was sitting with Ria's head on his shoulder, staring at nothing. His eyes were empty, swollen with unshed tears. Maybe if she put the flute in his hands . . . ?

She staggered toward the bedroom. The floor tilted crazily with her exhaustion, and she could barely feel it beneath her feet. She clung to the wall, keeping herself upright by sheer bloody-mindedness.

There! The flute case lay on the bed, and beside it, Hosea's banjo. She tripped over the edge of the flokati rug and fell to her hands and knees. It would be so easy just to lie here, give in to her exhaustion, sleep and pray to never wake up again.

Wimp.

She pulled herself to her feet, clinging to the edge of the mattress, then grabbed the flute case and the banjo. They seemed to burn in her hands, weighing far more than they possibly could. It was only with an effort that she kept herself from using the banjo as a crutch as she reeled back into the living room.

She dropped the flute case in Eric's lap. "Play something-something happy," she demanded raggedly.

Eric looked up at her, moving as though underwater. "Not now," was all he said.

"Eric, we need this. Play." Oh, please. Don't make me beg. I don't have the strength.

He shook his head.

"It's too soon. Let the dead rest," Hosea said, dully.

Kayla rounded on him, holding the banjo like a club. She felt anger building inside her and fed it, welcoming the burn of fury. It was all that was keeping her going. And when it was gone, there would be nothing left.

"Oh, yeah. That's a great idea! Jimmie'd be real proud of you, farmboy-she goes through hell for you and this is how you pay her back? Lie down and die? So she's dead-play her out, then! Play for her!"

Hosea's eyes focused on her, and slowly he reached for the banjo. "Guess I can do that much," he said. He began to play, something slow and mournful-"John Barleycorn," she thought.

"Oh great-is that how you want to remember her? A dead loser? You want to lie down in that grave with her?"

Hosea stopped and looked at her. "That ain't fair, Kayla."

"Do you think this is how she wants you to remember her?" She spun around and glared at Eric and Ria, although the world was graying out around her. "Do you think she just wants you to give up and die? Play!"

Slowly Eric began to fumble with the flute case, plainly unable to understand why Kayla was so upset. Hosea began to play again: "Ashokan Farewell." Kayla groaned inwardly. Not much livelier than the other thing. But when she looked at him, she could see confusion in his eyes as he began to sense the



wrongness here. By the time the melody came around again, Eric had joined him, the flute wailing like the wind in high lonely places. She could see he didn't get it, and she had no more to give. She sank down to the floor, sitting at Eric's feet.

But still the two Bards played, pulling themselves agonizingly from song to song, like travelers crossing a frozen river: from "Ashokan Farewell" to "Lorena" to "Bonnie Blue Flag" to "Dixie." It almost didn't matter what they played, not really. Music was life, and anything would help. Then faster: "Marching Through Georgia" and "Union Forever"-fighting songs, those-and "Susan Brown" and "Turkey in the Straw" with their catchy cheery rhythm, and she could see the power linking the two Bards like binary suns. Power-and life, that spilled over into the others, through the walls and the floor, filling the entire building with their defiance, filling Kayla until she twitched with it, all exhaustion banished.

The others roused, shaking off the seductive despair that had wrapped them like a burial shroud, breaking the cycle of grief and surrender. It seemed as if Kayla could feel the House itself taking a deep breath and shaking all over like a wet dog.

And then at last they could all sense the threat that came from without: the malignancy-and triumph.

\* \* \*

:Bogeys at six o'clock! Scramble!: Greystone Sent, panic in his mental voice. They could all feel it, that power like no other: the mark of the Dark Lords, the Unseleighe Sidhe. Eric ran to the window and stepped out onto the fire escape. Behind him he heard the apartment door slam as the Guardians ran to defend their turf. The front door of the building was "twelve o'clock," so the enemy was at the back, in the parking lot.

Aerune. A sickness twisted in Eric's gut as he recognized the rider on the black elvensteed. Aerune was the one who had been feeding on their anguish, turning their grief to despair. He vaulted over the railing, and let a touch of Power carry him lightly five stories to the ground. Outside the bespelled air conditioning of his apartment, the summer heat enveloped him like a glove, plastering his white dress shirt to his body as sweat sprang out of every pore.

The other three-no, four-Guardians reached the ground at the same time he did and fanned out, not seeing Aerune yet. Eric didn't see Ria-she was probably still inside, sitting on Kayla. That was a small mercy. The last time any of them had faced Aerune, he'd been kidnapping and draining Talent-and Kayla would be just the sort of morsel that would whet his appetite-if he weren't already glutted with the power he'd siphoned off from Guardian House and its inmates. Aerune glowed with Power in Eric's mage-sight-power enough to rock the city around their ears.

But tonight it seemed that Aerune had other plans.

"Greetings, mortal pests-and Bard." Aerune bowed with a flourish, leaning over his mount's saddle, hugely pleased with himself. When he spoke, the glamourie that surrounded him vanished, and the others could see him as well. "It is a lovely evening, is it not?"

"What does he want?" Toni whispered to Eric. "You're the expert on elves."

"Good evening, Lord Aerune."

Eric stepped forward, bowing in turn. Good manners, due form, these were vital in dealing with High Court Sidhe, whether Dark or Bright. Ignore the forms, and they could kill you out of hand, but if you

played by the rules, they had to as well. "You are far from home."

"I ride over lands I intend to claim," Aerune said. "Had you fallen into my trap, I could have done so tonight without difficulty-but no matter. I am an apt pupil, Bard, and I have learned your lessons well. My allies daily grow stronger . . . and I can wait while you wither and die. Mortals die so easily-ah, but you have already discovered that this fine evening, have you not?"

He means Jimmie, Eric realized, and held onto his temper with a great effort. Fury was weakness. It would not help him.

"Yes, I can wait," Aerune continued, "while all you can do is age and die, pathetic mortal meat that you are. Perhaps I will save you from that, and grant each of you a hero's death."

Aerune drew back his hand. It glowed blackly with levin-fire. Eric barely had time to throw a shield over himself and the others, but they were not his target. Aerune struck at the House itself, balefire fountaining over bricks and mortar, until the walls of the building itself ran with cold fire.

Eric could hear screams coming from inside. The Sensitives of Guardian House would have nightmares for months, but he dared not look away from the Unseleighe Lord. He wasn't powerful enough to take on Aerune by himself, the Guardians had no experience with the Sidhe, and Hosea was untrained either as Guardian or Bard. And nightmares were better than body bags.

Seeing that none of them would attack, Aerune began to laugh. "But not tonight. No, tonight, in token of the great love I bear for you all, I bring you . . . a gift."

Something-someone-staggered forward, sprawling at their feet. It was a girl-a woman-dressed in a glove-tight suit of black leather studded in silver, that covered all of her but her face. Silver hair spilled down her back, glittering in the parking lot's merciless halogen lights.

She wore a collar and leash, and she was human.

Aerune's mount reared and vaulted through the Portal he had opened. The Portal vanished, but his laughter echoed in the air.

Eric ran forward to help the girl up, but she scabbled backward on hands and knees, whimpering. The leash dragged along the ground. She was hemorrhaging Power, radiating like a beacon, and Eric could detect no hint of shielding.

"Hey, take it easy. We won't hurt you."

She shook her head-he still couldn't see her face-but she began to laugh breathlessly, a sound chilling in its hopelessness.

"What the hell is going on?" Ria demanded, arriving with Kayla. "What's that?"

"Aerune said she was a present," Eric said tightly.

The crouching figure looked up.

There was a frozen moment of silence.

"You," Ria breathed, fury in her voice.

The woman scrambled to her feet and tried to run, but Ria was faster. She lunged forward, grabbing a handful of silver hair and dealing a stinging open-handed slap with the other. She drew back her hand to slap the woman again, but Eric grabbed her.

"Ria! Stop it! What's going on?"

Ria glared at him, green eyes flaming, her hand still fisted in the woman's hair. She shook her victim. Ria's handprint stood out vividly against her skin.

"Don't you know who this is, even with the clever plastic disguise? Meet Jeanette Campbell: she invented T-Stroke, and I'm going to make her wish she'd never been born. Let go of me!" She struggled, trying to pull her arm free of Eric's grip. Jeanette cowered back, panting and whimpering.

"Now, Miss Llewellyn," Hosea said mildly. He picked up the trailing leash and looped it around his hand. "She isn't going anywhere. And I think we'd all like some answers."

"She's mine!" Ria snarled.

"No, she isn't," Eric said levelly. "Let go of her, Ria. We have to find out what she knows. And then the law can make her pay for her crimes."

"No," Jeanette said, her voice barely intelligible through sounds of pain. "No, it can't."

Ria let go of Jeanette's hair to try to break Eric's grip, but he refused to release her. Jeanette ran to the end of the leash Hosea still held and dragged helplessly at it, trying to get away. Hosea reached for her to try to calm her.

"Oh, God, no! Don't touch me!" Jeanette shrieked. The raw agony in her voice stopped all of them cold for an instant, but an instant was enough.

"She's an Empath," Kayla said, her voice flat with discovery.

"I don't care if she's Mother Teresa," Ria growled, yanking herself free of Eric.

"I think," Paul Kern said, "that we'd better take this inside if we possibly can." He pointed back at the House.

Eric looked up. It was well after midnight-nearly dawn, in fact-but all the windows on this side of the building were lit, and he could see people at most of them gazing down into the parking lot. In a few moments some of them would come downstairs, asking a lot of questions that the people standing in the parking lot wouldn't want to answer.

"Yes. Greystone, is this some kind of trap?" Eric asked.

:Not that I can see, laddybuck. She's harmless.; the gargoyle replied in mindspeech. :Come on in.:

"You guys go ahead," Eric said.

They went, Hosea dragging Jeanette by the leash. She shied away from all attempts to touch her. Ria

stalked into the building without looking behind her, back stiff with fury.

But Ria's anger was a problem to solve later, if he could. For now, some damage control was needed. Eric stepped back from the building, lips pursed in a soundless whistle as he summoned Power. The simplest of the Bardic Gifts—a spell of sweet dreams and forgetfulness for all those who stood watching from their windows, and for everyone else within the House it could reach.

Safe. You're safe here, all is well. Nightmares belong to the night and fade with the sun. It was all a dream, an evil dream, and it's over. You're safe. All is well.

The magic sounded forlorn and lost, like a candle in the wind. But each time the tune circled round again the magic was stronger, more hopeful. Eric ran through the simple tune that worked the spell nine times—three to shape it, three to set it, and three to bind it well—before he was satisfied. And finally he could feel it reach out to the people inside the House, touching them, bringing them comfort and hope, drawing force and reality from their hesitant belief.

It wouldn't be enough to banish the effects of Aerune's levin-bolt, but it would do for tonight. Later he and the others would have to see what they could do to unweave the harm that Aerune had done here, but tonight they had a more immediate disaster.

When he got back upstairs, Ria was sitting in the corner, seething, with Hosea hovering over her like a prison guard. Jeanette cowered in the far corner of the living room, her back against the wall, hugging herself and moaning. Her too--beautiful face was haggard, etched with lines of suffering. She looked like a bad plastic surgery case. Kayla knelt in front of her, several feet away, talking softly.

"I don't care what Aerune's done to her—it isn't enough," Ria said angrily when Eric arrived.

"Maybe not. But right now, finding out what he's up to is more important than revenge," Eric said.

Ria growled wordlessly and looked away.

"Yeah, facts are always nice to have," Kayla said, "but you aren't gonna get anything out of her while she's like this. She's got no shields, Eric. None. How can somebody be an Empath, and her age, and alive, and not have shields?"

Eric shook his head. "Maybe we can give her some."

"Wait a minute." Ria surged to her feet and took a step toward Jeanette. "You're going to help her?" She glared furiously at the three of them. Kayla glared right back.

"I'm going to—" Eric began.

"Don't worry, Ria," Jeanette said painfully, her voice a whispery croak. "Just a little time . . . I'll be dead and it won't matter." She smiled with great effort, as if this were a good joke on someone.

"You took T-Stroke," Eric said in abrupt understanding. Suddenly it all made terrible sense. That's why she has Gifts and no idea of how to deal with them.

Jeanette flinched. To an unshielded Empath, strong emotion was like salt in an open wound. He saw her meet his gaze with a grim struggle. "I thought Elkanah was going to kill me and T-Stroke was my only weapon. I wish he had," she added in a ragged whisper. "He killed someone here. Aerune said so."

Elkanah? Toni said that was Jimmie's brother's name! It made terrible sense-Jimmie's brother would have been able to get through her shields. If she had felt his pain, if he had led her to her death . . .

"Let me help you," Kayla repeated, reaching out.

"Don't touch me!" Jeanette gasped, shrinking back. "Whoever you are, you can't fix this. I've seen Healers die. I know. Please."

Kayla drew back. "We've got to do something. We can't just let her die," she said pleadingly to Eric.

Eric looked at Ria. Of everyone there, she was the only one, aside from Jeanette, who knew anything about how T-Stroke worked. All Eric knew was that Jeanette Campbell had come up with a drug that turned ordinary people into Talents . . . and killed them.

"Yes, we can," Ria said. "That's what T-Stroke does. It kills people a few hours after someone gives it to them. Only your clock wasn't running while you were in Underhill, was it, Campbell? Too bad Aerune's hung you out to dry, isn't it? Maybe now you'll know what it's like to die the way all the people you killed died."

Jeanette met Ria's gaze, though Eric could see that for her it was as much of an effort as to thrust her hand into an open fire. And just as agonizing.

"I never hurt you, Ria. Just your pride. Others have a lot more right to my head than you do. Stand in line." Jeanette gasped and doubled over, hugging herself against sudden stabbing pain, coughing raggedly until she began to gag. Kayla winced, flinching back from Jeanette's distress. Hosea crossed the room and swooped Kayla up as if she were a doll, depo-siting her on the couch at the far side of the room.

"You have got to stop Lord Aerune," Jeanette got out through gritted teeth. "He's got help." She curled into a fetal ball on the floor, shaking and gasping.

"I think if you've got any rabbits, Eric, now's the time to pull 'em out of your hat," Hosea said quietly.

But what could he do? He couldn't send Jeanette back to Underhill-from the looks of things, she wouldn't survive long enough for Lady Day to make it to the Everforest Gate. And he couldn't heal her-she was right; whatever T-stroke did to the human body, it was beyond the ability of either Healer or Bard to undo. Her time was running out.

But if he could stop time here . . .

"I'm going to try something," Eric said to the others. He thought about asking Hosea to help him, but he wasn't sure how Guardian Magic layered over Bardic Gift worked, and this wasn't any time to go doing field tests. "It'll buy us the time to figure this out, I hope, but it might feel kind of weird. Don't fight me, okay?"

"Whatever help we can give is yours," Paul answered.

Eric looked at Ria. She had power that stemmed from her half-Sidhe heritage and a lifelong study of sorcery. She could help him-or make this impossible.

Ria took a deep breath and nodded. "You're right. She's right. Do what you can. I won't stop you."

The first of the two spells was easy: a simple warding, to build the shields for Jeanette that she couldn't build herself. Eric saw them settle into place around her, saw her uncoil from her fetal crouch, panting with relief.

The second part was harder: to stop time itself for all of them here in this room. He didn't know if he could do it at all, if the House would permit it, and if he could, it wouldn't be for long. But he had to try.

For Eric, for any Bard, magic was music. He took a deep breath, holding the finished tune-the finished spell-fully formed within his mind-then letting it uncoil, filling him with music as he filled it with power. "Backward, turn backward, O 'Time in Thy flight . . . ' "

It was like rolling a giant boulder uphill. He gritted his teeth, focusing his will on that impossible task. He got through the first iteration, but there were eight more to go before the spell was truly complete.

Seven-six-five- And he had no more to give. For a moment he thought he would fail, that the spell would uncoil right then, then new strength came flowing into the working.

Ria.

:I said I'd support your decisions, remember?: her cool voice came in his mind.

Four-three-two-one-and the spell was set and began to run. The walls of the room grew pale and indistinct, the doors and windows vanished, leaving the eight of them suspended in a bubble of silvery timelessness.

"You must teach me that sometime," Paul said respectfully, looking only a little rattled. José and Toni were looking around at the transformed apartment, wary looks of wonder on their faces.

"Yeah," Eric said, sighing. He turned back to Jeanette. She was sitting up, breathing more easily. She looked at Eric.

"This is magic, but it isn't a cure," he told her. "I don't know how long I can hold this bubble, but when it pops . . . you're probably going to go with it," he finished reluctantly.

"Just as well," Jeanette answered. "I've killed a lot of people. It's time I paid for that."

"It isn't enough."

It was Hosea who spoke, coming to the center of the room and looking down at Jeanette with a stern expression on his face that Eric had never seen before. "I'm not sure who you are or what you've done, ma'am, but Miss Llewellyn seems to think it's something pretty bad. You can't wipe out something like that with one grand gesture and a quick death. It's gonna take a power of effort and time-a lifetime of doing good, and more."

"I don't have a lifetime," Jeanette said, looking at him. "And I suck at social work. If you can think of any way around that, I'm open to suggestions." She shook her head, looking away. "I did have, once. All the time in the world-a lifetime to use however I wanted. But I pissed it away and you don't get a second chance, so be happy, Ria, because I'm going to fry in Hell for a thousand years." She closed her eyes, gathering her resources. "Here's what you need to know. Aerune found where I was hiding. He sent Elkanah, one of Lintel's Threshold ops, to bring me to somewhere he could get his hands on me. He's got

most of my stash of T-Stroke, but it doesn't work on elves."

"Elkanah? Elkanah Youngblood?" Toni demanded in amazement. "Jimmie's brother?"

Jeanette stared at her. "Maybe. How do I know? People in our line of work aren't that free with last names and home addresses, y'know?" She took a deep breath. "Elkanah didn't know he was working for Aerune until the end-neither of us did. I thought he was going to kill me, so I dosed both of us with T-Stroke. The higher the dose, the more time you have-maybe if you take enough, you get to live, I don't know. But Aerune came. He took me Underhill and left Elkanah behind. I don't know what happened to him, but he's dead now, for sure. At least I know he deserved it," she added quietly.

"Most of what happened then isn't important. But this is: Aerune has human help-a guy from this side of the Hill. Parker Wheatley. They're working together-planning to start a war between humans and elves so Aerune can get us to bomb ourselves back to the Stone Age. I get the idea Aerune found a bunch of government elfchasers and gave them a little help. Wheatley depends on him now. If you can't stop them, they're going to drag all your precious secrets onto the front page of The New York Times, and then what I've done is going to look like a wet firecracker next to a neutron bomb. They were talking about . . . internment camps for witches. Crazy stuff."

Even insulated as she was, Jeanette was still painfully weak, and delivering the message had cost her a lot. She hung her head, breathing hard. "There's a lot more to tell you, but I don't think I have time."

Eric knew she was right. His spell couldn't hold, even rein-forced with Ria's power. In a few minutes, it would fade away, and time would run normally once more. And a few minutes after that, Jeanette would be dead.

"You could have." Hosea spoke again. "Time."

Jeanette looked up at him, hate and hope in her expression. "Yeah? And how do you figure that?"

"Your body has to die. You don't. Instead of going on, why don't you stick around and clean up some of your mess?" Hosea said, as if it were the simplest thing in the world.

"Become a voluntary ghost?" Paul said doubtfully. "That has certain drawbacks, you know. Once a spirit has chosen to tarry, for whatever reason, moving on becomes a rather ticklish proposition. And you'd need an anchor to hold the spirit in place."

"Like a building," Toni said. "But I don't want her haunting Guardian House."

"It could be a physical object, not a house," José said. "A sword, or a mirror, as the old tales say. Or a harp."

"We're a little short on any of those objects right now," Paul pointed out, looking around the room. "Even if the lady agreed."

"And we don't have a lot of time to discuss it," Eric said tightly.

"Hey, so you don't have a harp. You've got this," Kayla pointed out, holding up Hosea's banjo. "Will this work?"

Paul took the instrument from her hands and studied it carefully. "If Hosea consents, and Miss Campbell

does as well, I think this will do nicely. But I warn both of you: though we can hold her here, we can't set the terms of her imprisonment, and I do know one thing-if the banjo is destroyed without Jeanette's spirit being released from it, she will be dead in this world and the next, with no reprieve possible."

"I'm game," Hosea said, and looked at Jeanette.

"A choice between Hell and bluegrass," Jeanette said. "I'll take bluegrass-if you'll have me, Hosea?"

"This isn't right," Kayla said. "I saw- When Jimmie- Shouldn't she go on and find what's waiting for her?"

"No, thanks," Jeanette said briefly, and shuddered. "I think I've seen it."

"Everybody deserves a chance to fix what they broke," Hosea agreed. "If you do right, Miss Jeanette, I'll do right by you."

"Folks-" Eric said urgently.

"Come here, Jeanette. Take the banjo. Eric, when I give the word, release your spell and let us cast ours," Paul said. "I warn you, Miss Campbell, this isn't going to be pleasant for you. Keeping a spirit from passing over is a terrible thing, painful for both the spirit and the enchanter, even when full consent is involved. You may wish we hadn't."

"Just do it, for God's sake." Jeanette crawled to the center of the room and sat, reaching out to take the banjo and cradling it in her arms. The Guardians formed a circle around her, even Hosea, who looked very unsure of himself.

"Call this your baptism of fire," Toni told him.

"I can't-" Eric said, just as Paul said: "Now."

With a pang of relief, Eric stopped feeding power to his spell and felt it uncoil and vanish. Time rushed back into the room like the incoming tide filling a sea cave. Jeanette gasped and fell over on her side, groaning and clutching the banjo tightly.

Light surrounded the five of them, like an egg of multicolored opal. Ria reached out for Eric's hand, and he took it.

Eric wasn't sure he believed what he saw happen next. He saw Jeanette-a ghostly, different-looking Jeanette-climb to her feet, stepping over the slumped body on the floor. She gazed around, frightened, shaking her head, obviously looking for a way out. But there was nowhere to go. She beat against the walls of the egg, crying out silently in frustration.

Kayla jerked forward.

"No, Kayla," Ria said. "Her choice, right or wrong." Ria coaxed Kayla to sit down again. The young Healer's face was a mask of frustration. "You don't know," she repeated.

"Jimmie went to what she deserved, after a lifetime of service and self-sacrifice. Do you think Jeanette wants to face what she deserves?" Ria asked.

"How can you be sure you're right?" Kayla demanded.



"I don't have to be," Ria said austerely. "All I have to do is let her make her own mistake."

Slowly, the egg of light shrank, keeping Jeanette imprisoned within it despite her struggles, dwindling until it surrounded the banjo alone, forcing her down with it.

Then the light was gone.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have created the world's first haunted banjo," Paul said wearily. "And I wish I felt better about doing it."

"You did what you had to, Paul. We all did," Toni answered.

Hosea picked up the banjo from where it lay against Jeanette's dead body. One of the strings promptly broke, and in the faint ringing Eric thought he could hear the echo of a human voice.

:Bluegrass . . . :

"Feels heavier," Hosea said, hefting the instrument. He began to detune the banjo, taking the tension off the remaining strings.

"Well, this has been a hell of a night," Ria said.

"Look," Kayla said. "The sun's coming up."

And it was. The sky outside the living room window was gray with dawn.

"What now?" Eric said.

"We need to make plans," Toni said, "but first things first. We all need sleep. And then . . . Hosea, I guess Jimmie's apartment is yours now." Her eyes filled with tears as the reality of Jimmie's death hit her anew.

"Eric, you should warn Misthold about Aerune's plans. I don't know much about Underhill politics, but maybe there's something they can do about him from their side," Ria said.

"Yeah." Weariness-healthy weariness this time, and not Aerune's spell of despair-overwhelmed Eric, and he dropped into the nearest empty chair. But I doubt it. Aerune's too clever to give them an excuse to move against him, and by the time I convince them he's a real threat to Underhill and the World Above alike, it might be too late. Elves don't do anything in a hurry, and nothing much excites them. Kory's the real exception there, and he's young. The others just won't listen-or if they do, they won't do anything.

"But that's a matter for another day," Ria went on, seeing his face. "Come on, Kayla. It's time to get you home and settled in."

"No way. I'm staying here." Kayla got to her feet and walked to the middle of the room, glaring at Hosea and the other Guardians. "You people need a keeper, you know that? If I hadn't blown the whistle on Aerune, he woulda slurped you all up like a Coffee Coolata-and where'd you be then? You're great at taking care of everyone else, but who's taking care of you? You need me, and I'm staying. End of discussion."

Her speech took the Guardians by surprise. "You?" Toni asked.

"You see anybody else applying for the job?" Kayla shot back.

The Guardians looked at each other, and back at Ria, who shrugged, looking almost as tired as Eric felt.

"I'm not her mother. And I think it would be okay with Elizabeth if Kayla lived here, so long as someone was keeping an eye on her."

"I think we can arrange that," José said, with the ghost of a smile. "And I think I speak for all of us when I say that your offer is most welcome, munequita."

"Well, good," Kayla said. She'd obviously been expecting more of an argument, but by now Eric was used to the speed with which the Guardians made decisions. And as for Ria, having seen Kayla's taste in clothes, he was pretty sure Ria was a little relieved not to have Kayla on hand to redecorate her Park Avenue apartment.

"Then it's settled. I guess you can have the basement apartment, now that . . ." Toni said. She took a deep breath and went on. "Why don't you go home with Ria tonight, and tomorrow we can see about getting you settled in. And there will be the . . . funeral arrangements for Jimmie. She died in the line of duty. There will be a Department funeral, I think. I'll have to check."

"That can wait," Paul said, putting an arm around her shoulders. "Now it is time to rest, and to gather our strength. There will be time enough to say our proper good-byes."

But how much time was Aerune-and his unknown allies-going to give them? Eric wondered.

TWELVE:

CELTIC HOTEL

"Welcome to Glitterhame Neversleeps-and the Tir-na-Og Resort Hotel and Casino! I'm your friendly neighborhood VIP greeter, and you two are certainly VIPs."

Beth blinked, looking around herself as the Portal dissolved behind her. She and Kory stood in the center of a pristine greenwood of towering oaks-a Node Grove-and beneath her feet, the ground was covered with thick emerald moss in which violets and tiny blue starflowers bloomed. But beyond the trees she could see neon in every shade of the rainbow, and the light overhead was filtered through the glass skylight of the casino atrium, ten stories above.

"I'm Geraint mac Merydydd, but you can call me Gerry-Meredith, as it were. Prince Arvindel told us you'd be coming. It's November, the temperature is a balmy 50 degrees Fahrenheit, and sunset is at 4:33 today to be followed by a waxing moon. Please adjust your calendars and watches and return all tray tables to an upright position before exiting the heartwood."

Though two days ago it had been August, Beth's time, in the world two months had passed, as she and Kory had used the Gates at Everforest and Neversleeps to arrive both when and where they wished to. In essence, it was time travel, though the elves rarely used the gates in that fashion, and Beth's mind had been boggled the first time she'd understood that it was possible.

"But why don't you use it? Go back in time and change things that went wrong? You could keep Perenor from buying the Node Grove, keep Susan from building the Poseidon machine-"

"The web of the world is woven as Danu wills," Kory had told her, "though we may affect some small threads of Her weaving, we dare not unravel the design. I am but a Magus Minor, with small gifts, and so I do not perfectly understand the why of these things. Our wisest Adepts could explain, though they might not choose to. But it has always been so."

"But how do you know when 'now' is?" Beth had asked, frustrated. "If there's no time in Underhill, and you can go back and forth in the time of the World Above as you please, how do you know?"

"And what else is a Node Grove for, but to anchor the hames into the 'now' of the World Above?" Kory had answered, smiling. "And that anchorage is vital if we are to come and go between the two worlds in safety and ease. There are worlds as real as your own, places in the World Above, where there are no Node Groves, no Portals, and no Elfhames. Such worlds are difficult to reach, and easy to become lost in forever, nor does magic work so well in such worlds as it does here. And so we accept time as the precious gift it is, and do not make light of it."

"After all, it does keep everything from happening at once," Beth had quipped, and let the subject drop. As far as she could figure, the Sidhe used time the way humans used magnetic north: as a useful aid to navigation, but something they could ignore if they chose. Still, they were in November now, and in a day or so they'd go back Underhill, and if she stayed there long enough, everything would sort itself out. So long as she didn't think any more about it, her head wouldn't hurt. And meanwhile, there was their host to consider.

Gerry Meredith looked as if the description "lounge lizard" might have been invented just for him, and his glamourie made him look human-though far more handsome than any human had a right to be. He was wearing a white sharkskin suit with the casino's logo-a Celtic dragon coiled around a tower--embroidered in gold over the suit pocket, and a black satin shirt open to the waist. His short black hair was slicked straight back; he wore an ornate gold hoop in one ear, a host of gold chains around his neck, and jewel-studded rings on every finger.

"We're, uh, pleased to be here," Beth said, taking the proffered hand. Gerry's smile broadened into a conspiratorial grin.

"Quite a shock, isn't it? We like to think of our little -casino as a teensy bit of home here in this great big desert-and where better to hide something than in plain sight? The tourists think that the Grove is just part of our lovely Celtic ambiance, and with the trees indoors instead of outside, we aren't disrupting the local ecology either-which is more than I can say about some people, with their seventy-five-thousand-gallons-a-day-lost-to--evaporation waterfalls. Well! No point in weeping over what can't be mended, is there, dear ones? Let me get someone to take your luggage, and we'll show you to your suite. If there's anything you've forgotten, you can probably find it in one of our tragically-trendy concourse-level shops. All on the house, of course. Nothing too good for our honored guests."

He snapped his fingers, and two bellhops dressed in tights and doublets arrived. Gerry pointed at the two small bags-Beth and Kory didn't plan to be here very long, but each had brought a few things just in case. "Those go to the Lady In The Lake Suite in Tower Four," he said. Each man picked up a bag and walked off through the wood, and Gerry turned back to Beth and Kory.

"Now if you'll come along with me, you can see a bit of the casino on the way up to your rooms," Gerry said. "I understand you'll be attending Comdex along with 250,000 other lovely people? A very busy time of year for us. We have your passes and badges all taken care of-we can pick them up along with your keys when we get to the desk-but of course you'll be wanting to take care of all the teensy details yourself-we don't pry. Discretion is our watchword here at Neversleeps-after all, if we told everyone simply everything, what would there be left to gossip about?" Still chattering, Gerry ushered the two of them through the little greenwood.

Beth could see that there were colored floodlights ringing the base of each tree-the place must look amazing at night-and in the distance she could hear the splashing of a small fountain.

Neat. They can use magic practically openly, and the mundanes'll think it's just another special effect. Nobody ever really expects to be told the magician's secrets, now, do they?

At the edge of the heartwood a red velvet theater rope marked off the trees from the rest of the casino floor and discouraged casual wanderers. There must be five acres under this roof, Beth marveled, looking around. When Kory had told her that elves were running a casino in Las Vegas she hadn't been sure what to expect, but she sure hadn't expected . . . this.

The motif here in the main casino was Celtic kitsch-as if Liberace'd had a heavy date with the cast of Riverdance, with a lot of Camelot and some Robin of Sherwood thrown in. The carpet beneath their feet was a multicolored Celtic knotwork pattern, dizzying to look at for very long. Half the wait staff wore kilts and poet shirts and looked like demented Highlanders, while the other half wore diaphanous-and very short-glittery togas with sequined Celtic motifs and sparkly "fairy" wings.

The air was filled with sound-piped-in Celtic music (rather good, to Beth's surprise, and not the potted Muzak one usually heard in public buildings), the ching! of slot machines and the clatter of jackpots being paid off, the low calls of the croupiers, the hum of a thousand conversations, and over it all, the ring of other bells and chimes she couldn't begin to guess the reason for. Despite the fact that it was broad day, there were plenty of customers, both at the banks of gleaming slot machines and clustered around the tables. Las Vegas was a true 24-hour town. "Neversleeps" indeed. For once, that Sidhe quirk must come in really handy, Beth thought.

While the table games were pretty standard-poker, blackjack, baccarat-even the slot machines carried out the theme of the casino, with leprechauns, pots of gold, rainbows, castles, and dragons prominently displayed on the faces. But the wackiest thing, in Beth's opinion, was the twelve-foot-high vertical roulette wheel that towered over the rest of the casino floor, prominently captioned "Arianrhod's Silver Wheel of Fortune." It promised a \$100,000 payoff on double zero, and the most frequent payouts on the entire Strip.

"Oh, my," she murmured to Kory, pointing circumspectly. "Have they no shame?"

"None at all, my lady," Gerry said brightly. She'd forgotten how acute elves' hearing was. "We give the tourists what they come to see-and if we have a bit of fun with it, too, where's the harm? We run the quietest, safest, friendliest house on the Strip-only the people who need to lose do so here, and the people who need to win do that too. It all works out." He beamed at them happily.

"Friendly, perhaps. But how honest?" Beth wanted to know. This whole place was too big, too gaudy-and too good to be true. It made her suspicious. What were they really up to?

Gerry grinned at her conspiratorially, obviously aware of her reservations. "Devil a bit, m'lady, but does

that matter? The good are rewarded, the wicked are punished-and as for those who are sick beyond our power to help them and wish to lose themselves in games of chance as others do in drink or Dreaming, why, somehow they never come in our doors-or if they do, it's for a quick drink, a pull of the slots, and then they're on their way. We harm no one here, nor -allow -anyone to come to harm. This is Tir-na-Og, the Land of Dreams, and all our dreams are pleasant!" Gerry swept his arms wide, indicating the casino floor with a proud -flourish.

"But surely more need to win at your tables than need to lose," Kory pointed out. "If more money is paid out than taken in, how do you survive?"

"As to that, Prince Korendil, it's a fine old Vegas tradition to cook the books, and really, we don't even need to do much of that. More people need to lose money than you'd think-for one reason or another. We get a lot of convention traffic, and with two five-star restaurants and three shows nightly in Merlin's Enchanted Oak Room, we do quite well. And if there are any shortfalls . . . well, there's fairy gold aplenty here in Tir-na-Og!"

With enough kenneled gold to back it, Beth supposed, any business could afford to run at a loss. And casinos had traditionally been used to launder funds . . . though somehow she suspected that Tir-na-Og was one of the few casinos in Clark County without a Mafia silent partner hovering in the background.

"I do hope you'll be able to make the time to stop in and see one of our shows. The prettiest girls, the most toothsome boys, and more. Magic. Real magic. Stage illusionism--prestidigitation in the grand tradition of Kellar, Maskelyne, Houdini-the very best in the business!"

"Real magic?" Kory said, delighted. He turned to Beth. "We must-we could see the show tonight!"

"Why not?" Beth said. It was strange, when even a Magus Minor like Kory could perform feats of magic that no human could hope to duplicate, that most of the elves she'd met were bonkers for stage illusionism, which involved no "real" magic at all, just misdirection and sleight of hand. It was just another aspect of their endless fascination with human creativity, she guessed, but it did seem odd. Like their obsession with microwaves. And their lust for pretzels.

Elves were pretty strange when you got to know them.

"Splendid! I'll get you tickets for the midnight show-and you can have dinner beforehand in the Merrie Greenwood. You'll see us at our best, I assure you!"

It seemed to Beth that they'd been walking for miles. It was hard to tell, with all the mirrors and flashing lights, and the casino floor was laid out in a labyrinthine path that required anyone passing through it to loop around and double back, passing the maximum possible number of temptations, to reach their destination. But at last they reached the hotel desk.

It was an imposing structure-the desk itself, nearly as wide as it was tall, was pure white Carrera marble with gilt accents-and was carved with fierce warriors and mythical beasts in an antique style, sort of Xena Meets the Monks of Lindisfarne. The space behind the desk was paneled in a good approximation of golden English oak, and all the informational signs were done in uncial script, with illuminated initial letters after the Book of Kells. But the staff behind the desk was courteous and professional, all wearing matching white Tir-na-Og blazers with nametags. Beth supposed that none of them were Sidhe; though she couldn't be sure. The Seilighe Sidhe had the weirdest notions of what was fun, sometimes.

Gerry stopped at the end of the desk, under a sign that said "VIP Services," and spoke to one of the

staff.

"The Misthold party is here. Be a good little elf and fetch me their check-in package."

"Of course," the woman behind the counter said. She flashed Beth a dazzling smile. "Welcome to Tir-na-Og. We hope you'll enjoy your stay with us." Her name tag read: Hi! My name is Galadriel and her slitted pupils were narrowed against the dazzling lights.

Beth blinked. Gerry had spoken no more than the truth when he'd called her a "good little elf." She was probably Low Court, one of the host of Sidhe linked almost symbiotically to the anchor-ing Node Grove and its Gate. Low Court elves could not travel any great distance from the trees to which they were linked, either in Underhill or in the World Above, and would die if their parent grove was harmed. Unlike their High Court brethren, the Low Court elves were unable to completely disguise their Sidhe nature. They were also said to be more scatterbrained and mischievous than their High Court brethren, with less of an interest in the future-it was from encounters with members of the Low Court over the centuries that most of the tales of "mischievous spirits" had entered human myths, while the High Court figured predominantly as shining heroes and sometimes gods.

But that was a long time ago, Beth thought, watching the saucy sidhe tuck envelopes, keys, maps, and coupons into a white leatherette folder with the hotel logo stamped prominently on it in gold. From gods to resort owners. Wonder if they miss the olden days? Galadriel handed the folder to Beth with a cheerful smile. Probably most of the people who stopped by her counter didn't even notice her eyes, or thought they were costume contacts.

"Will you be needing anything else, Ms. Kentraine, Mr. Korendil?" Galadriel asked.

"Uh . . . not right now," Beth said, taking the folder. This place was as strange and unworldly in its own way as the Goblin Market and Rick's, and at that, the Tir-na-Og wasn't that different from most of the other A-list casinos on the Strip. I guess the guy who said that truth is stranger than fiction knew what he was talking about. . . .

Galadriel wished them both a lovely day at the Tir-na-Og Resort Hotel and Casino, and Beth and Kory followed Gerry past a row of shops selling souvenirs and sundries-the high-priced designer boutiques were on the other side of the casino-and over to a bank of elevators. The doors were golden, showing the castle-and-dragon logo being dive-bombed by a number of -scantly-clad fairies with jeweled wings. He led them to an ele-vator at the end that was marked "Penthouse Suites Only."

"You'll need your room key to access the elevator, and it only stops at the top two floors," Gerry explained. He took Beth's portfolio from her and extracted the room key, fitting it into a slot beneath the row of buttons. When he did, all the buttons lit up, and he pressed one of them. Beth immediately felt the sensation of weight that told her she was in a high-speed elevator.

"How many floors does this place have?" she asked.

"Twenty-five," Gerry answered promptly. "The top two floors are for Paladin-class guests such as yourselves-and most of our Underhill guests, of which we're seeing more every year, I'm delighted to say. You'll find no Cold Iron anywhere in our Paladin-class accommodations, and of course you'll have noticed there's very little deathmetal on the casino floor. Why, even the flatware in our restaurants is silver, not stainless."

"You must lose a lot of it," Beth said.

Gerry smiled. "Not really. Most of our guests think it's plate, not worth stealing. And it's enchanted to come back, anyway, if someone tries to take it out of the building. Much easier that way."

At that moment the doors opened.

The hall carpet was a deep rich purple, bordered in a subdued knotwork pattern in gold that was picked up in the wallpaper. Reproductions of some of the more whimsical Pre-Raphaelite paintings hung on the walls-not that Beth was sure they were reproductions. Some of the hames entertained themselves by collecting art and literature about the Fair Folk that was created by humans, and that would certainly be right in line with Glitterhame Neversleep's corporate culture.

"This way, dear ones."

They passed a few tastefully gold-leafed doors with various Celtic motifs done on them in low relief-serpents, claddaughes, Celtic crosses, triskelions-but not many. These were the kind of suites that every Vegas casino kept for its high rollers, and Beth had heard that they were enormous.

At last they arrived at their destination. Gerry opened the door with a flourish before handing the key card back to Beth.

"Welcome!" he said, stepping back so they could enter.

"Oh, my," Beth said.

They stood in the main room of the suite. The curtains were drawn back from one curving glass wall to show her the eastward-looking view of the late-afternoon Strip. The Superstition Mountains were a faint blue smear in the distance, and even with the dust and fuss of the city's building boom, the air seemed clear and impossibly crystalline. She could see the various casinos all the way down to the MGM Grand and Excalibur, looking tawdry and faintly apologetic without their nighttime neon.

"There's a balcony on the other side-and, of course the Roof Terrace. And now, I'll leave the two of you to settle in. If you have any questions, or need anything at all, no matter how infinitesimal, don't hesitate to give me a jingle. My card is in your information packet, and as you already know, we never sleep here in the City of Sin." Gerry waved gaily and sauntered out, closing the door behind him.

"And I thought Underhill was weird," Beth said. Tearing her attention away from the view-it was mesmerizing, and would be more so come nightfall-she turned to inspect their -lodgings.

It was obvious no marketing department or consumer focus group had been consulted in decorating the suite, because their suggestions would have run to the bland, the inoffensive, the middle of the road. And this wasn't that. It had a cheerful vulgarity, a no-holds-barred excess, a lurid exuberance that made Beth smile. See? the room almost seemed to say. It's okay to play around with bright colors. No Fashion Police here! And remember: Glitter is Good.

If she'd had to characterize the style, she'd have said Celtic-Egyptian, providing, of course, it'd come by way of the Sun King's court in France. There were several sectional seating groups in bright colors-red, blue, purple-stone-topped gilded tables in the shapes of fantastic beasts, paintings and a few statues and some knick-knacks and several vases filled with gaudy lilies scattered across the top of the bar and the entertainment armoire. The whole room fairly radiated self-confidence, the cheerful happiness of someone secure in their own style, no matter how far from the mainstream that might be.

On the coffee table was a large fruit basket, a jeroboam of champagne, and an equally enormous candy box with an unfamiliar logo, all gifts of the management. Beth went over and lifted the lid, puzzled. This couldn't be chocolate . . . ?

It wasn't. The box was filled with marzipan and divinity, candied apricots, caramels, sugar-glazed nutmeats: in short, everything but chocolate. Oooh, Purina Elf Yummies. Cool.

"I must say, we're certainly getting the VIP treatment. As advertised," she said to no one in particular. Kory was wandering around the room like a cat in a strange place, picking things up and setting them down. He went off into the bedroom. Beth followed, nibbling on an apricot.

The bedroom was decorated mostly in soothing blues and greens: there was a second bar, a second television, and enough closet space to get lost in. It had a bed bigger than anything Beth had seen outside of Underhill dominating the room, with a green velvet tufted headboard that went halfway up the wall, and a matching half-canopy jutting out above it, satin-lined drapes held back with tasseled gold ropes.

But the bathroom, so far as Beth was concerned, was the star attraction, filled with enough Eurogadgets that by rights it should have launched you into orbit, not just gotten you clean. There were heated vibrating massage beds, towel warmers, infrared lamps, a heated floor, an omnidirectional step-in shower, and a whirlpool Jacuzzi big enough to baptize an entire parish at one go. The counter was filled with bottles of complementary toiletries, everything from bath gel to toothpaste, and there were more fresh flowers in a silver bowl, filling the room with the scent of roses and oranges.

"Can we take this whole place with us when we go back to Underhill?" Beth asked, only half joking.

Kory smiled. "I think Maeve would like it. I think I would, too. I have never . . . seen any place quite like this in your human world."

"Just goes to show you what happens when you turn elves with money loose in Las Vegas," Beth quipped. "Now, we'd better go start making those phone calls and find out where those vendors Ray promised to hook us up with are going to be tomorrow."

Travis Booker already knew he was in over his head. His ID (should he need to produce it) said he was working for Greenwood Security Limited, one of the Paranormal Defense Initiative's screen organizations-and if that were really the case, he'd have no problems. Greenwood Security had a booth at Comdex; it was actually a legitimate business, providing on-site security services for vendors concerned about industrial espionage. The fact that its findings trickled upstairs to its governmental masters was something that very few people-its clients not among them-needed to know.

Until ten months ago, Travis had been a researcher. There wasn't much else you could do with a Ph.D. in folklore and anthropology-when he'd written his paper on urban myths, he'd had hopes of a bright publishing career, or at least a plum teaching job. Neither materialized-but the United States Government in its infinite wisdom had plenty of jobs for someone whose only real talent was hitting the books. He knew he was working for one of the alphabet agencies, but even Travis wasn't sure which one: his paycheck said General Services Administration, just like everyone else's; he'd been hired by the State Department (just like everyone else), and his time was occupied either in preparing briefing memos on whatever esoteric subject appeared in his in-box, or in boiling other such documents down into two-page memos.



It seemed to him sometimes that life would be simpler if they all just stuck to writing two-page memos in the first place, but the same governmental department that swore it was too busy to read the information it asked for also insisted on in-depth coverage of its subject.

Then one day a man had come to him and asked him if he'd like a new job. Travis had warmed up to Parker Wheatley immediately-the man was obviously a Washington insider, clearly going places. Wheatley had said that he was forming a special new department, and Travis's qualifications and clearances fit him admirably for work there.

For a while his new job was the same as the old-his paychecks still came from the GSA, and he even had the same office-but instead of putting together reports on the political history of Afghanistan, the subjects he was called upon to research were universally wacky. UFO sightings over major cities. Appearances of elves and fairies since 1900. A list of cryptozoological sightings organized by geographical area, with special reference to those grouped around sites of current nuclear power plants. He found it a nice change to be able to put his degree to some use, but wondered vaguely what his tax dollars were up to, if his new employers were investigating Bigfoot.

After a while, he began receiving what were obviously field agents' reports, with a request to match the descriptions in them to the closest known folklore motif. Curiosity was something discouraged in Travis's line of work, but he couldn't help beginning to piece things together. There actually was something out there. Something with huge implications for national and global defense. Something that had been here before, leaving legends in its wake, and was back again now. John Keel had called them "ultraterrestrials"; Keel's being a sort of Unified Weirdness Theory that whatever the source of this weird phenomena, it was Earthly and continuous, not extraplanetary and recent, in origin. Travis duly wrote a lengthy paper cross-referencing *The Field Guide to Extraterrestrials* with Arne-Thompsen and passed it up the chain of command.

Shortly after that, Parker Wheatley had called to invite him to lunch at the exclusive Cincinnatus Club, and Travis had leaped at the chance. Something was definitely up, and he suspected he was about to be given a chance to find out what.

What he didn't expect was to be offered the chance to be a field agent for the newly formed Paranormal Defense Initiative, successor in interest to Project Broad Church, for which he had been recruited. Mr. Wheatley had assured him that he could pick up the field skills he needed as he went along-with intensive coaching, of course-but that it was very important to the PDI to have field agents who had some idea of what they were dealing with.

"My doctorate is in folklore," Travis reminded him, trying not to be overawed by the vibrations of money and power that filled the Cincinnatus Club's dining room. It very much resembled an exclusive English men's club of the 19th -century-it was meant to-and was the sort of place that people like Travis rarely saw. Parker Wheatley, on the other hand, was obviously a frequent guest.

"So it is," Mr. Wheatley had said. "And surely you've gained some idea of our mandate from all the work you've been doing for us?"

This was dangerous ground, for thinking was next door to prying into matters that didn't concern you, and a good way to lose your job, your clearances, and your government pension.

"Well, really, sir, I'm just doing my job. And I know I'm not seeing the full picture. After all, it isn't my job to speculate. Only to provide factual information."

"Let's just suppose for a moment that I were to ask you to speculate. Based solely on the material that crosses your desk in the line of duty, of course, and with the full understanding that you don't have all the pieces. I'd be interested to see what you'd come up with."

"Well . . ." Wheatley obviously wasn't going to let him off the hook. "I guess I'd have to say that you're interested in a class of phenomena whose manifestations explicitly predate 1947, and in fact have occurred in essentially the same form as far back as we have written records, though the interpretation of them has naturally changed over time."

"Neatly put," Wheatley said. "And what would you say those phenomenal manifestations are?"

"I can't say," Travis pointed out. "No one knows. I can say that at various times in history, these same phenomena have been classed as gods, demons, various forms of non-deific supernatural beings, and, most recently, as space aliens, of which the Alien Grey is the most commonly recognized, but certainly not the only type. Whether there's really anything there-and if there isn't, why people keep seeing them with such peculiar consistency-isn't something I can tell you."

"Well, then, Travis, let me put the question I asked you earlier in a different way: would you like to go and see for yourself?"

Put that way, it had been an offer he couldn't refuse, one which had led him, over the course of nearly a year, to standing around a Las Vegas airport in the ugliest green suit imaginable, looking for . . . what the rest of the PDI was looking for: Spookies.

Travis hated the green suit, but the stealth technology woven into the fabric didn't take dye very well, so Headquarters said, so the field teams were stuck with looking like a bunch of forest-green fashion plates. Fortunately, in a town like this, they didn't stand out, and Travis had to admit that the cut itself was stylish.

Las Vegas was far from PDI's usual beat, but Headquarters had gotten a tip that some Spookies might be showing up at Comdex, so he'd been tasked to keep an eye out at McCarran International to see if he spotted one coming in through the airport. Spookies could look like anything, but the black box on his wrist impersonating a watch didn't lie. It was designed to respond to the presence of parasympathetic energy, and PS waves always meant Spookies.

Nevertheless, he'd been as surprised as anyone to see his watch light up when the tall woman passed him. He would have stared at her regardless-she was well over six feet tall, even without the high-heeled black boots, and had long red-streaked black hair that hung straight to her waist. He slipped on his sunglasses to take a better look. Their special filtering technology was supposed to cut through Spookie illusions as if they weren't there, and for the first time, Travis'd had a demonstration of what that meant. His quarry's business suit and porn queen boots vanished. Now she was wearing what looked like a black velvet riding habit, and she had the ears.

Gotcha, babe. You may run, but you can't hide. His heart raced with excitement-he knew the Spookies were dangerous, often savage, and totally unpredictable, but he was actu-ally seeing one up close! He hurried to follow her as she headed out the front of the airport toward the waiting line of cabs.

The cab ride to the Strip was short, and he had no trouble keeping hers in view. She pulled up at one of the casinos; he stopped his cab at the next one and walked back, following her inside. His black box promptly lit up again, and this time the entire face went red, unable to give him a directional indicator. The

whole place was loaded with PS energy!

He shook his head, suddenly dizzy. He had an urge to go back out onto the street, back to the airport, but a sense of duty stopped him. He'd tagged a Spookie, and he wasn't going to stop until he chased her down. PDI was always hoping for the pot of gold: a live Spookie capture, not just a bunch of glimpses and second-hand reports. If he was involved in a capture, it could mean promotion, maybe even a bonus.

Maybe I'd better report in, he thought, worried. The GPS locator all field agents wore would let the local office know where he was, but no more than that. Just then he spotted her again, over at the Reservations Desk.

And she was surrounded by Spookies. Half the people behind the desk looked just like the ID sketches he'd seen-the long pointed ears and brilliant overlarge hypnotic eyes. He swept a glance around the rest of the casino. More of them. The place was crawling with Spookies-a whole nest of them!

He started to panic, then controlled himself. They didn't know he was here, and they didn't know about the PDI. He was safe for the moment. And he needed to find out as much as he could about what they were up to before he made his report.

Roderick Gallowglass-his name was Rhydderich, but Roderick was close enough-was a happy elf. He'd been security chief for the casino for the last three years, and he never tired of watching humans. They were so endlessly inventive, so passionate. A joy to work with, really-and with the whole place loaded to the gills with Trouble Begone spells, he rarely had to do anything more taxing than point out the bathrooms to bewildered tourists.

Today, however, might be different.

He'd spotted the Unseleighe the moment she walked in the door, of course-that "you are all peasants" arrogance would have been a dead giveaway, even if she weren't swaddled in glamories that rendered her true seeming invisible to humans (though not to Roderick)-but the Tir-na-Og was a neutral zone, protected by truce. So long as they didn't make trouble, members of the Dark Court were as welcome here as were the Bright.

The man who'd followed her, however, was a different proposition. There was something odd about him-not quite magic, but odd nonetheless. Roderick could see the casino's wards swirl around him, unable to get a good grip, and felt an urge to rest his own eyes somewhere-anywhere-else. As he watched, Roderick saw the man hesitate, staggering a little as the magics did their best to push him out the door. But Tir-na-Og's gentle wardings were not designed to combat a determined will, only to turn aside those who could be encouraged to go elsewhere. Obviously the young man in the green business suit thought he had business here-and with the Unseleighe lady, at that.

The lady picked up her registration and headed for the elevators, and the nervous young man moved to follow.

Ah, laddie, the likes of her isn't for the likes of you. Time for me to save you from yourself.

Roderick moved forward to intercept the young man as he attempted to follow the lady into the elevator. He nearly didn't make it-for some reason, the green suit was particularly hard to see in the casino's misleading illumination.

"Excuse me, sir. Those elevators are for guests only. May I help you?"

The young man turned toward him, anonymous in his sunglasses, and Roderick saw his mouth gape with shock. "You're one of them too!" he gasped, reaching into his jacket.

He sees me as I truly am, Roderick realized, equally stunned. Not so stunned that he didn't take the young man's arm gently but firmly, keeping him from whatever he was reaching for-and hustled him through a door marked "Staff Only."

The nervous young man did his best to put up a fight, but Roderick's greater strength put paid to that airy notion, and by the time the lad thought of shouting, they were well away from public eyes. A small spell opened the door of one of the Quiet Rooms, and Roderick dragged his charge inside, plucking the object the lad had been reaching for from his pocket as he did. On the streets of Victorian London, Roderick had been an accomplished pickpocket, and he liked to keep up the old skills.

His fingers tingled and burned with the presence of Cold Iron-none of this new-fangled steel or alloy, but the pure deathmetal itself. The device resembled an old-fashioned zip gun, but instead of bullets or darts, it held a clip of inch-long iron spikes. It might annoy a human, but it would kill or cripple one of the Sidhe. He tossed it quickly into a containment bin for later examination, and rubbed his blistering fingers together. A nasty piece of work that, put together by someone who knew more about Roderick's kind than was strictly comforting.

"Now. What can we do for you?" he asked pleasantly. It was still difficult to keep an eye on his young guest-baffling that, as Roderick could detect no magic, though the force acting upon him certainly wasn't physical. Still, whatever power the young man had of avoiding the eye, it would do him little good in a small locked room.

"You can let me go. I've done nothing wrong," the lad-little more than a boy, really, even by human standards-said sullenly.

"Au contraire. You were on the verge of annoying one of our guests, and you just tried to kill me, as well you know. Best make a clean breast of things, lad. If you're in trouble, we can help you."

"Help us? We've had more than enough of your kind of help! I- I have nothing to say." The lad backed away, putting the table in the center of the room between them. His expression was hard to read through the mirrorshades, but he sounded terrified.

As well he might, did he have dealings with the Dark Court, Roderick thought philosophically. Still, that didn't mean he had to bring his vendetta here.

"Nothing to say? Let me help you," Roderick said. He cast a simple glamourie, one that would make the young man see him as a trusted friend.

Nothing happened.

Roderick frowned, moving toward the boy, who recoiled. "I'll call the police!"

"From here? A good trick, that. I rather think you ought to tell me who you are, first-and if you canna do that, then you'll have to show me."

He cornered the boy quickly, and plucked the glasses from his face. As Roderick touched them, he felt a tingle of not-quite-magic, from the glasses and the suit as well. It was they which held the interference to his spells, not the lad. Possibly not a private vendetta, then.

Ruthlessly-and with little cooperation-he searched the boy, removing all loose objects from his person. No other weapons, and not much in the way of the gadgetry and paperwork humans carried with them everywhere they went. He tossed the items to the table and looked through the wallet.

"Well, now, Travis Booker, what business is it that you have with the Sidhe?"

"The what?" Travis clung to one hope only-that the months of hypnotic conditioning he'd undergone would protect him from the Spookie's alien psionics. Without his special glasses, the Spookie looked like anyone else-a big blond bodybuilder type, well over six feet-but Travis knew better. It was one of them-the enemy-and now Travis was a prisoner in an undeclared war. He owed it to humanity to reveal as little as possible about who and what he was. Only the PS detector he was wearing could possibly implicate the PDI, and its components would fuse if it were taken from him; it was designed to self-destruct within a few minutes if its ambient temperature dropped below 98.6. He pulled it off and tossed it to the table. "There. You've got everything. Now can I go? I'll leave-I won't make any trouble for you."

"You've already made a certain amount of trouble, young Travis. Why not spare us both the rest? You already seem to know a bit more about us than would ease my mind, but we've always been on good terms with your folk. What business do you have with that lady? I warn you, she's no one to be trifled with, but if she's done you harm, perhaps we can mend it."

"Is she your queen?" Travis asked, probing for information even though it did not look as if he'd ever be able to use it. They had so little hard information about the Spookies that any crumb was valuable. He asked what business I had with the Shi-is that a personal name, or a tribal designation? Oh, Lord, if I could only sit him down and ask him some questions. But Travis-and the other field agents-had seen the morgue photos of people who'd tried that, their bodies burned almost beyond recognition by a combination of hard radiation and corrosive poison. By nature and inclination, Spookies were merciless predators, using their mental power to trick and destroy their prey.

But weirdly, his question only made the Spookie laugh. "My queen? Not bloody likely, young Travis. Nay, she's nowt but trouble for your kind and mine, if she takes it into her head to make it. But she's here peacefully, and so should you be."

"I . . . all right. I won't make any trouble." Could escape be this easy? The briefing book said that Spookies didn't think like humans. Maybe a promise-even if one he had no intention of keeping-would be enough to get him out of here.

"Now how am I to believe you, when a moment ago you were so hot at hand?" the Spookie protested, smiling his inhuman smile. "Perhaps if you were to tell me all about yourself, we could come to some accommodation."

The Spookie looked into his eyes, and Travis found himself unable to look away. He felt a pressure in his head, as if the air had grown suddenly dense, holding his skull in a soft yet merciless grip. But the conditioning held, and he said nothing.

The Spookie sighed, pretending disappointment. "Ah, Travis, you're being less than forthcoming with me, aren't you, coming here as you have with armor and weapons? Still, we can settle this peaceably, can we not?"

"Kill me, you mean?" the young cockerel blustered, still full of fight.

Roderick sighed inwardly. Too much television, that's what it was. Everybody thought that violence settled things, as if it didn't just put off the trouble to a future time. And the lad seemed to be able to resist all Roderick's encouragements to confide in him-worrisome, but a certain percentage of humans were naturally resistant to mind-magic, and Travis might be one of that happy few.

Ah, weel, there's more ways to skin a cat than by buttering it with parsnips.

If the lad couldn't be induced to tell why he was here, surely making him forget all he'd seen would serve nearly as good a purpose? Let him hunt elsewhere-in vain-for his vengeance.

"Kill you?" Roderick asked. "Nay, you'll live out your years in quiet content. But you'll trouble us no more, Travis Booker."

It had taken a great deal of Power to set the spell, to wipe the lad's mind clean of the day's events and cast him into slumber, but in the end, Master Roderick was well satisfied with his work. When Travis lay asleep on the floor, he examined the items on the table, but found nothing odd about them, and tucked them back into Travis's pockets. As for the suit itself, perhaps he'd been mistaken, for the heavy cloth held no trace of magic or spellcraft that Roderick could sense-and in any event, he could hardly take it and leave young Travis to foot it home in socks and smallclothes, now, could he? But the strange glasses-and the lethal little weapon-would remain here. Roderick would show them to Prince Gelert, and see if his lord could make any more of them than he had. But young Travis would trouble them no more.

And the puir laddie had broken his wristwatch, as well, for it lay cold and dark and unresponsive in Roderick's hand. He shrugged, and buckled it back onto Travis's wrist. Now to put him in a cab, the slumber spell timed to lift as Travis reached the hotel whose key had been among his things. With any luck at all, he'd just think he'd fallen asleep on the way to his destination, and with a little time, the boy's own mind would create a plausible tale to fill in the missing hours.

Another crisis solved. But I do wish I knew what had set him on.

THIRTEEN:

YESTERDAY UPON THE STAIR

The Las Vegas Convention Center was the largest single-level convention facility in the United States, containing 1.9 million square feet in its 102 meeting rooms and 12 exhibit halls-so the literature in the package she and Kory had received at check-in said-and after a morning spent trying to find the displays of the people she'd talked to last night, Beth Kentraine was inclined to believe it. This was the first day of Comdex, and the place was crammed with convention-goers.

It wasn't that she'd never been to a trade show before. When she'd still had a mundane job in television (though that time now seemed as if it belonged to someone else's life), Beth had attended ShoWest and a number of other conventions, some of them even held in this very place. But Comdex outstripped them all--there were hundreds of vendors, offering everything to do with computers that was even imaginable, including products that wouldn't reach the wider market for years, if ever. In just the short walk from the main entrance, Beth had seen wraparound computer monitors as wide as a Cinerama screen, 19-inch screens that you could hang on the wall like a picture, laptops that would fit in your purse but whose monitor and keyboard unfolded to the size of a desktop system. She'd seen servers the size of shoeboxes, computers so small the CPU was built into the keyboard, solar-powered computers, and computers on which you could surf the net from the heart of the Amazon jungle, no phone lines, electricity, or cables required.

It was dizzying.

Their first stop was Haram Technologies. Haram's business was shielding and buffering equipment, and they were picking up the Faraday Cage here. It had been Azrael who'd suggested they just order the stuff and pick it up at Comdex. For one thing, everyone they would want to deal with would be here. For another, if the components were shipped to Comdex as part of the trade show paraphernalia and then sold off the floor, there'd be no detailed paper trail leading back to who bought them. And that, Beth considered, was a very useful thing.

The sales rep at Haram had the slightly-unbelievable name of Mike Fright. He and Beth quickly checked over the component list for the cage (the directions said it was easily assembled; Beth personally doubted that), and Beth paid with a certified check drawn on the Elfhame Misthold account. The equipment would be shipped to the Tir-na-Og at the end of the show--just as well, as it came in a crate weighing several hundred pounds.

Their next stop was a small Seattle-based company called Orion Power and Light, where they took delivery of solar charging arrays and LION battery packs to run both the Faraday Cage and the computer system that would be set up inside it. The two booths were a serious distance apart, and Beth and Kory still had several more stops to make--computer, monitor, printer, software--before they'd have taken care of their shopping list. They could carry some of the smaller items with them, but the cage and the batteries were too heavy.

It was while they were looking for Hesperus Microsystems that Beth realized that the same guy had been behind them, just a few feet away, every time she'd looked for the last forty minutes. Even in a trade show full of eccentrics he was easy to spot--how many people wore business suits in that shade of green? He looked as if he'd mugged a sofa to get it.

"Kory," she said, stopping to nudge him. "See that man? Over there? The one in the green suit? Don't let him see you looking. I think he's following us."

Kory glanced carefully behind him, but saw nothing. Men in suits aplenty, of course, but none of them in any of the colors humans might call green. He glanced at Beth, worried.

"I see nothing," he said.

"Well, I know he's following us," she muttered crossly.

She looked worried, and Kory was worried as well. He'd had no idea this Comdex would be so big-and Beth hated crowds. No wonder she looked so drawn and fretful. He thought of suggesting that she go back to the hotel and leave him to complete their shopping, but he knew that Beth did not entirely trust him to be on his own in the World Above-and to be fair, Kory did not entirely trust himself either. Much as he loved the human world, it was an extraordinarily vast and complicated place, and the penalties for being revealed to be other than what one seemed were great.

But at the same time, he wasn't sure there was any present danger to concern himself with. It was true that there were still warrants out for Beth's arrest, but as Kory understood it, the hunters were not actively looking for her, and unless she ran afoul of one of their security databases, or returned to the San Francisco Bay Area, she should be safe from their hunt. The last time they had been captured, it had left Beth with a legacy of panic attacks, and it was possible that one had been triggered by the crowds surrounding them now. The press of people here even made Kory edgy-in comparison to human lands, Underhill was sparsely populated, and a quarter of a million of anything gathered together in one place was a sight one of the Seleighe Sidhe might expect never to see even in the course of his long life. In the World Above, of course, such gatherings were commonplace, but that didn't make Kory any more used to them.

"Do you see him now?" Beth demanded. "Look!"

Once more Kory looked where she pointed, and once more saw nothing.

"I see the booth where we are to pick up the computer," he offered, pointing in his turn.

"Good. The sooner we get this over with the better. I just wish he weren't following us. Whoever he is."

Kory looked again, hoping to see what she saw, and still saw nothing.

It could be worse. They could be wearing black. Sean Collins had heard all the MIB jokes he cared to since joining the PDI's field teams. At least the conspiracy nuts weren't looking for guys in green. Not yet, anyway.

The whole unit had been on alert since the incident with Booker yesterday. According to the tracking software, Travis'd left the airport, gone to one of the casinos on the Strip, and then gone back to his hotel. Unfortunately Booker couldn't explain why he'd done any of those things, because Booker didn't remember doing any of them. He didn't remember anything at all that had happened yesterday, or where he'd left his weapon and his optics. He had no idea why his PS detector had melted down. In short, Booker'd had a Close Encounter, and now they were all on alert. Sean had flown in from Washington last night, about the time the local shop reeled Booker in and found out what had happened. Now he and his team were looking for an answer the size of a needle in a countywide haystack, with precious little notion of where to start.

The others were checking out the casinos, but Sean had decided to cover the trade show almost on a whim-if Spookies were hitting Vegas now, it stood to reason that it might be linked with the other big event hitting town. He was wearing his PS detector, but not consulting it. The special optics would tag a Spookie just as fast-their special filtering technology cut through Spookie illusions as if they weren't there.

To his surprise, he hit paydirt almost immediately. A tall blond man with a redheaded woman, both



dressed Corporate Casual. She was human, he wasn't. Sean wondered if she knew the truth about her companion. Best to bring them both in, just in case, but priority one, as always, was a live Spookie capture.

He phoned to bring the rest of his team in-the fact that they were in the neighborhood at all was the one lucky break they had from whatever had happened to Booker-and waited for them to get here. Meanwhile, he stuck close.

Beth was furious. Kory's air of gentle bewilderment was all too obvious: he didn't see the guy in the green suit with the green-tinted mirrorshades. He thought she was having visions, or some damn thing-but she wasn't, and she didn't dare point the guy out openly for fear of letting him know she knew he was there.

But why was he following them? There was no way for the government to know she and Kory were here, for one thing, even if they did know what ID they were traveling under. Sure, you had to show ID every time you boarded a plane, these days, but they'd used a Gate to get here.

And for another, he didn't really look like a Fed.

Maybe he thinks we're somebody else. The thought made her smile humorlessly. No matter who he thought they were, the moment he arrested them and ran their prints through VICAP, her outstanding warrants would show up-and she wasn't sure what Kory's fingerprints would look like. Elven glamories and spells couldn't do a lot to fool machines, only the people who ran them.

But the green man wasn't going to arrest them. Not if Beth had anything to say to the matter. :Bredana? Can you hear me?:

There was a long wait-seconds-before she felt the elven-steed's faint reply. Bredana and Mach Five were at Elfhome Misthold, but they were stabled in the World Above precisely in case Beth or Kory needed to Call them. :Come here--quietly-and bring Mach Five with you. I think we may need a quick exit.:

She felt the faint tickle of the elvensteed's assent. San Francisco was at least eight hours away by car, and while the 'steeds could duck back Underhill to make their way here swiftly, she couldn't count on them to be here much inside of half an hour-twenty minutes if they really pushed things. She knew Kory would think she was just being paranoid to summon them-or, worse, that she was seeing little (or big) green men who weren't there. To be honest, she'd spent enough time jumping at shadows before they'd gone Underhill to live to give him good reason. But this time it was different.

He is there. I do see him.

Why can't Kory?

They reached the Hesperus Microsystems booth, and Beth pulled Kory past it. No sense in giving the Man In Green their whole itinerary. It was bad enough that their watchers would be able to find out everything they'd already bought-and while the information couldn't help them, nor could they trace the equipment once it had been taken Underhill-Beth resented giving up any information to her persecutors.

She stopped a few booths down from Hesperus, in front of a booth that seemed to be selling very large

concave mirrors. She could see herself and Kory in them, weirdly distorted.

And she could see the green guy.

"Look," she said, in a teeth-gritted voice. "There. Look in the mirror. See him? Behind the booth with the yellow -banner."

"I see him," Kory said.

Relief washed through her. Oh, thank the Mother! I wasn't completely sure I wasn't losing my mind. "He's the one that's been following us since we got here."

Kory turned slightly, pretending an interest in the booths on the opposite side of the aisle, and looked behind him. His hand closed over Beth's, and she could feel his shock.

"I don't see him."

He glanced back at the mirror. "Only here. In the mirror. Not there."

"What? That's not possible." Elves were immune to most broad-spectrum glamouries. If Beth could see him, there was no reason Kory shouldn't.

"It is true," Kory said. "I see him in the mirror. But when I look directly at him, he isn't there."

"Let's get out of here," Beth said in a low voice. "I called our rides, but I don't know when they'll get here."

"And they cannot enter the convention center in any case," Kory said practically. He began moving toward the exit, pulling Beth with him. "We must get back to the hotel. Prince Gelert will know what must be done."

"What about our stuff?" Beth asked in spite of herself. They couldn't just abandon it, not when it was their passkey into Chinthliss' library.

"We'll get it somehow. I was a fool to bring you here and expose you to such danger," Kory said bitterly.

"Hey-my choice," Beth said reassuringly. "I just wish I knew what the hell's going on."

Something had spooked the Spookie. Sean grinned mirthlessly at his own joke. He wasn't sure what-the stealthtech woven into his suit should keep the thing from reading his brainwaves, much less seeing him unless he directly approached it, but there was no point in trying to argue with the facts. The Spookie and the redhead had stopped wandering and were heading purposefully for the nearest exit.

"Caboose. All units, move up. On me," he said into his throat mike.

"There's another one," Beth exclaimed, alarmed. Same suit, same glasses. Proof, if she'd needed or

wanted it, that something big and dangerous was after them both. Or . . . just after Kory? If he'd been here alone, he couldn't even have seen them until it was too late.

Someone hunting elves with magic they can't sense? Well, that makes my day complete.

"Where?" Kory demanded, his voice filled with exasperation and fear. Beth's heart sank. If Kory couldn't see them, how could they get away?

"Two o'clock. Moving toward the exit. Hold on to me, and don't let go."

"Always," Kory answered grimly.

They turned away from the exit, trying to keep the crowds between them and the men in green. But Beth spotted a third one, and realized there was no point any longer in pretending not to look. Please, oh, please, let them be trying to get us somewhere quiet before they try something. She pulled Kory to a stop.

"This would be a good time to tell Bre and Mach to hurry," She said tightly. Three that she could see-and how many she couldn't spot?

"They say they're coming." Kory was better at communicating long-distance with the 'steeds than she was. "But can we get to them?"

"Bring 'em in here if we can't get out. Ten to one every-body'll think its another floorshow." She turned back toward the center of the hall, where the crowds were thicker. As she did, she caught the eye of the green-suited thug she'd first spotted. As she did he smiled and nodded, cocking thumb and forefinger in a make-believe gun and pointing it at her. Gotcha, he said silently.

"Oh, Sweet Mother," Beth groaned, looking sharply away. She felt panic well up inside her. They were after her-after them-and didn't care if they knew it. The exhibition hall reeled around her, and everything was suddenly too bright and too loud. She couldn't breathe.

No! Not here-not now-no matter how good a reason she had, she couldn't lose it and leave Kory helpless. She took a deep breath, half choking, fighting back the panic.

"I will not let them take you," Kory said. Comfort and calm flowed into her from their clasped hands.

"Funny," Beth said in a strangled voice, "but I don't think it's me they're after. If it was, how come I can see them but you can't?"

"Then leave me," Kory said promptly. "Get away while you still can."

He tried to pull away, but Beth wouldn't let him. "No! They've seen us together. They'll want me, too, now. And if you think I'm throwing you to the wolves, Mister, think again. If we can just get back to the hotel, we'll be safe. Gerry can glitter them to death."

"Good idea," Kory said, smiling tightly.

Trying to make headway through the crowds was like swimming upstream through day-old Jell-O. Several exits loomed temptingly near, but if Beth was right in her guesses, to leave the main floor for any of the stairwells or walkways would play right into the hunters' hands. They had to stay in plain sight until

the 'steeds were near, and then run like hell.

She'd never felt so exhausted. Tension, and the cat-and-mouse game they were playing, sapped her strength and will. The exhibit hall was a blur of sound and color around her, every display a place the enemy could hide. Kory had little strength to loan her-he needed to save his own in case they had to fight their way out. As the long minutes passed, she tried to keep herself from looking at her watch-Bredana and Mach Five would get here when they got here, and not a moment before. She concentrated on watching for telltale flashes of green clothing among the eclectically-costumed press of attendees-dressed in everything from three piece suits straight off Savile Row to Hawaiian shirts and Birkenstocks-that filled the convention space. She wasn't sure now whether there were dozens of them or she was seeing the same few over and over.

"They're here," Kory said, and a moment later Beth, too, could feel the elvensteeds' worried presence.

"Okay," she said. "Time to make a break." She was glad her voice sounded steady, because she felt about ready to burst into tears. At last they began slowly working their way toward the exit.

"Two more Spookies," Cat said over the radio link. "Outside on Paradise Road near the Visitor Information Center. You won't believe this one, Chief. They're horses that look like motorcycles."

"Nothing surprises me about Spookies," Sean answered, into his throat mike. "Okay, kids. Looks like our boy is trying to make a break for it. Move up. Cat, stay away from whatever those things are. We don't know what they can do."

"Gotcha, Chief. I've called up the Fantastigar, just in case."

"Good girl." No matter where the Spookies ran, the Special Ground Vehicle could catch them. It was packed with gadgets that made everything here look like a set of Legos, and its built-in AI was smarter than most of the field team. If only they had more than the one prototype, they could wrap up the Spookie threat over the weekend and all go for a nice six-week vacation in Aruba.

We do what we can with what we've got, Sean told himself philosophically. As Wheatley always said, there were better days ahead, providing you got through today alive.

"Let's catch ourselves a Spookie."

The exhibit halls were arranged on both sides of the Grand Concourse, which had a second floor that led to skywalks that connected both with the Hilton and one of the parking lots. Beth had been tempted to try for the hotel earlier, but had been afraid of what would happen once they left the safety of the convention crowds. With the elvensteeds waiting just outside, however . . .

She and Kory hurried out into the concourse and turned west. They'd have to go up a flight of stairs to get to the walkway. That would be the danger point-when they were away from the protection of the crowds, easy prey.

Hand in hand, the two of them hurried past a number of closed doors-meeting rooms, with programs going on inside-drawing curious glances from passersby still wandering the halls. She didn't see any of

their pursuers, and for one sweet moment, Beth thought they were home free.

Then the original man she'd seen-their leader, Beth was morally certain-stepped out of the stairwell and walked toward them, hands open, smiling.

Beth glanced toward Kory. He was looking in the other direction, back the way they'd come. She squeezed his hand frantically. He looked where she was looking, and she saw sudden awareness in his eyes, as if he could at last see what she was seeing.

"Hi," the stranger said. "I wonder if you could-"

The air crackled as Kory let go of Beth's hand and flung a spellbolt that would knock the stranger senseless and clear their way. It splashed against his shirtfront, going from invisible to visible, from violet to pale yellow.

And nothing happened.

"Not very friendly," the stranger said, reaching into his jacket. Beth could see now that he was wearing one of those Secret Service earplugs. "Zeppelin. All units converge." His hand came out of his jacket holding a small pistol-shaped object. "Stay where you are, both of you."

Kory stepped back, dropping the glamour that made him appear human and calling up his elven armor as well. There was a hissing sound as his sword cleared its scabbard.

Though the stranger apparently knew a great deal about elves, this move-and Kory's appearance-seemed to take him by surprise. Beth could not see his eyes behind the green sunglasses, but the rest of him was eloquent of disbelief. Kory swung the flat of his sword at the hand that held the pistol, but even in the face of a Sidhe warrior in full field plate, the stranger's reflexes remained good. He jerked his hand up and fired.

Beth expected a loud explosion, but the strange gun only made a short hiss, like a sneeze. Louder than the sound of its firing was the plinking sound made as its projectile struck Kory in the chest. Kory uttered a startled cry. There was a short, dull-gray dart sunk into the armor's elvensilver breastplate. The armor smoked and melted around it like dry ice around a red-hot coal, and magic flared and sparked unevenly.

"I can put the next one through your eye, if you move another inch. It's Cold Iron. I imagine it will hurt."

Kory froze, sword half-raised.

Beth flung herself at the stranger, terrified into bravery.

His gun went off. She felt a burning, cramping pain high on her left shoulder as the dart sank in, but she was no creature of magic to burn at the touch of iron. She scrabbled for the gun, trying to get her hands on it.

There was a sound of glass breaking in the stairwell, as thick, crack-resistant, shatterproof glass gave way beneath the assault of elvensteed hooves. Kory jerked her away from the stranger-Beth yelped in pain as his hands closed over her injured shoulder-and pointed his sword at the stranger's chest. The man froze, hands spread wide.

"I do not know what quarrel you think you have with us, but I will tell you plainly: leave us alone!" Kory

said.

Beth ran past him, to the door to the walkway, and jerked it open. The elvensteeds-in equine form-floundered up the last of the stairs, clumsy in such close quarters, and trotted into the hall. Bredana nuzzled Beth anxiously, smelling the blood on her, and Beth pushed the 'steed's head away before she could be burned by the iron. She reached up and grasped the end of the dart, pulling it free. It looked like a golf pencil, or a child's crayon: harmless, not powerful enough to penetrate more than an inch or so.

But deadly to elves.

Her left arm felt numb and tingly, too weak to be of much use in mounting. Bredana shivered all over, and suddenly in place of the gleaming white mare stood an equally-gleaming motorcycle. Gratefully, Beth threw her leg across the seat and settled aboard.

Kory backed away from his downed foe and vaulted aboard his own 'steed, still in armor. Once in the saddle, he reached up to pluck the dart free of his armor and fling it away; the armor of his gauntlet sizzled and popped but protected his hand long enough to keep him from burning. Then he turned and sent Mach Five back down the steps, Beth and Bredana close behind.

For a moment, it looked like they might make their escape. There was no sign of pursuit when they hit the street, and even the sight of a knight on horseback didn't draw more than a few glances-this was Las Vegas, after all, and the Excalibur Hotel was just up the Strip. They headed for the Tir-na-Og at a gallop, planning to cut around back and go in through the service entrance, where they'd attract less attention. Once inside the casino's spellshields, they should be able to go to ground and figure out just what it was that had been chasing them.

In the parking lot, Kory morphed from armored Sidhe knight to Mundane in khakis and blazer, and Mach Five transformed from fiery charger to high-ticket bike as they accelerated toward the main road. No one was looking when he changed, and if they were, it wouldn't really matter. The two of them were already in enough trouble without worrying over whether or not they became an X-File.

But as they reached the Strip, a shadow appeared between them and the sun. Beth looked up, over her shoulder.

A large black limousine without any wheels was hovering over them, ready to follow them anywhere they went. As she watched, it shimmered and vanished, leaving behind nothing but a disturbance in the air like a heat mirage. It still cast a shadow, but that was a lot less noticeable than a flying bathtub cruising the noontide Strip.

Beth felt her mind slowly and carefully boggle, a sensation not unlike having a lounge chair languidly collapse under you. She could believe in elven knights, dragons, winged fairies, unicorns, and magic castles without a single blink. But this flying car thing chasing them was straight out of Star Wars. It didn't seem possible-let alone real-and it might be able to do anything.

We can't go back to the casino, she realized with a sinking feeling. We'd just be leading them right into the middle of Glitterhame Neversleeps-and these guys probably aren't all that picky about which elves they kidnap.

Glancing to her side, she saw that Kory had come to the same conclusion. He pointed south-down the Strip, out of town. Beth nodded, glad that her dark turtleneck and blazer concealed the amount she was bleeding. He knew she was hurt, but the last thing she needed was for Kory to be worrying about her

when he ought to be worrying about himself. And it wasn't a bad injury. More of a puncture wound, painful and annoying and messy, as if someone had driven a tenpenny nail into the fleshy part of her shoulder.

The two elvensteeds accelerated down the road, weaving in and out of afternoon traffic with blithe disregard of local speed laws, but no matter how fast they went-and at the end of the first mile they were doing well over 100 mph-the flying car kept up with them (at least as far as Beth could judge from the coffin-shaped shadow that raced ahead along the ground). The two elvensteeds were invisible to ordinary traffic now-but no matter how they zigged and detoured, the vehicle paced them as though they were plainly visible. Beth very much wanted to talk to Kory, to ask him what he thought, but that would involve stopping, and the only thing that was keeping them even slightly safe at the moment was sheer speed.

We can't hide, and we can't run. What does that leave?

All they needed was a few seconds and a little privacy, and the elvensteeds could open a Portal that would take them back to the casino, but that assumed that the Men In Green couldn't follow that as well, and at the moment Beth thought that was too dangerous an assumption to make. The best thing to do-and undoubtedly Kory's plan-was to lose their pursuers entirely before doubling back.

If they could.

The airport flashed by in a blur of palm trees, and in a few seconds more they were on the open road. Even in November, the desert sun hammered down on blacktop and pale red rock, casting the harsh desert landscape into merciless relief.

And still the shadow over their heads paced them.

At the moment it began to seem that the contest would settle into one of sheer endurance, the hovercraft opened fire. Pale flashes of light wove a lattice in the air ahead of them, driving them off the road, herding them in a circle back the way they came-and undoubtedly into the arms of other pursuers. The elvensteeds exerted themselves to the utmost, reaching unimaginable speeds, but the hovercraft easily paced them, throwing up barriers of laser fire whenever the 'steeds tried to escape. That they wanted to capture, not kill, the two of them was clear-and frightening, especially since it seemed like only a matter of time until they got their wish. The elvensteeds were fast, and nimble, but doubly handicapped by having to care for their riders: sudden stops and changes of direction might fling Beth and Kory from their saddles, and Beth, injured as she was, couldn't hold on very well.

Suddenly Mach Five wheeled around and turned back the way he'd come. Beth waited a moment for Bredana to follow-and was filled with sudden stricken fury when she didn't. Everything she tried was useless; the elvensteed would not obey her.

"Kory! Damn you!"

Unable to make her mount heed her, Beth flung herself from Bredana's seat. The elvensteed, sensing her intention, had barely enough time to bring herself to a stop, but Beth still bit the dust hard, sending a lance of pain through her shoulder. She staggered to her feet, growling deep in her throat. Kory and Mach Five were only a faint speck upon the horizon, the invisible hovercar somewhere above them.

The elvensteed came up behind Beth timidly. Beth swung around and grabbed her by the handlebar with her good hand, shaking with rage. How dare Kory go off and sacrifice himself? How was she ever going

to get him back once the MIGs had him? Didn't he understand that going off in this quixotic fashion didn't help?

"Find him," she told Bredana in a low dangerous voice. "Find him now."

If he lived through this, he would certainly receive-and deserve-a severe scolding from Beth, Kory thought distractedly. A part of his mind was occupied with sorting the chaotic pictures Mach Five sent him of the terrain the elvensteed had covered on its run here; as much as possible, he wished to choose his ground for what he was about to try. Not for the first time, he wished he had more of his elders' skill in the Art, but Prince Korendil of the High Court of Elfhame Sun-Descending was only a Magus Minor; gifted with little more than the native skill in geasa and glamouries that were the birthright of all the Children of Danu. What he was minded to try now would tax the power of a great Adept, a Magus Major. But he could imagine no other solution to their problem. They must escape the flying car, and they could neither outrun it or hide from it. They dared not lead it back to the other elves, for he now realized that Beth had been right-the strange men in the green suits seemed to be hunting the Seleighe Sidhe, and doing it with tools that seemed near magical in effect, yet held nothing of the Art.

That any sufficiently advanced technology was indistinguishable from magic was a favorite saying of Beth's, and right now Kory hoped desperately that she was right, and that what they were facing was an advanced technology. Because if it wasn't, his plan wouldn't work. And if it didn't work, he and Beth would be prisoners within the hour.

He urged Mach Five to greater speed across the open desert, exulting inwardly when the flying car followed. Let them think he fled in blind panic, so long as they pursued him at the pace he set. And then he withdrew all his attention from his surroundings, to concentrate on the spell he must cast.

Node Groves held Gates, semipermanent Portals between Underhill and the World Above that anchored the elfhames both in time and in space, and most of the traffic between the worlds used such Gates. Elvensteeds could, by their very nature, open a Portal anywhere at very little cost to themselves, but only for themselves and their riders. The Sidhe could open Portals away from the vicinity of a Gate and pass anything through them, but to open such a Portal away from a Node and its anchoring Grove took both Art and Power-the more Cold Iron or inanimate mass involved, the more power it took.

Beth said modern computers contained very little metal because they were so advanced. Kory only hoped that an invisible car that flew was even more advanced than the computers he had seen today, or the backlash from his spell would guarantee he would not have to concern himself with Beth's scolding.

He closed his eyes and concentrated, making the shape of his intention clear in his mind. He drew on Mach Five's power as much as he dared, adding it to his own, though he well knew he could not take too much or his elvensteed would not be able to maintain the pace Kory had set. Desperation drove him-he would not think about the fact that his spells had been useless against the Man In Green before, he would not think about the fact that if he failed here he would be helpless, all his power spent. He concentrated, summoned up all his power, his will, his need . . .

And opened a Portal directly in the path of the onrushing aircar.

It hurtled through and vanished, the Portal closing behind it. Kory only had the strength to hold a Portal for seconds-he had needed to ensure that both he and his pursuer were going so fast that the aircar could neither stop nor turn aside. Mach Five staggered to a halt and stood, head hanging, sides heaving. Kory,



drained and exhausted by that ultimate effort, slid from his 'steed's back to lie dazed and motionless beneath him in the desert sun.

Beth reached them a few moments later. She jumped from Bredana's saddle and staggered over to where Kory was groggily trying to sit up.

"What happened?" Beth demanded. "Where are those guys that were following you? Are you all right?"

"I don't know," Kory said, his voice blurry. "But I do not think they will be back for a while."

On the long-and considerably slower-return trip to Las Vegas, Kory explained what he had done. They were riding together on Bredana, leading the exhausted-but smug-Mach Five.

"Perhaps it was not the safest course to take, nor yet the wisest, for now they are somewhere in Underhill with their vehicle and their weapons, but it was the only one I could think of, Beth, and I did not want you near me when I tried. It was possible that the backlash would have . . . So I wanted you out of the way before I tried anything."

"If you ever scare me like that again, Kory, you'll wish they had gotten you," Beth promised feelingly. "But . . . how can we be sure you got all of them, or that they won't be back? Leaving aside the question of who they are in the first place."

"I can't," Kory said somberly. "But if they last saw us fleeing into the desert, that is where they will seek us-and our vanished pursuers-and we may gain the sanctuary of Glitterhame Neversleeps unmolested. I think it is time to lay this whole matter before Prince Gelert and cry his aid. It is a greater peril than I have wit to solve."

Upon their return to the Tir-na-Og Casino, Beth and Kory immediately sought out their host, glad to discover that there was stabling for Otherworldly steeds as well as more conventional parking beneath the casino.

Gerry Meredith was devastated to hear about the trouble they'd had at Comdex. "But lovely people, how hideous that something like this should have happened to you on your very first visit to our wonderful city! Certainly you must not stir a step from your rooms, and I assure you, we will all be supernaturally vigilant! Don't worry a hair on your pretty little heads about your shopping list-leave it entirely to me; I have oodles of entirely human employees just eating their heads off who would jump at the chance to go pick up some lovely computer equipment! We can have it brought here and transshipped to Misthold before you can say 'Owain Glyndower,' never fear. And no one at all will suspect the fair hand of the Fair Folk in the matter."

Their audience with Prince Gelert later that day was less encouraging.

"Green men upon whom the magic cannot take hold, say you? This makes for ill hearing. One such came here yester'een-but he was following an Unseleighe lady, and we thought he had some private quarrel with the Dark Court. We are not so great a secret among mortalkind as some among us might

hope-many mortals know of our existence, and not all of them have had good of our kind."

"I don't think this is a private quarrel, Prince Gelert," Beth said carefully. "It seems more organized than that. What happened to the young man who came here?"

Looking around the Prince's rooms, Beth was pretty sure whose taste was reflected in the decor of her own suite and the rest of the casino-but here there was no need to even pretend that the suite's trappings were such items as might be found in the normal everyday human world, and the whole effect was like the inside of a jackdaw's jewelry box.

"Ah, my Rhydderich set a glamourie on him, casting from his mind all that had befallen him that day, and sent him back to his own place. At the time we thought no more of it."

Prince Gelert frowned, pondering the matter. The Seilighe lord was what Beth would have to call "thoroughly acculturated"; even here in his private penthouse suite, while discharging his princely duties, he wore Earthly garb-though the double-breasted suit in pale mauve silk (with matching tie) was a bit on the flamboyant side. Only his speech patterns betrayed any hint of his true age; fascinated as they were by novelty, the Sidhe were as prone as anyone else to gravitate naturally to the styles and fashions learned when they first became adults. And if your adulthood lasted several centuries, a certain amount of cultural jet lag was bound to set in. . . .

"Have we enemies, my Rhydderich? And of ourselves, or of the hame, or of the Sidhe in general?" Gelert asked.

The casino's security chief-and head of Gelert's personal guard-bowed his head. "I know not, my Prince-and the fault is mine for letting my prisoner go so lightly!"

"You acted under my orders," Gelert said kindly, excusing the fault. "We wish no trouble with mortalkind, no matter how they come to discover our true nature, and you had little reason to think he was not alone. You acted wisely-I do confess, I would like to know more of these enemies before I do face them."

"Maybe you could see if any of the other hames have been attacked," Beth suggested cautiously. "Or see if anyone looking suspicious and wearing green has been hanging around them."

Or if a lot of elves are all of a sudden going missing, she thought and did not say. What did they want with Kory and the other elves, anyway? She wished she knew-but not at the price of ever seeing those green-clad whackos again.

Gelert sighed heavily. "We must warn our Underhill guests of what it is that may stalk them while here in our city, and I fear that too many of them will regard it as a chance for great sport. Meanwhile, I shall send word to my brother princes of all that has befallen us here, and I am sure your lord will have his own questions for you when you return home, Prince Korendil. Be easy in your mind that we shall do all that we may to see that your mission here is accomplished as you would have it, and that your visit here is troubled no further."

He looked sorrowful and proud, a combination that clashed oddly with his dress and his surroundings, but after so much time among the Sidhe, Beth barely noticed the incongruity. Now that they had warned the Prince about the trouble in his own backyard, she was anxious to finish their business here and return to the safety of Underhill. Not even the prospect of delivering the computer system to Chinthliss and achieving the solution to her quest could comfort her at the thought of what had nearly happened today.

Though the chase had come to naught, the terror had awakened old ghosts, and Beth dreaded the thought of sleeping tonight.

Three days later, Beth and Kory stood once more before the gates to Chinthliss' palace.

After a long night of unbroken nightmares, Kory had demanded that Beth return to Elfhome Misthold without him. He had followed the next day, driving a wagon drawn by two affronted elvensteeds that was piled high with the booty from Comdex. Computer, printer, monitor, software, batteries-and the Faraday Cage that would make it all run in Chinthliss' Underhill domain.

The Gate opened as they approached, and once more they found themselves within the dragon lord's great hall. Chinthliss was there to greet them himself, regarding the cart's contents with ill-concealed eagerness.

"We have brought all that you asked," Kory said, bowing.

"Excellent," Chinthliss purred, rubbing his hands together in glee.

"If you've got a room with an, um, skylight," Beth said, "that would be the best place for it. It's set up to run off batteries and solar cells, and it has a wireless connection for your Internet link." Though where you're going to dial in to, and how, I'm not sure I want to know.

Chinthliss snapped his fingers, and servants appeared to unload the cart and carry away the boxes. Unlike the flowerlike geisha Beth had seen on her last visit, these servants were burly, bald, and half-naked-picture-perfect dacoits from the pages of an old penny dreadful.

"All is in readiness. Perhaps you would like to see it assembled? I have asked my son to see to that trivial and insignificant detail."

Son? Beth wondered, as she and Kory followed the dragon.

The room Chinthliss had chosen for the computer looked as if it had started life as a Victorian greenhouse. The walls and ceiling were made up of hundreds of panes of leaded glass, and jasmine trees in colorful porcelain pots ringed the walls. A large mahogany table stood in the center of the room, awaiting the computer.

By the time Beth and Kory reached it, the servants had already gotten most of the equipment unpacked. A young man in jeans and a T-shirt stood surveying the mess; Beth was surprised to recognize the black-haired race-car driver from the photo in Chinthliss' study.

"My son, Tanim. Tanim, this is Prince Korendil and the lady Beth Kentraine. They have come to use my library."

"And paid handsomely for the privilege," the young man said, grinning. "Hi. I'm Tanim, from Fairgrove." He held out his hand. Fox had said Tanim was a friend of Chinthliss', but the dragon called the young man his son. Which is true? Beth wondered. Both?

"Hi," Beth said, taking his hand. His grip was strong and warm, the palm slightly rough in the way of those who work with their hands. "I'm Beth, and this is Kory. I sure hope you know more about this stuff than we do." And if you're from Elfhame Fairgrove, I guess we'd better warn you about little green men with nail guns before you go.

Tannim grinned engagingly. "Not really-but I read directions really well. Hey . . . what's this?"

Beth explained about the Faraday Cage, and to her relief, she didn't have to explain much.

"We use them sometimes at Fairgrove, too. Pretty cool."

With so many helping hands, the work went quickly. The Faraday Cage was unpacked and assembled-despite Tannim's protests of mechanical helplessness, he certainly seemed to know what to do with a toolbox-and soon the gleaming copper mesh, a cube twelve feet square and eight feet high-filled the room. Tannim and Kory unrolled rubber floor mats and covered them with an Oriental carpet before the servants moved the mahogany table back inside. It had to weigh as much as a small car, but Chinthliss' impassive servants handled it as if it weighed nothing at all.

Soon the computer itself was spread out upon the table, an Omnium processor-only one generation up from the Pentium, not two, but Intel had looked at its choices of names-Sexium, Septium, Octium, Nonium-and wisely opted to skip them all-with a 27-inch flat screen, full-color laser printer, and wireless Internet connection. Cables ran to the solar array lying on the floor beside the table, an LED flashing slowly as it began to charge.

"I guess we better switch the cage on before we turn on the computer," Tannim said, "or there isn't going to have been much point to this, right?"

Just then Chinthliss' butler arrived, to announce that luncheon was served. He fixed his master with a militant gaze, as if daring him to mistreat his guests. Chinthliss nodded reluctantly, although Beth could see that he was as excited as a kid on Christmas morning, and just as eager to play with his new toys.

Over lunch, Kory told the others the tale of their flight and narrow escape from their pursuers in Las Vegas.

"And you mean that those guys are somewhere Underhill? Wild," Tannim said. He didn't sound particularly worried. "Hope they've got more with them than those dart guns. Not everything down here is allergic to iron."

"What is of greater concern to me-as it will be to Keighvin Silverhair-is the motive for their attack, as well as their methods," Chinthliss said. "You say they used no magic?"

"None that I could sense," Kory admitted. "Yet their artifice was such that they were invisible to me, though Beth could see them. And I do not understand how their vehicle could operate at all."

"Beats me," Tannim said, interested. "Fairgrove is pretty --up-to-date when it comes to automotive technology, and offhand I can't think of anything that could do what you've described. Flying fast-and silently-and with some kind of cloaking device-there isn't anything out there, or in development, that could do that."

"Unless it did not come from your world at all," Chinthliss supplied helpfully. "Underhill is vast, and there are realms within it that rely as much upon technology as the Sidhe do upon magic. Yet why should they

choose to trouble the elfhames upon Earth?"

"That's the sixty-four-thousand-dollar question," Beth agreed. "We've run into people before who wanted to treat Talents like lab rats, and there's all those psychic research programs the government runs, but . . . these people knew about elves. And were hunting them."

"It would be sad indeed were the ancient alliance between Sidhe and human to founder upon this rock of enmity," Chinthliss said. "I shall consider the matter, and see if any of my resources can provide an answer to this riddle. And now, let us return to our work."

By the time the four of them returned to the conservatory, the boxes had been tidied away and the solar panels were up and running. "Here goes nothing," Beth said, flipping the switch to power up the Faraday Cage.

She heard a faint whine that cycled quickly up past the edge of human hearing, and Kory winced. When the others moved to enter the enclosure, he stepped back.

"I believe I shall remain here."

Beth glanced at him curiously for a moment, then understanding dawned. If the cage worked as advertised, and sealed off everything inside from the currents of magic constantly wafting through Underhill, stepping inside would be like going into a soundproof room-or worse-for Kory. It was tempting to fall into the habit of thinking of the Sidhe as invulnerable, but the truth was, they had as many weaknesses as mortals did. They were just different ones.

Whatever the reason for Kory's distaste, it was plain that Chinthliss didn't share it. He led the other two into the cage and seated himself in the squamous leather chair behind the table. Beth felt a faint tingle-as if a storm were brewing-as she stepped inside, and smelled a faint tang of ozone, but nothing more.

"What do I do?" the dragon asked eagerly.

"Well, first you load the operating system," Beth said, leaning over his shoulder.

An hour later, the software they'd brought was installed and running, and there was a fat pile of manuals at Chinthliss' elbow. Even the internet was up and running, on a T1 line to a standard server with a cross-worlds energy link via tightbeam broadcast to Underhill through a Nexus. Chinthliss had not only gotten his e-mail up and running, he'd ordered several thousand dollars worth of CDs to be delivered to a P.O. box in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Well, it's a good start. . . .

"It'll take you a while to get the hang of all these apps," Beth said, regarding the screensaver full of flying toasters that moved smoothly across. A bouncy march played over the computer's speaker suite in flawless high-fidelity concert hall sound. "But that's everything."

"Excellent. I am truly impressed," Chinthliss purred.

"And now, my lord?" Kory said from outside the cage. "We have fulfilled our side of the bargain."

Reluctantly Chinthliss shut down the computer, watching as the screen went inert and dark. Then he got to his feet and walked out of the Faraday Cage.

"Just as I promised you," he said, reaching into his suit jacket and placing a large gold key into Kory's hand. "Full access to my library and all that it contains. The information you seek is there. Tan-nim and I will be away on business for some days, but my house is yours. Charles will provide you with anything you -desire."

"Charles" must be Chinthliss' formidably-correct butler. As if he had been summoned by the speaking of his name-and for all Beth knew, that was literally the case-the manservant appeared in the doorway.

"Prince Korendil, Lady Beth. May I show you to your rooms-or would you prefer to go directly to the library?"

"The library," Kory said decisively.

Beth turned to Chinthliss and Tannim. "Thanks so much for all your help."

"Hey, my pleasure," Tannim said. "I'll check out those guys you mentioned when I get back to Fairgrove. Haven't seen anybody like that hanging around, but you never know. There's some weird folks out there."

"That's the unvarnished truth," Beth agreed, and turned away to take Kory's hand. "See you around."

"Come down and visit," Tannim urged. He waved, and followed Chinthliss from the room.

"If you will be so good as to accompany me?" Charles said.

The entrance to the library was on a par with the rest of the palace's semi-Victorian sensibilities: a double set of coffered oak doors twelve feet high, surmounted by an elaborate plasterwork coat of arms. The golden doorknobs were in the shape of eagle claws grasping jade spheres, and there was a keyhole on the right-side panel just beneath the knob.

"If you require anything further, do not hesitate to ring," Charles said. He bowed stiffly and walked off, leaving the two of them standing before the library doors.

"Well," Beth said, suddenly nervous. "This is it."

"Yes," Kory said. "But somehow I fear . . ." He shrugged, leaving the sentence unfinished, and inserted the key in the lock.

Both doors swung inward. Beth drew a deep breath, stifling a squeak.

The room was huge-four stories tall and as long as a football field. Books lined the walls, all the way to the ceiling. There were ornate gilded catwalks circling the room so that one could reach the higher volumes, and ladders on tracks were set on each level so that the top shelves could be reached. There were long tables running down the center of the room, and a number of comfy chairs that seemed to urge her to curl up in them with the nearest handy volume. The alabaster lamps that hung down from the ceiling bathed the entire room in a soft shadowless light. Beth took a few steps into the room, gazing around

herself in wonder.

"There must be about a billion books here," she said in awe.

"Yes." Kory looked around, frowning. "A great number of books. But where is the catalogue?"

Beth wandered over to the nearest shelf and inspected the titles. A copy of *The Arabian Nights* stood next to a book on practical gardening for the weekend gardener. The book next to that had no title at all on its spine, and when she picked it up, she saw that the pages were covered in a strangely ornate script that she didn't recognize. She put it back. Next to it was a book in French—the title was something like *A Saraband for Lost Time*, but Beth wasn't confident enough of her French to be quite sure. Next to that was an Oz book, but not by Baum.

"They're not in order," she said, turning to Kory. "They're just . . . here."

"As the information we seek is here," Kory said gloomily. "Somewhere."

"But why would he do that to us?" Beth could think of nothing else to say.

Kory sighed. "I do not think he meant us harm. It may not have occurred to him that we could not find something here as easily as he could himself. Or perhaps it did—but this is what we asked for—access to his library. He has fulfilled the bargain we asked of him."

Beth walked over to the nearest chair and sat down numbly, staring at acre after acre of randomly shelved, uncatalogued, unindexed books. Even if they searched every volume—a task that could take years—they had no guarantee that they'd even recognize the information they wanted when they stumbled across it.

Dumb, Kentraine, dumb. You were so careful at the Goblin Market to ask for exactly what you wanted. Why couldn't you put your brain in gear when it really mattered?

"All is not lost, Beth," Kory said.

"Oh yeah?" she answered bitterly. "It sure looks like it from here."

FOURTEEN:

TOGETHER WE

After the grief and exertion of the night before, Eric slept as if someone had hit him over the head with a blunt instrument. He awoke, still exhausted and disoriented, in the late afternoon, barely able to remember what day it was.

Tuesday. I think. And that means I missed class today, but somehow, I can't find it in my heart to care. Jimmie's unjust death was still too fresh, and everything surrounding it too unbelievable and tangled. Hosea a Guardian. Aerune back to make more trouble. And, unless he'd slept a lot harder than he thought, sometime last night the lot of them had infested Hosea's banjo with the soul of a thirtysomething

underground chemist.

I need a shower. I need tea.

He staggered blearily out from behind the closed bedroom door, and was mildly surprised to see Hosea in the living room, his banjo across his knees. Hadn't Hosea . . . ? Oh. Memory smacked him on the brain once more, and Eric continued wordlessly on to the shower.

Ten minutes under a shower hot and cool by turns put what was left of Eric's brain into working order. He dressed and went into the kitchen to see about the tea.

As he was standing over the kettle waiting for it to boil-Eric was a firm believer in the adage that a watched pot needs the help-his mind registered the fact that Hosea was playing quietly. And more than that. There seemed to be a kind of whispering sound mixed in with the melody, like the sound of wind through leaves, but whenever he tried to hear it, it disappeared again. Curious enough to abandon his morning-transplanted-to-afternoon ritual, Eric went out into the living room. Hosea looked up as he entered.

"Afternoon, Eric. For a while there, I thought you were going to sleep the clock around."

"I still feel like I'm a few days short on sleep," Eric sighed, running a hand through his hair. He glanced at the banjo in curiosity.

"Oh, Jeanette and I was just getting caught up on a few things, and I was hearing all about that Dark Lord feller we run into last night. He sure is a piece of work."

"Yeah. Kind of 'Welcome to the Hollow Hills, now go home.' But you said you were talking to, um, Jeanette?"

"It's the darndest thing. When I'm playing, it's just like I was talking to her-only I'm thinking, and I guess she is, too."

"Can she hear me? I mean, right now?" Eric asked.

Once more Hosea ran his fingers over the strings, and again Eric caught the overlay of eldritch whispering. Hosea grinned.

"She says she's dead, not deaf. Seeing's not quite the same, but she can hear real fine."

"Um . . . great." Eric cudgeled his brains. "I guess we kind of need to know what Aerune's planning, and then figure out some way to stop him." And good luck to that. I don't think the Guardians would stand much of a chance against a Magus Major, and Aerune's a lot more than that. It's not so much that the Unseleighe Sidhe are more powerful than the Bright Elves as it is that the Dark Court doesn't care what it has to do to gain its power and the Seleighe Sidhe do. Still . . .

"Ayup. Miss Hernandez called while you was still sleeping and said she wanted to get together tonight and study on that with you and the rest of . . . us." Hosea looked a little discomfited at the renewed realization that he, too, was one of the Guardians, and quickly changed the subject. "And Kayla's been here for awhile. She took a look at that studio down there and went out to buy a couple of gallons of black paint."



Eric grinned faintly, thinking of Ria's reaction to Kayla redoing her Park Avenue pastels in basic black. It was nice to think that one thing in this mess had worked out for the best.

"Any word about the funeral?" Eric forced himself to ask.

"Day after tomorrow. I guess I'll have to go out and get myself a dark suit."

"Yeah. I'd like to help you out there, but I don't think the two of us wear the same size."

That got a grin from Hosea. "No, sir. I reckon we don't. Well, I expect I've been loafing long enough. Time to get back to work. I'm packing up Jimmie's things." Hosea laid the banjo aside.

"I'll help," Eric said, though it was about the last thing he wanted to say. Still, it was a brutal job, and Hosea shouldn't have to do it all by himself. And it was a last service Eric could perform for a fallen comrade.

"So we can't fight this Aerune, and we can't get the elves to fight him? That doesn't leave much," Toni said in disgust.

The four Guardians, Eric, and Kayla were gathered in Eric's apartment once more. For the last several hours the six of them-with advice from Jeanette via Hosea's banjo-had been trying to figure out what-if anything-they could do about the threat of Aerune mac Audelaine.

"It's not that we can't get the Sidhe to come in on our side," Eric explained patiently. "It's just that we can't get them to do it fast. By the time they're convinced Aerune is a real threat, and organize to stop him, a lot of damage will have been done."

"A good thing to prevent, if we can," Paul said. "And from what Jeanette has told Hosea, our Sidhe friend has learned some lessons from the last time you went up against him. He's got allies in this world working to sow distrust between human and Sidhe-a neat trick, since humans are largely ignorant of the Sidhe's existence and the Sidhe, from what you've said, are largely indifferent to the common run of human-ity."

"That's about the size of it," Eric admitted. "And as usual, humans can manage to do a lot more damage in this world than any number of Sidhe. Aerune's more immediately dangerous, but it's his allies that worry me. Cut off Aerune's involvement with them, and that threat might disappear, though."

Eric spoke from experience. Aerune was undoubtedly giving the mysterious Parker Wheatley Jeanette had told them about the ammunition to put on a pretty good show for whoever was backing him in government circles. Remove that aid, and the whole conspiracy might collapse under its own weight.

"Well, isn't there some way you guys can just stop Aerune from coming around here? Nail his door shut, or something?" Kayla suggested.

"We can't exactly put a lord of the Sidhe under house arrest . . . even if we could get to him," Toni said dubiously. "Or can we?" She looked at Eric.

"I'm not completely sure on this," Eric said, "but I kind of think he could break through any barrier we set in place . . . and to keep him from being able to enter the World Above, we'd have to be able to seal

all the Nexus points connecting Underhill with the World Above. And even if we could get all the Elfhames to agree to that, it'd have severe repercussions for humanity. From what Beth and I could see back when Elfhome Sun-Descending was in danger, humans and Sidhe are pretty closely intertwined. We're the ones with the creativity, but something about them feeds that creativity in us. Split us off from each other completely, and we'd lose something pretty important."

"Still . . . house arrest," Paul mused. "There has to be some way to trap Aerune Underhill and sever his connection with our Mr. Wheatley."

"Pop quiz," Kayla said. "How do you trap something bigger and stronger than you that can bust through any walls you put up?"

They sat and stared at each other in glum silence. Suddenly there was a scraping at the window, and Greystone stepped through.

"Sure an' it's surprised at your lack of a classical education I am," he said in a broad stage brogue. "Hasn't a one of you ever heard of the Minotaur?" The gargoyle winked at Kayla, who grinned. She'd met him for the first time earlier today, and taken his arrival with a lot more sangfroid than Eric had exhibited.

"The Minotaur!" Paul exclaimed. "Of course! The solution has problems of its own, but-

"Hey?" Kayla said, raising her hand. "For those of us playing along at home?"

Paul smiled at her. "There's an ancient Greek legend about a monster called the Minotaur, a beast with the body of a man and the head of a bull, enormously strong and powerful. It was said to be the son of King Minos of Crete, born to his queen, Pasiphae, as a punishment for disrespect to the gods. Unable to control it, Minos asked his court artificer, Daedalus, for a solution. Daedalus built the Labyrinth beneath Minos' palace, and installed the Minotaur at its center. The creature roamed the maze endlessly, unable to find a way out, and Crete was saved from its ravages."

"So we need to find this Daedalus and have him build us a maze?" Kayla said doubtfully. "And how do we get this Aerune guy into it?"

"But is this the best solution?" José asked. "Caged enemies can escape."

"It certainly seems like the most promising one we've come up with so far," Toni said. "And I don't like the idea of setting out to execute someone in cold blood. Assuming we could, which I wouldn't bet on, even if we got the drop on him. Eric?"

"It could work. And it would at least solve the Aerune part of the problem-better than killing him, which even if we could do it, might gain him some allies among the Sidhe, and end up starting that war after all. Decoying him into the cage would be easy-he's always looking for Talents to drain them, and we've got two Bards and a Healer to bait the trap with. But where do we find someone to build a maze that would keep him in?"

"You're the one who gets invited to parties Underhill," Hosea pointed out slowly. "Don't you know any wizards who owe you a favor?"

When all else fails, ask an expert. And hey, I can live without sleep.

It wasn't really much of a plan, not yet-more of an idea that needed more research, and as Eric was the one with the Underhill contacts, that part of the matter fell to Eric. Could a labyrinth be built that would keep Aerune inside it, cut off from the World Above? And, if so, who could build it?

At least it was a good excuse to take Lady Day for a run. Going Underhill in person would actually be faster than sending e-mail, and if you were asking for favors, it was always best to do it personally.

The ride to the Everforest Gate sped by with the quickness of familiarity, and once through, he left the route to Misthold up to the elvensteed. She shifted to horse form once she was Underhill-there weren't a lot of paved roads here, and four legs were better than two wheels for covering the ground safely-and Eric changed from his biking leathers to the silks and mail of a Bard. It wasn't long before they reached the golden gates of Elfhome Misthold. The guards recognized him, and let him through without difficulty.

He thought about going directly to Prince Arvindel, but realized that might play directly into Aerune's plans. Dharniel had warned him about Aerune before. It might be best to start there; scope out the territory before he put his foot in it. And Dharniel was Prince Arvindel's Master of War. Eric would be following protocol as well as using common sense to see Dharniel first.

You have learned wisdom, Grasshopper, Eric told himself with a wry smile. He went to Dharniel's suite of rooms, and asked his old master's chief man-at-arms for an audience. To his surprise and pleasure, his request was granted at once.

"So, young Eric, is your student proving too much for you already?" Dharniel asked, once they were seated in the Elven Bard's inner chamber.

The room was strewn with a working musician's litter-sheaves of music half-transcribed, bundles of strings looking like strange silvery pasta, a half-finished lute neck drying in a heavy padded clamp. A young girl-Dharniel's newest appren-tice, Eric was willing to bet-had brought them spiced fruit juice and small sweet cakes, then withdrawn to leave them alone. Eric had waited as patiently as he could manage through these preliminaries, knowing that they were inevitable.

"I haven't really started working with him yet. Right now I've got another problem-you remember that Unseleighe Prince you talked to me about a few months back? The one with an interest in New York?"

To name someone in Underhill risked drawing that person's attention to you, even within the walls and wards of an Elfhome. As Dharniel had been cautious in giving his initial warning, so Eric was cautious now.

"Aye." Dharniel's face had gone still and watchful. "I remember."

"I've seen him recently. My friends and I think we need to take him out, but we haven't got a lot of good ideas."

"A moment, Sieur Eric," Dharniel said.

He got to his feet and went to a cabinet on the wall, from which he removed a surprisingly prosaic item. It looked like a fat white candle, set in a shallow dish of carved green stone. Dharniel cleared a space on his worktable and set it down, then called fire from the air to light it. And Eric got his first surprise.

The light was . . . thick. As the candle flame rose to its full height, the thick syrupy glow of its light seemed to roll outward slowly, like one of those enormously slowed down films of a big explosion. As the bubble of light reached him, Eric could feel it, like a fine warm mist breaking over his body.

"Whoa!" he said, startled. "What's that?"

Dharniel smiled, pleased with the reaction he had provoked. "You may call it 'hard magic,' young Eric, and think of it as a compression of the Power all around us into this tangible and highly-concentrated form. While it burns, we are as safe as we may be anywhere from prying ears and eyes. But I will not spend it without cause, so do not dawdle in this tale you have to tell me."

Accustomed to this sort of rebuke from his stint as Dharniel's pupil, Eric told his story as concisely as he could: Aerune's appearance last night, his taunting promise that he had discovered a way to destroy Eric and the Guardians, their discovery through Jeanette that Aerune had human allies, and intended to force the Sidhe into war with the World Above.

"And so we figured the best thing we could do was cut him off from his human allies and keep him from meddling any further in the World Above. Paul suggested a kind of maze-prison, but even if it would work, none of us has the faintest idea of how to build one."

"And so you came at once to me," Dharniel said sourly, for it was plain that Eric's news hadn't made very good hearing for the Sidhe Bard. He shook his head. "'Tis a long time to mourn a lass, even one so fair as Aerete the Golden."

"You know her?" Eric asked, surprised. Hosea had told them what little Jeanette knew about Aerune's lost love, but Eric hadn't expected it to be common knowledge.

"She was a Lady of my Line-one still revered Underhill, for she gave her life to save her people from the scourge of war and slavery. That her sacrifice was all for naught when Aerune slew the folk she had taken under her protection does not make her deed any the less, and so we honor her, though her name is lost to Men."

Oh.

"Well, Aerune still seems to be in the slaying business, and if he's teamed up with a bunch of humans to broker a human/Sidhe war, you ought to be worried, too."

"If he can," Dharniel commented. "But mortalfolk are kittle cattle, as likely to betray him as aid him, even if he can forget his ancient feud with them for long enough not to strike out at them first."

"I think he can-and so do you, or else you wouldn't have warned me about him in the first place," Eric said boldly. "His allies won't get too far with their war without his help, though, so that brings us back to the original problem."

"To slay him, or to trap and imprison him," Dharniel said. "You cannot kill him, Sieur Eric-once your kind believed him a god, and worshipped him in terror, and he is not easily slain by such guile and power as you and your allies might command. And the Wild Lands are littered with the bones of those who cried Challenge against him, and sought to fight him in accordance with our ancient laws, so you would be well advised not to attempt such a course. But to imprison him in a labyrinth . . . such a course might well succeed, if it is crafted with sufficient power. And yes, I think it would be for the best, for he has long been a trouble to us, and should he turn his attentions to his fellows once more, no good would

come of it." Dharniel sighed, as if the words had cost him something to say.

"I would suggest that you ask Lord Chinthliss to aid you in crafting your prison; he has certain ties to the Elfhames, and is well disposed to Sidhe and mortalkind alike. And it would be just as well that my lord Arvindel and the rest of the Folk were not consulted in this matter."

So he'd been right about the way the winds of Elvish politics blew, Eric thought to himself.

"Chinthliss?" It was the second time in two days Eric had heard the name-Chinthliss was the dragon that Beth and Kory were consulting.

"Who better to build a labyrinth than one of the kings of the earth?" Dharniel said, as if it were incredibly obvious. "Such a prison as he might craft could baffle the power of a god, let alone one of the Folk of the Air."

"I . . . er . . . well, do you think he'd do it?" Eric asked.

"If you put the question to him with as much wit and style as you have just put it to me, how can he not?" Dharniel asked waspishly. Eric grimaced. He was a Bard, not a diplomat!

"But as I have said, he bears your race a certain love, and if you bargain well with him and meet his price, I do not think it impossible," Dharniel said, relenting. He regarded Eric, obviously waiting for his former pupil to say something intel-ligent. Eric took a deep breath.

"Okay. How do I find him?"

Distances in Underhill were difficult to measure, as so much depended more on how you went than where you went. Time was a slippery concept Underhill, and Eric tried to think about it as little as possible. Fortunately, no matter how long he spent here, Lady Day could make sure he got back to New York the same day he left, so there was little possibility he'd miss Jimmie's funeral. Before dousing the spell-candle, Dharniel cautioned him again not to speak of his mission to anyone else in Misthold, and said that if asked about Eric's visit, he would put it about that Eric had come to consult with him about Eric's new student-a plausible enough excuse for the visit. Eric had no trouble agreeing to keep the real reason for his visit a secret. Aerune scared him, and he had no desire to bring the Dark Lord's vengeance down on his friends.

Even if that would wake them all up to the threat he presents. But there are prices too high to pay for being proved right.

Dharniel provided him with a guide to his destination-maps were as little use Underhill as clocks were-and a short time later, he and Lady Day stood before the gate to Chinthliss' domain. The glowing will-o'-the-wisp that Dharniel had given him in lieu of a map hovered in front of them, blinking impatiently.

"Okay," Eric said aloud, to quiet it. "I'm here, but how do I get in?"

The ornate bronze doors gave him no clue. He'd walked all the way around them once. They looked the same from the back as they did from the front, but if he could manage to pass through them, he knew he

would be inside of Chinthliss' domain, a kingdom carved by the dragon's power and will out of the formless Unmanifest of the Chaos Lands.

The question was, how to get them to open? An ordinary Gate-one put up to allow travelers to shuttle from one domain to the next-would have keys for as many as six destinations, but this one didn't seem to have any key at all. Not even a door knocker. And him without his flute to play a tune and hope someone inside heard him.

Oh, crumbs. I must be short on brains along with sleep. That hardly needed to be a real problem right here, right now, did it? He always forgot how strong the magic was in Underhill. It didn't take any strength at all to summon up a flute out of thin air. The flute he summoned was a thing of solidified air, no more than a shimmer to the eyes, but real and solid beneath his fingers, smooth as glass. He didn't really need one to conjure the music, but Eric liked the feel of the instrument between his fingers, the interplay of body, breath, and power that shaped the Bardic magic.

He thought for a moment about the most suitable tune to play-he planned no more magic than a simple announcement of his presence-and then began a sprightly and very baroque version of "Break On Through," one that Jim Morrison would certainly never have recognized, though Ian Anderson might have enjoyed it.

The will-o'-the-wisp departed in a miff, its purpose completed, but something seemed to be listening. Emboldened by even that amount of success, Eric's playing grew more fanciful. He drew the melody to a close and waited expectantly.

Nothing seemed to happen, but now, when he looked at the ornate bronze door, he could see a door knocker, set just at human height. Had it been there before, and he'd just missed seeing it? Or had it appeared because of what he'd played?

No sense in breaking my brain about things that don't matter, Eric told himself, and stepped up to the door. The knocker was in the shape of the head of an Oriental dragon, and the scaled ring of the door knocker was cool in his hand. He brought it down against the door-once, twice, thrice-and heard unreal booming echoes, as if he knocked at the door of an abandoned church.

The doors swung inward. Eric walked inside, Lady Day following closely. The hall he was in was as big as an aircraft hangar, decorated in hues of red, yellow, and black. The place had the same vaguely Oriental look as the doors of the Gate he'd just walked through-Chinese dragons were supposed to be very wise, and concerned with the welfare of mankind. Eric hoped this was a good omen. Lady Day snorted and nosed him nervously.

"Welcome, Bard."

Eric blinked, though after all his time with the Sidhe, he ought to be used to surprises like this. The speaker didn't look much like a dragon-more like a really high-priced lawyer.

Appearances could be deceiving. Eric produced his best courtly bow.

"Thank you for allowing me into your home. I am Eric Banyon. I've come seeking the great Lord Chinthliss." A little sugar never hurt, especially when you were coming to ask a favor you weren't sure you were going to get.

The man in the bronze Armani suit bowed his head. "You have found him, Bard Eric. And he is entirely

at your service."

Not bloody likely. Eric knew better than to take such courtesies at face value, but they were certainly nice to hear. He bowed again.

"Lord Chinthliss. My master, Lord Dharniel of Elfhome Misthold, sent me to you. I need help."

Chinthliss inclined his head graciously. "Surely you will receive it here. But come. We will go someplace more comfortable, and take tea. And you will tell me of your need."

A few moments later the two of them were sitting in an ornate and very English drawing room that wouldn't have been out of place on Masterpiece Theater, being served tea by a genuine English butler. Eric had attended weirder parties. He kept his face smooth and put on his best company manners. He'd never met a dragon before, but Bards were traditionally used as go-betweens in Underhill, and Dharniel had included a few lessons on diplomacy in his training. He'd never thought he'd need to use them, though.

"I'd hoped for a chance to meet you," Eric said, shading the truth only slightly. "My friend, Beth Kentraine, spoke very highly of you."

Chinthliss smiled. "Ah. The Lady Beth and her fair knight Korendil. Did you come seeking them? I regret to say they are not here at the moment. They are discharging a small commission for me in the World of Men. But if you would care to wait, I am certain they will return soon."

"No. That isn't really why I came. I need a maze. I think."

Chinthliss looked pleased. "A maze. It has been long since one of the Children of Men came to me to ask for a labyrinth." He regarded Eric with open curiosity. "But perhaps a maze would not serve your purposes best. Pray tell me every-thing. Leave out no detail, no matter how seemingly insignificant." He sat back in his chair and steepled his fingertips, waiting.

"I, um . . . no disrespect, sir, but is it safe to talk openly? The person I'm concerned with . . . I don't think it would be completely healthy to draw his attention by saying his name."

"Be of good heart, Bard Eric. I am not quite no one, and all who sojourn within my realm are under my protection."

Once again, Eric found himself explaining about Aerune. It turned out that Chinthliss did indeed want to know everything. Under the dragon's probing questions, Eric found himself backtracking, clarifying, explaining everything he knew about the entire situation, from the trouble with Threshold that had drawn Aerune to New York in the first place, to as much as he knew about why the elf-lord had chosen to make it his home, and the death of his love, Aerete the Golden, which had driven him to his bitter hatred of mankind in the first place.

"And it's not like I approve of the Unseleighe Court, because they can be a real pain in the-well, they're evil, but it's not like they have the power to wipe out the human race, just to add a little more misery here and there. But if Aerune gets this government connection of his up and rolling, it could make real serious trouble for everybody. I'm not sure what to do about that, but if we can just separate Aerune from these guys, his conspiracy might curl up and die. So I guess that's where we want to start-putting Aerune

somewhere that he can't meddle any more."

"It is always best to use as little force as possible, and allow your enemy to defeat himself. And such a prison as you describe would indeed be sufficient. He would be trapped within it forever, unable to extricate himself." Chinthliss sat forward and reached for his fragile Sevrés porcelain teacup, staring meditatively into its depths before replacing it on the table before him. "I can build such a structure as you require. But my help comes at a price."

"Fine." Eric set down his cup as well. "I'll pay it."

The dragon raised his eyebrows. "Without knowing what it is?" he asked.

Eric sighed, exhausted from answering the dragon's questions. "I'm no good at bargaining," he said bluntly. "Dharniel says you're good people, and Beth and Kory wouldn't have anything to do with you if you weren't. I trust you to set a fair price. Whatever it is, I'll find a way to pay it. This is too important to haggle over. Aerune's about as cold-hearted a murderer as I've ever heard of. He's killed a personal friend of mine already. He'll kill everyone I know, and a lot of people I don't, if he isn't stopped."

"The trust of a Bard is no small gift," Chinthliss said gravely. "Wait here."

He got to his feet and left the room, leaving Eric to wait. Eric was too keyed up to stay seated. He got to his feet and began to pace the room, not seeing any of its contents. Even if Chinthliss could give him what they needed to trap Aerune, even if this turned out to be a good idea, they still had to get the Sidhe lord into it.

And what if they failed?

Well, then, at least I won't be around to see what happens next. Cold comfort, but all he had. And if he kills me, at least that will get Misthold up off its duff. Not that I'm sure that's a good thing. I just know that things can't go on the way they're going now.

Just when Eric didn't think he could wait any longer, Chinthliss returned carrying a small box. He held it out to Eric.

"This is what you seek."

Eric took the box. It looked awfully small for a labyrinth, but appearances could be deceiving. The box was about four inches square, made of a highly-polished close-grained golden wood. He opened it. Inside, nestled on a bed of blue velvet, was a small, wrinkled, silvery object about the size and shape of a walnut. He glanced at Chinthliss for permission before lifting it from its case. It was remarkably heavy, as if it were made of some substance denser than lead, and tingled coldly between his fingers as if a faint electric current were running through it.

"It is a seed," Chinthliss said. "Plant it anywhere in the Chaos Lands, and such a maze as you desire will instantly appear. It will work in the World Above as well, of course, but the maze that will grow there will be of a different sort-and I do not think it would serve your purposes as well."

"Thank you," Eric said, a little stunned. It almost seemed too easy, but having the maze to trap Aerune in was actually the least part of the problem he and the Guardians faced. "How can I repay you, Lord Chinthliss?"



The dragon smiled. "As I have said, the trust of a Bard is no small gift, and I would be sad to see the place from which comes so many beautiful things destroyed. Only think of me kindly, Bard Eric, and perhaps some day you can do me some trifling favor in return."

"Count on it," Eric said feelingly. "I . . . thank you again."

The dragon bowed. "No small thing, to render a Bard speechless," Chinthliss observed. "Fare you well, Bard-and good luck to you in the coming battle."

"We'll need it," Eric said bleakly.

It seemed unfair that the day on which they laid Jimmie Youngblood to rest should be so bright and sunny. It was one of those clear sparkling late August days-hot, but without the heat haze that cloaked New York through most of the weeks of summer.

The NYPD had turned out in force to salute their fallen comrade. Jimmie's coffin was draped with a flag, and the chapel where the funeral service was held was filled with officers in dress uniforms and detectives in plain dark suits and dresses. A number of Guardian House's tenants had come as well, and tonight there would be a wake in her honor at the apartment. Jimmie had been well-loved, though no one had known her very well.

Did I know her? If I'd known her better, could I have stopped all this from happening? Eric wondered desolately. He stood beside Hosea at the front of the chapel, both men dressed in dark navy suits with mourning bands on their left arms. Ria was there as well, looking severe and correct in a black Chanel suit. Even Kayla had been persuaded into something less flamboyant than her usual Goth garb. In a plain black dress, her face bare of all but the most minimal makeup, she looked very young. Far too young to -expose to Aerune's danger.

If there's any way around it . . . Eric promised himself.

Toni stood close beside Paul, wearing dark glasses to conceal eyes red and swollen from grieving tears. She held a rosary in her gloved hands, her fingers moving over the smooth beads. Paul's face was cast in harsh and impassive lines, the mask of a man who felt deeply and knew the emotion must not be allowed to sway him.

The minister spoke of a life dedicated to duty and service-soothing words, meant to comfort those Jimmie had left behind. But there was no comfort for the Guardians, knowing she had been slain almost randomly by her own estranged brother in a bizarre side effect of Aerune's plotting.

The service and its aftermath passed in a blur, and Eric barely registered the names and faces of those who came up to him to offer their condolences and share their grief. Her co-workers were the men and women who knew Jimmie best, who knew that her death could have come for any of them.

After the service itself, the coffin was taken to a cemetery on Long Island for interment, at a second ceremony attended only by the departmental honor guard and Jimmie's closest friends. As the coffin was being lowered into the ground, the terrible finality of it all struck Eric like an unanticipated blow. This was real. This was forever. He stood, gazing down at the ground, until Kayla came and pulled him away toward the waiting Rolls.

Ria had volunteered her car to drive the Guardians and Eric to the cemetery, as New Yorkers rarely kept cars, Lady Day couldn't manage anything larger than her Lotus Elan shape, and Toni's venerable Toyota couldn't accommodate them all.

Why do we grow up thinking life should be fair? Who told us that it should be? Because it never is, and finding that out . . . hurts worse than a lie.

As the car passed through the gates on its way back to New York, its occupants were unusually quiet, constrained by the depressing occasion. Even Kayla had nothing to say.

Ria leaned forward in her seat and caught Eric's eye. "Whatever you're planning, I want to be a part of it."

Eric blinked, taken by surprise. Ria took the hesitation for disapproval.

"Oh, come on! Do you think I think you're going to just let this slide? You're planning something, and I can help."

"I, um . . ." He hadn't really thought about involving Ria. He'd gotten used to thinking of this as his fight, and the Guardians'. But Ria was a trained sorceress. And someone with her high-level Real World contacts could be a lot of help in unraveling the human end of Aerune's plot. "Are you sure? This isn't really your battle."

"As much mine as yours," Ria pointed out, with a certain justice. "Leaving aside the altruistic-that he's coming after everyone pretty much equally-let's descend to the selfish: if Aerune does what Banjo Girl says he wants to, I'm going to be persona non grata on either side of the Veil."

That much was true: Ria's mixed blood would make her as unwelcome with Aerune as it would make her a target for Aerune's human allies.

"I know," was all he said.

"And for that matter, I'm already involved. You know I've been chasing down the people Lintel was selling Threshold's black-ops drugs to. What do you want to bet that some of them are the same people Aerune's dealing with?"

"It's kind of you to wish to help . . ." Paul began.

Ria snorted. "I'm not kind. Ask Eric. But I'm not stupid, either. You have a better chance of success with my help than without it."

"We don't generally involve outsiders in what we do," Toni said, her voice neutral.

"I'm not an outsider, any more than Kayla and Eric are," Ria shot back. "You Guardians think you're special because you have abilities most people don't, and know more about the way the world really works than most people do. Well, surprise, so do I."

This had all the earmarks of degenerating into a nasty fight. Eric spoke up quickly.

"If this were just a problem like you've faced before, Toni, I'd be glad to stay out of it, and Ria too. But Aerune's my problem too, and Ria's. This involves both Underhill and the World Above, and you're

understrength at the moment. Hosea's untrained, either as Guardian or Bard, and from what I've found out, Aerune eats guys like you for breakfast, no offense."

"None taken," José said gravely, glancing toward Toni and Paul.

"So let's wait till we get back to my place and hash things out. I've got the maze-seed. It might take Aerune out, but it's going to take teamwork to use it."

"That?" Toni Hernandez said in disbelief an hour later. "That's our weapon? What next, a sack of magic beans?"

There had been no chance for Eric to talk with the others before the funeral, so this was the first opportunity they had to hear the tale of his visit to Chinthliss. He'd produced the box containing the maze-seed and passed it around for the others to examine.

"All the old fairy tales have their roots in truth, maybe more so than we imagine," Paul said musingly. "So . . . yes. Magic beans are not impossible." His eyes sparkled with the excitement of a scholar on the trail of hot new information. Toni passed the box to him, but Kayla grabbed it next.

"Hey," she said, holding the silvery seed in her closed fist. "It tickles. Weird."

Ria frowned at her firmly, and she passed the seed to Paul. José took possession of the box, examining its craftsmanship with pleasure.

"If this will not be needed afterward, may I have it to keep? It is a beautiful thing."

"Sure," Eric said. "I only hope we're going to be in a position to want souvenirs after this is over."

"Hear, hear," Ria drawled. "Okay, you've got your prison, and it shouldn't be hard to get the six of us into the Wild Lands to plant it. But how are you going to get the genie into the bottle?"

"Hey," Kayla said. "Can't you count? Seven-Hosea, the other three Guardians, you, me, and Eric." The others looked at her. Kayla glared back stubbornly. "Oh, no. You're not cutting me out of this deal, pat me on the head and leave the poor little girl on the sidelines to see if you come back. You need me! Who's going to put you back together when you come to pieces? Who's going to sucker this Aerune into coming after you in the first place?"

Eric shot Ria a guilty look. Involving Kayla would be an enormous help in bringing off the plan he didn't quite have yet. But it wasn't fair to involve a teenager in this. The danger was too great.

"No," Ria said flatly. "Elizabet would skin me with a dull knife."

"It might not be necessary," Eric began reluctantly. Kayla made a rude noise.

"Perhaps it would be simplest if you began by telling us what you had in mind," Paul said, handing the maze-seed to José. The other man placed it back into the box and handed the closed box back to Eric.

"The plan is to keep Aerune from being able to meddle in the World Above ever again," Eric said. "The method is to trap him inside a magical labyrinth-he won't be able to get out, and no one else will be able

to get in. So we decoy him into the Wild Lands, and distract him while we plant the seed. When it grows up, he'll be inside, we'll be outside. Simple." I hope.

"Nothing in life is ever that simple," Ria commented.

José frowned. "I see two weak points in this plan. How do we get him to come to us in these Wild Lands-and how do we distract him until the labyrinth is complete?"

Hosea fingered the strings of the enchanted banjo, listening intently. "Jeanette says that Aerune's fief is carved out of the Wild Lands-would that be about right, Eric?"

Eric nodded. The borders of some Underhill domains actu-ally touched, but more of them didn't.

"So if we raise up a great big magical fuss just outside his front door, he's bound to come and see who's out there," Hosea said.

"Then all we have to do is fight him to a standstill for long enough for your magic beans to grow." Ria looked at Eric. "Do you think it's possible?"

"If anybody has a better idea, I'm open to suggestions," Eric said grimly. "What we've got going for us is that the Guardians' powers are going to be as unfamiliar to Aerune as they were to me. And we don't have to defeat him. Just hold him for however long the maze takes to sprout."

"Then you definitely need me," Kayla said. "You've said that Aerune likes to eat Talent. Well, I've got Talent. He'll come after me."

Eric expected an immediate objection from Ria, but she actually appeared to be considering Kayla's suggestion. "You're right that we need bait to draw him out, someone chock-full of tasty Talent. We can't use Eric-Aerune's met him before, and Aerune might not want to antagonize the Elfhames by openly attacking a Bard. But he offered me an alliance, once. I could say I've changed my mind."

"But wouldn't he be suspicious? You turned him down once, and he's seen you with us now," Paul said.

"It doesn't matter if he's suspicious, so long as he comes," Ria said simply.

The talk went on-arguments, objections, attempts to plan for a situation that none of them could really predict. Ria pointed out that they would need armor and weapons of Cold Iron. The Guardians had swords, and Ria promised to provide them with chain mail shirts similar to her own, which would at least deflect any levin-bolts Aerune chose to throw. Kayla continued to argue for her inclusion in the mission, and Ria was just as firmly opposed.

"I think we're all forgetting something," Toni said at last. "The other night, when Aerune attacked Guardian House, Kayla was the only one who noticed. I think she needs to come."

Ria opened her mouth to protest. Toni raised a hand.

"I don't think she should be the bait. But I think she should be there. We've planned for the fight, but we need to plan for losing it, too. If we lose, what happens to Kayla?"

"Aerune will naturally return to Guardian House," José said, "seeking to complete his revenge. If Kayla is here alone-forgive me, querida-she will be easy prey."

"Whereas if she's with us, and things go bad, we can put her on a fast horse out of Dodge-Eric, is there somewhere you can send her that would be safe?" Toni finished.

"Lady Day could take her to Beth and Kory at Elfhome Misthold," Eric said. "Quit glaring, Kayla. Somebody's going to need to tell them that things went wrong, and how, and who was responsible, and an elvensteed won't be able to."

"And, meanwhile, she might be able to keep Aerune from pulling the wool over our eyes," Paul said. "I'm afraid I'm in favor of including her. She's not so much younger than Toni was when Toni became a Guardian."

"And I've already been an elvish blue-plate special once," Kayla pointed out. "And if something happens to you, Ria, Elizabet will kill me. So it's settled. I'm going."

Ria sighed, recognizing defeat. "Maybe we'll be lucky and all be killed," she said sardonically.

"I guess it's settled, then," Hosea said. "We all go. And the Good Lord willing, we all come back. The only question left is . . . when?"

"Soon," Eric said. Aerune had boasted that he was in no hurry to implement his plans, but that didn't mean he would leave them alone. If they were going to attack at full strength, it had better be a preemptive strike. "How soon can everyone get things ready?"

FIFTEEN:

#### THE EAGLE AND THE HAWK

The funeral and war council had been on Wednesday, and Ria said it would take a few days for the armor to arrive, and for her to make arrangements to be away from her office for a few days. The others also had real-world commitments, and arrangements to make—fortunately, Caity had one of José's birds, and could be trusted to take care of the rest of his little ones for a few days. Toni would send Raoul and Paquito to her sister in Brooklyn for the weekend, and none of the others had any dependents to be harmed by a few days' absence.

Eric was particularly glad to have the extra time to prepare. Hosea needed to know everything Eric could teach him, and he needed to know it fast.

Eric remembered Prince Terenil, who had been the first to show him what magic was. Terenil had done it by loaning Eric his own memories—a quick-and-dirty form of training worlds apart from the slow disciplined instruction he had suffered later under Lord Dharniel. But that had been a desperate time, with Perenor set to destroy all of Elfhome Sun-Descending and its inhabitants. And it had given Eric the first insight into using his power. If they were to face down Aerune in his own back yard a few days from now, Eric owed Hosea at least as much help as Terenil had given him.

Little good though it had done Terenil, in the end. He had died in the battle for the Sun-Descending Nexus, though at least he had taken Perenor with him. And the rest of us are still here, and so are the elves, so I guess we have to count that as a victory, even if it doesn't feel much like one when I think about it.

"I don't know if this is going to work," Eric said. The two Bards were sitting in Eric's apartment the morning after the funeral, Hosea with his banjo, Eric with his flute. "I'm not even sure I can do it."

"I reckon you can," Hosea said in his slow Appalachian drawl. "I reckon it's like quilting-if you trace out the pattern, and I follow it, I'll end up with something that's mine alone."

"I guess," Eric said dubiously. "I hope. This isn't the way I wanted things to work out."

"We can't always have what we want, Mister Bard," Hosea said with a smile. "And I guess, if I came all this way to have you kindle up my shine, I can't kick about how you do it."

"I . . . yeah. So let's get started."

The first thing Eric did was summon up some heavy duty shields to insulate them from the rest of the House. It had been a rough week for the psychics who lived there, and he didn't want to add to their troubles, especially if something went wrong.

The healing circle Kayla had organized at the wake last night was a good start to healing the damage Aerune had done to the psychic fabric of this place. The more Eric saw her work, the more impressed he was. Kayla had good instincts. And if her Gift wasn't as flashy as Bardcraft or as initially impressive as that of the Guardians, in the long run, it made a lot more difference to the quality of life for ordinary people.

I guess that's what Jimmie meant about the Guardians' job being to let other people get on with their lives. It's all that, and about making a safe space for people like Kayla to use their gifts. She'd make a great battlefield medic for the psychic wars, but the important thing is to make a world where she can do something else instead. And I'd better get on with my part in arranging that.

He didn't think he could do what Terenil had done-there were advantages to being as long-lived as the Sidhe, and having a thousand years to practice your craft-but he could try to do something that had the same effect. Raising his flute to his lips, Eric began to play: long slow tones, not yet a tune. No one would be able to hear it but Hosea, and as he played, Eric tried to will his experience into the music, letting his mind rove over every time he'd used his magic, over all his lessons with Dharniel. As he did, the slow notes slowly evolved into music, a slow wandering tune of nothing in particular.

He risked a glimpse at Hosea's face before closing his eyes to concentrate upon the tune that he wove. The other Bard's expression was one of wide-eyed concentration, as though he listened to more than the music.

Eric drew his consciousness inward, focusing entirely on the Bard-ness of the music. Music is magic. The whole world is made out of music, if you can just hear it. Shape the tune, and you shape the thing . . . and yourself. Feel the music of the world. Hear it. Play it.

Slowly, Hosea began to join in the music. At first only a note here and there, the plink! of the banjo's strings like pebbles thrown into a swiftly-running stream. Then more-scrapes of music woven around the song of the flute, blending perfectly with the unplanned melody. The tune Eric played was faster now, more urgent, more insistent. Hear this. Here what I have to tell, hear what I have to teach. He found he was playing the story of his life, all its disappointments, cowardice, and false starts. A part of him cringed

at stripping himself so naked before another human being, showing himself so utterly open and defenseless. But another part was stronger. That is what I was, not what I am. I am stronger now, wiser, but I do not hide from the mistakes I've made.

And slowly, as Hosea's music joined his like two streams running together, Eric could see into the other man as well-every pettiness, every failure, every moment of cowardice . . . but love and courage and greatness as well. Then the music carried them onward, away from self and selfishness alike, -carried them on into the bright world of Creation of which Underhill itself was a mere shadow, into the place where the wish and the deed were one. Both men were playing flat-out now, blending their power as they blended their music-Eric's with the power of a trained Bard, Hosea's full of promise and power yet to be, power that Eric could shape to his own ends, or twist, or destroy.

Those were easy traps to avoid, but there was a greater and more subtle one waiting. Eric could teach Hosea the way to call his magic. He could teach him that Eric's was the only right way, teach Hosea to do only as Eric had done and could do, and no more.

But that was not what it meant to be a teacher. Hosea must grow to be all that Hosea could be, not what Eric could foresee for him with the limitations of his human personality. And so, somehow, he found himself able to step aside now that he had shown Hosea the way into his power, to stand beside him as an equal and a friend in the face of that ultimate source of their shared magic, letting Hosea drink his fill from that wellspring and learn all that he could learn. Hosea had trusted Eric to lead him here, and now it was Eric's turn to trust-in Hosea's kindness, his goodness, his essential decency. If the pupil was worthy to be trained, there came a time when the master must allow the pupil to train himself, to use and become all that the master had seen in him, fulfilling his true potential.

Letting go like that was the hardest thing that Eric had ever done. Every instinct screamed that he was the one with the training, that his experience and wisdom must control all that Hosea learned. But that was a trap, one that every teacher must confront and defeat. If Eric gave only what he thought was best, Hosea would never be more than a pale reflection of him, touching the magic only through Eric's understanding of it, not forging his own. He played more softly now, supporting Hosea as his magic soared, as the Bardic fire within him kindled and flamed, letting him make his own choices, shape his own path.

I wonder if it was this hard for Dharniel? Eric mused. As the thought clothed itself in words, he tumbled down out of the moment, out of the realm of endless light, and the sharing was over. The two of them were nothing more than two musicians, having an impromptu morning jam session in a New York apartment.

He opened his eyes.

Hosea played on alone, jamming with the melody Eric could no longer hear. He . . . glowed, bathed in a white radiance of power that flowered within. The banjo's strings burned like silver fire, the white doeskin of the soundbox glowing like the moon seen through clouds as Hosea's fingers flew, drawing music out of silver and bone, skin and wood. There were tears on the big man's face, and Eric was surprised to find that his own eyes were wet.

This was the power of the Bard, the power to sing things into creation, the power that caused the Sidhe to venerate them above all others.

Slowly, Hosea drew the melody to a close. It seemed to echo in the room long after he hushed the strings with one massive hand. He opened his eyes and looked at Eric.

"Is . . . that what I'm supposed to be? What I am?"

"That's right." For a moment Eric was able to forget the deaths that had brought them to this place, the deaths that might be yet to come. This was the most important thing he had ever been taught-that the magic wasn't for something, that it wasn't a means to an end. It simply was.

"It seems so easy," Hosea said.

"It is. We're the ones that make it hard," Eric said. He summoned a grin and drew a deep breath. "That doesn't mean I let you out of all the practice and drills, though. We'll start with an easy one. Call up a shield."

Hosea frowned, consulting his memories. "Like this?" he asked. He slowly strummed a minor chord, each note separate and distinct. A faint rippling light seemed to grow up around him.

Eric batted it down with a triumphant major. "Yeah, but make it stronger. Push back when I push you, or that shield isn't going to do much good."

Half an hour later, both men were panting and out of breath. Instinctively, Hosea used his magic in a much different way than Eric did. Where Eric tended to confront an enemy and do his best to overawe it with a display of superior but (now at least) elegantly-crafted power, Hosea relied on seeming harmless and not being noticed-pretty much an extension of his real-world behavior. After a while, Eric's attacks on Hosea's shields just slid aside: it wasn't that the shields had a great deal of strength, something that would only come with more practice and skill, but more as if they were shaped to deflect the attack, rather than meet it. If Eric was a lance, then Hosea was the stubborn round stone in the middle of the road. The stone could break the lance, or the lance the stone, but it was likeliest of all that the lance would simply . . . slide away.

"Crane and turtle," Eric said, standing and stretching. I guess Ria's style would be tiger. What does that leave for Kayla: monkey? She'd kill me if I ever suggested that. "We ought to open a school of the Bardic martial arts."

"Too fancy for me," Hosea said, stretching until his muscles cracked. "I'm a simple country boy. Let's go find the young'un. I could eat a whole horse, raw or cooked."

"I won't tell Lady Day you said that," Eric said with a grin. After the morning's workout, he felt a peace and confidence that had been absent from his life for too long, as if he'd found the work he should do and was doing it. It was a good feeling.

\* \* \*

The smell of fresh paint greeted them when they went downstairs. The door to the basement apartment was open, and some items of furniture-and the rest of Kayla's luggage, delivered from Ria's that morning-were waiting in the laundry room. There was a futon couch, a table and two chairs, some bookcases, and a couple of lamps, all contributed by the tenants of the house and customized by Kayla with fresh paint in shades of black, ultraviolet, poison green, and hot pink. The sound of hammering came from within.



Eric knocked loudly on the open door. "Kayla?"

"C'mon in! Ooh, is that the scent of Bardic power I smell? It smells like victory!"

Eric and Hosea walked cautiously into the main room. Kayla had been working hard, and it showed.

The walls had been painted an even velvety black, then stenciled with Celtic borders halfway up their height in a glittery dark purple. More of the glitter was painted on the walls themselves, so that they glistened in places like mica-studded granite.

The ceiling was the same deep purple as the Celtic border, painted with swirling clouds and a yellow crescent moon. A bead curtain of iridescent dark purple moons and stars had been set up to screen the studio's kitchen from the rest of the space, and a mirror wreathed in black silk vines and roses had been hung on the bathroom door. The battered linoleum floor had disappeared under several moth-eaten but still serviceable Oriental rugs. Kayla was standing on a short stepladder, hammering a curtain rod into place over the high narrow windows. Black lace curtains were piled on the floor waiting to be hung.

"You gonna help me with this, or just gawk?" she asked. Hosea moved forward to hold up the curtain rod-black iron, with twining leaves for finials-as Kayla finished sinking the last of the nails.

She jumped off the ladder and turned to face them, grinning. She wore black cigarette-leg jeans and a cropped black (and paint-spattered) "Anarchy" T-shirt. Her navel was pierced. Eric blinked.

Am I getting old, or just out of the loop? Fashion or not, that looks painful.

"Pretty neat, huh?" she asked.

"I'm sure Ria is blessing her narrow escape," Eric answered.

Kayla made a face. "Oh, sure, like I'd do this to somebody else's apartment! But this is mine, all mine-I can do anything I want! Toni said so."

"And you certainly have," Eric said. "How'd you get all this done in-what?-two days?"

"Oh, everybody helped. Margot gave me the bead curtains, and Caity did the stenciling, and Tat gave me the couch-all I had to do was go out and buy a new cover for it. Every-body's nice, and it's not like they're . . ." She searched for a word. "Hurting inside all the time. I like this place."

"And it likes you," Eric said, "or you wouldn't be here." And maybe it needs you, too. The Guardians protect the city, but who protects the Guardians? Aloud he said: "Hosea and I were going to go out and grab some lunch. Want to come?"

"Sure," Kayla said. "And then when we come back you can help me move the furniture in. I think it's all dry now."

If it wasn't now, it would be before he put his hands on it, Eric vowed. He had no desire to go through life wearing a coat of black enamel in interesting places.

Kayla studied Hosea critically. "You look taller. Did it hurt much?"

Hosea grinned at her amiably. "Not too much. You'd better do some growing on your own, Little Bit, or

I'm liable to trip over you one of these days."

"Size elitist," Kayla grumbled, but she sounded pleased. "Just let me get my stuff, and I'm there."

The three of them walked a few blocks to a fried chicken place on Broadway, where Hosea ate most of a family-style dinner for four while Kayla nibbled on fries and an order of buffalo wings and Eric contented himself with a chicken sandwich and a Coke.

"So is he ready?" Kayla wanted to know. Eric had warned her about his morning's plans-for one thing, there'd been the possibility that Kayla'd be needed to do a patch job if something went wrong.

"That'd take a lot longer than one morning. But he's made a good start," Eric answered, grinning at Hosea.

"Shucks, ma'am, it wasn't nothing. I've got a magic banjo, you know," Hosea said, playing up his drawl.

"That's so dorky it's almost cool," Kayla said, brandishing a French fry as if it were a conductor's baton. "But really."

"We won't know until we get there," Eric said, his earlier good humor fading as he concentrated once more on the threat they faced. "But it's as good as I can do in the time we have." And pray that it's enough. I don't think I can bear any more deaths on my conscience.

All too soon, it seemed, Saturday came. Eric had continued with his summer classes-if he wanted to graduate from Juilliard, he couldn't let them slide-but had given very little attention to his studies, devoting all his concentration to the training sessions with Hosea. Fortunately his native skill could carry him through a little scholastic sluffing off, but he was really going to have to hit the books when he returned-if he returned-if he wanted to go into the Fall term with passing grades in his summer make-up courses.

Now there's a cheery choice: death or summer school.

At first he'd been surprised at how nervous he was over the upcoming battle, but then he realized why. All the other messes he'd gotten into had been last-minute, skin-of-his-teeth races against time. This was more like deciding to go clobber somebody in cold blood. Never mind that it was vitally necessary and they had more than enough cause to act. Aerune wasn't here, wasn't an immediate threat. If Eric wanted to go into the realm of serious denial, he could even tell himself that Aerune would lose interest in destroying humanity, that the elf-lord's real-world allies would fall into disorder and doubt and no longer be a threat. That he didn't really have to do anything at all.

I guess I'm starting to see the elves' side of things. When you live that long, most problems do tend to go away if you ignore them. So how could they know that this one is going to be different?

If it is. But waiting to find out isn't a chance I really want to take.

There was also the fundamental difference between Elvish psychology and that of humans. Terenil had explained it to him, when Eric was taking his first steps into the world of magic.

"We are virtually immortal, Bard. Our lives are measured in centuries, not decades. That can be as much curse as blessing. Firstly, we are few in number. Secondly, strong emotional ties bind for centuries, not

mere decades. Your legends call us lightminded and frivolous in our affections-but think you for a moment. Suppose you have a love that turns to dislike. But you are tied to the place where that love dwells, and there are perhaps a few hundred inhabitants of that place. Try as you will, you must see that love every day. For the next thousand years. Unless one of you finds a way to leave. So do we avoid both love and hate, granting either only when there is no other choice."

Kory was an exception to Sidhe customs. Barely two hundred years old-a very young man by Sidhe standards-he cared passionately about many things. It made him a sort of freak in the world of Underhill, and Korendil had always preferred the company of humans to that of his own kind. But Kory was comparatively lucky. He was a child of the High Court. He could leave his Grove and its Nexus, and go elsewhere if he chose, or if he needed to. And he had Beth.

But what if Beth . . . died? What would Kory do then? Would he hate whoever had caused her death? And over the course of a hundred centuries, would that hatred grow and fester until he became a monster like Aerune?

Eric hoped not, but he didn't know. Any more than he knew what Aerune had been like before he had loved Aerete the Golden and seen her die at the hands of humans. Just as Kory had, Aerune had broken the first commandment that governed the life of the Children of Danu. And as Terenil had warned Eric, so long ago, not knowing what he warned him against, it had destroyed Aerune.

It's no excuse for what he's done. No matter how badly you're hurt, that doesn't give you a free pass to hurt someone else. But I wish we could think of a better solution than just locking him up.

And maybe they could, if they had infinite time and -resources. But they didn't have either. They had to stop Aerune now, and then see about undoing the damage he'd already caused in the World Above.

"No brooding," Kayla said with mock sternness, rousing him from his reverie.

"Sorry," Eric said sheepishly. "Just thinking about how to change the world."

Early Saturday morning-too early, by Eric's standards, though he hadn't slept well the night before-the seven of them gathered once more in Eric's apartment.

Toni, Paul, and José had brought their swords. Toni's and José's were conventional longswords, carried in long slender cases that looked like instrument cases, but Paul carried only an elegant sword cane, an antique, ebony with a silver ferrule and a large cairngorm set into the silver ball-handle. He was dressed as if for an afternoon's grouse hunting, with lace-up calf-high boots, khakis, and a Norfolk jacket in an understated tweed. The other two were wearing everyday clothes-Toni in jeans and a pink sweatshirt, José in a dark workshirt and twill pants.

Toni had suggested that Hosea take Jimmie's sword-like the rest of her magical paraphernalia, Hosea had inherited it along with her apartment-but the big man had declined.

"I guess I wouldn't hardly know what to do with a sword. I'll stick to my banjo, if it's all right with you all."

Toni had wanted to argue, but Paul convinced her that it would be better for Hosea to go into the field with no weapon at all rather than one he didn't trust. "And Eric has assured us that the young man is

coming along quite well with his Bardic studies, so it is not as if he will be quite defenseless."

Ria was the last to arrive. She was dressed in a street-casual outfit Eric hadn't seen before-black jeans with the extra gusset at the crotch that would give them as much flexi-bility as a pair of dance tights, a long black linen duster, black dance boots that came up over the knee, and a long silvery mail coat, its links so fine that it shimmered like hammered silk.

"You look like an outtake from Highlander," Eric told her.

"Wait till you see my sword," she answered with a tight smile. She patted the pocket of her duster. It hung heavily, and Eric suspected she was carrying a gun and several extra clips or speedloaders. Steel-jacketed hollowpoints could cause serious damage to any of the iron-averse Underhill folk, even kill.

"I left the shirts in the car. Not only do they weigh about a hundred pounds, but you'll be a lot more comfortable on the ride up to the Gate without them. Eric, are you going to ride with us? I think we should take the 'steeds with us. Etienne's waiting for me up in the park with the rest of our gear. If anyone sees her, they'll just think they've seen a deer."

"If Eric's going up on his bike, I want to ride with him," Kayla said instantly. "Hey, this could be like, my last moments on Earth. They should be fun. Eric? Puh-leeze?"

"Fine with me," Eric said, grinning in spite of himself at Kayla's exuberance.

"Okay, let's go," Toni said.

Eric savored the ride up to the Everforest Gate. In another lifetime, he might have been on his way up to the Sterling Forest RenFaire, with nothing more on his mind than a feathered hat. Now he was riding into battle.

He could sense Lady Day's excitement. Unlike mortal horses, the elvensteeds were bred for battle, and relished a good fight. He tried to take comfort from her easy courage-Eric was no coward, though he'd spent the first half of his life running away from anything that looked even vaguely like a fight, but this was a different kind of fight than any he'd ever been in. It hadn't been forced on him. He'd had plenty of chances to back out. But he'd chosen to be here. If that was courage, then he guessed he was brave. But it seemed perilously close to desperation.

All too soon they arrived at their destination. The Faire would be running for a few more weeks, but the Everforest Nexus had been set on state park lands, away from the crowds.

He pulled the bike to a stop in the clearing that held the Gate, and he and Kayla dismounted. She looked around, turning in a circle. "Hey. Untouched nature. Who'd'a thunk there could be something like this so close to the city? Hey, what's that?"

She pointed. There were tire tracks sunk deep into the mud, and burn marks on the grass.

"Levin-bolts, or something similar, and probably a van. Jeanette said Aerune had Elkanah bring her here so he could take her Underhill easily."

"Creepy." Kayla hugged herself and shivered, though the day was warm. "He isn't coming back, is he?"

"I hope not. But this is the closest Nexus point to New York City, so most of the East Coast Underhill traffic comes through here."

Kayla didn't say anything, though Eric could tell she was thinking hard. Just then Lady Day shivered all over, and in place of the red-and-white touring bike stood a neat-footed black mare with golden eyes. Kayla goggled as if she'd never seen a horse before, and Lady Day minced delicately forward and nudged her with a soft black nose. Kayla reached up tentatively to stroke it.

"Hey, she's soft!" the young Healer exclaimed. "Am I going to get to ride her? I mean, like she is now?"

"Maybe. That's kind of between you and her," Eric answered. He knew Kayla had grown up on the street, abandoned by her parents when her Talent began to show, but somehow the experience hadn't hardened her. She pulled up a handful of grass from the turf at her feet and began to feed the elvensteed, who almost purred under the admiring attention.

A few minutes later, the Rolls pulled up, moving slowly over the narrow bumpy track. Ria was driving. She pulled the car to a rocking stop, and the venerable machine seemed almost to sigh with relief. Rolls-Royces were built like a bank vault, but by no stretch of the imagination were they off-road vehicles.

Ria got out, followed by the other four. She pulled a large suitcase off the driver's seat and began to unzip it.

"These are for you," she told the Guardians, opening the suitcase and hauling out the first of the shirts. "They're lined in Kevlar fabric, at least partly so they don't chafe, but you won't want to go jogging in them; they're heavy, and they don't breathe. Iron can kill the Sidhe-folk, and it also makes their magic run wild, one of the reasons Aerune is a lot less powerful here in the World Above than he's going to be when we go to meet him on his home turf. The steel part of these shirts will absorb some magic and deflect a lot in the way of levin-bolts, but some of it gets worn away each time."

"So if Aerune keeps hitting one of us, he'll eventually burn through the shirt?" Paul said, examining the shirt with interest.

"Try not to let that happen," Ria said, deadpan.

"Won't he know we're wearing these?" Toni asked, holding a shirt up to herself to check the fit. It was too small, and she passed it to Kayla. Each was slit up the sides and laced shut-with plastic-coated steel cording-to ensure a tighter fit.

"Sure. Think about it-if I were him, I'd be expecting it. There still isn't much he can do about it-if he touches you while you're wearing that, he risks getting his widdle fingies burned off," Ria said.

Kayla had pulled off her leather jacket and was slithering into the mail shirt. She wore her full elaborate Goth makeup and jewelry, but had elected to dress sensibly-jeans, Doc Martens, and a long-sleeved T-shirt that fit as if it were sprayed on. Hosea helped her lace the sides shut. "Ain't we gonna be a little conspicuous dressed like this?" she asked Ria.

"Not Underhill, so far as I know," Ria told her. "Unfortunately, it may be a long walk to reach the borders of Aerune's domain, but they're lighter to wear than to carry, I assure you."

Etienne appeared then, summoned by Ria, trotting out of the forest and greeting Lady Day with a whinny. The two elvensteeds nuzzled at each other, exchanging greetings in their own way. Whatever differences the two had once had seemed to have been dealt with.

"Eric?" Ria asked, holding out a shirt to him. He thought about it, and shook his head.

"I'll call up my armor once I'm on the other side of the Gate. Might as well go in all flags flying."

"And hope we don't go down with the ship." Ria walked over to Etienne and vaulted into the saddle with one easy motion. In her black duster, she looked like a vision straight out of the Old West.

Once they were all re-dressed, Toni and José opened their sword cases and removed their magical weapons. Toni's was long and elegant, with a cross set into the pommel and Hebrew letters running down the gleaming blade. José's sword was simpler-almost a short sword, with a browned-iron blade and a plain leather-wrapped hilt.

Hosea slung his banjo over his shoulder and looked at Eric.

"I guess this is your show now, Eric."

Eric nodded, touching his hip to assure himself that his gig bag was in place. He pursed his lips and whistled a soundless phrase.

A portion of the air in front of them seemed to darken, shimmering like a deep pool. As it faded into existence, the trees beyond it slowly disappeared.

"Is that it?" Paul said, hefting his sword stick.

"One gen-u-wine, accept no substitutes Sidhe Portal," Eric said, feigning a lightness he didn't really feel. He held out his hand, and Lady Day put her nose in it, her warm breath flowing over his hand.

"Let's go, then. I'm not getting any younger," Toni said. In the silvery mail armor, carrying her sword, she looked like a medieval warrior saint.

Eric mounted Lady Day, and reached a hand down for Kayla. She scrambled up behind him and settled snugly against him, her arms around his waist. With Ria leading, the small party passed through the Gate.

"It looks just the same," Paul said, sounding disappointed.

"No it doesn't," Toni said. "It looks the way everything did when I was a little girl-all bright and clean and new."

They were standing in the Underhill counterpart of the Sterling Forest glade. There was a theory that the Underworld places near Gates tended to mirror the World Above they were connected to, and Everforest was an example of that. But if these were the Ramapo Mountains, they were those mountains as they had been before any humans at all had come to trouble the land: lush and wooded and green.

Eric could feel that they were being watched, but that was common enough. There were Low Court

elves in the area, of course, and other creatures too numerous to name, any of whom might take an interest in visitors.

"Which way?" Hosea asked.

"You tell me," Eric said. "Jeanette's the one who's been this way."

Hosea played a few bars of "Foggy Mountain Breakdown," his head cocked as if listening. Here in the magic-rich air of Underhill, it seemed as if Eric could almost hear her too: complaining but resigned.

"She says it was dark when she came through here, and she was busy being poisoned. She also says you don't want to go the way Aerune took her, unless you've got a taste for dying young. But I think-ain't there something with shine over that-a-way?" He pointed.

Eric focused his senses on the direction Hosea indicated. It was like listening, but not really; human language was pretty inadequate when it came to describing what magic felt like. After a moment he nodded. "There's a Gate that way. Let's try it."

Before they started off, Eric transformed his garb into the flashy silks and gleaming armor of an Underhill Bard. The four Guardians frankly stared, and Ria applauded mockingly.

"I think I'm going to have major feelings of inferiority after this," Toni said a little breathlessly.

"Don't," Eric said. "There's no way I could do half of what you can-our magics are completely different-and you'll probably find that your abilities are increased here, too. Magic is as common in Underhill as, well, as cable TV in the World Above."

"A good thing to remember," Paul said. "Well, it's a lovely day for a walk. Shall we get started?"

Eric wished he'd been able to borrow elvensteeds for the others, but they weren't given out lightly, and to ask Prince Arvindel for some might have tipped Eric's hand. He wasn't sure how much he wanted Misthold to know about what he was doing until it was over-even if they disapproved of Aerune, having a bunch of humans come Underhill to take him out might have made some of the elves a little uneasy.

When they reached the Gate, Eric chose their direction from the available destinations already set into it. He and Ria had both been to Aerune's domain, and Jeanette had been in and out of Aerune's land several times. Locating the Goblin Tower wasn't going to be the problem. Getting to it safely was. Travel in Underhill was sort of a cross between cross-country hiking and code breaking.

The Gate led them through to a land considerably less lush and tended than the one they'd originally entered. It looked as if it might have belonged to someone once, and now was returning to the wilderness it had originally been. Depending on how much magic had been used to create it, it might go on this way until a new owner claimed it, or dissolve back into the mists of the Chaos Lands.

It's not knowing which until afterward that's so amusing, as Humpty-Dumpty said to Alice.

The maze-seed was a heavy weight at the bottom of his gig bag, and Eric couldn't keep his thoughts from fixating on the battle to come. The real question is, am I sure that what I'm doing is right? And the answer is, I can't think of anything else to do. And something has to be done.

The next Gate brought them to a tropical seashore, where a smooth white sand beach as fine as sugar

formed a broad shining ribbon between pale clear water and a cliff of dark craggy rock. The light was sunset-ruddy, but there was no sun to be seen anywhere on the horizon. This was the first -major discrepancy the Guardians and Hosea had experienced, and Eric could tell it unnerved them a little. But at least this realm was safe for them to pass through-friendly, or at least neutral. This was obviously the domain of some oceangoing branch of the Sidhe, such as the Selkies, or of another aquatic race, such as Undines or Nereids. The upside of this was that sea dwellers tended to be fairly indifferent to humanity, having no interest in them for good or ill. There might be a pretty long walk to the next Gate, but they were unlikely to encounter anything fiercer than a sand crab along the way.

But as they walked along the beach, Eric realized he had other things to worry about than their immediate danger. He'd never really thought about it before, but he'd spent so much time Underhill that he was, if not quite accustomed to its wonders, at least no longer dazzled into slack-jawed amazement by them. It was hard now to remember how astonished he and Beth had been when they'd first seen the halls of Elfhame Mithold, and how long it had taken either of them to get used to (or at least to be able to function around) the sheer beauty of Underhill. Magical, enchanting, and glamorous weren't just empty words to the Sidhe-and "stunning" was pretty relevant, too.

All of which became a problem when four people who'd never seen Underhill before, and who comprised most of your fighting force, were going there to pick a fight with a native on his own turf. While Kayla had been briefly Underhill once before, and Ria had spent half her life in Perenor's pocket domain, neither of them could be considered really experienced with Underhill, either. Even beauty had its dangers.

Eric glanced back over his shoulder. Kayla was openly gawking at the landscape, but she wasn't the one whose reactions really worried him. Paul, José, and Toni were staring around themselves like kids on their first trip to the big city. If their minds were blown by an empty stretch of beach-admittedly a pretty gorgeous beach, but still just a beach-how were they going to react when they got to a place where things got weird-children's-book-illustration, role-playing-game, sci-fi-movie weird?

He didn't know. And there wasn't anything he could do at this point but worry about it. Even drawing attention to his fears might simply make them worse.

"Oh . . . look!" Toni exclaimed in awe. Reaching down, she plucked up a seashell out of the sand. It was as big as her hand, and perfect: a gleaming pale golden color as luminous as a unicorn's horn. She held it up, and the ruddy light made its surface sparkle like an opal.

Paul and José stopped to examine it. All three of them looked . . . spellbound, somehow as if they'd never seen a seashell before and it was the most fascinating thing in the world. If something in Aerune's domain made them freeze up like that, distracted them . . .

We'll all be toast.

"It's beautiful, and wholly unfamiliar," Paul said. "What manner of creature inhabited it, or what its native environment is, are things we may never know. Suddenly the world becomes as vast and uncharted as if we lived a thousand years ago."

Reluctantly, Toni set her prize carefully back down on the sand. She looked around wistfully. "I only wish there were some way I could bring Raoul and Paquito here to see this. It is so beautiful. It seems as if nothing bad could ever happen here."

"When you know the Sidhe a little better, you'll realize that beauty is their greatest weapon. While you're



being dazzled, they're sticking a knife in your back, or doing whatever else they damn please."

Though Ria's voice was lightly mocking, there was an undertone of real bitterness in it as well.

Toni looked up at Ria, her dark eyes as startled and hurt as if Ria had interrupted a lovely dream. "So you're saying this is all a sham? A trick?"

"I'm saying it's beside the point-it doesn't count much one way or the other, except to put you off your guard. The ancient Greeks might have thought that what was beautiful had to be good, and vice versa, but I think we've managed to learn a little better in the last 4,000 years. The Sidhe live in a world where magic flows freely and they can alter their appearance and surroundings almost at will. If you can do something like that, the way things look becomes just another tool. Or a weapon."

"I hadn't thought of that." Toni's voice was flat. Disappointed. "I suppose human nature isn't much different even when humans aren't involved. C'mon, folks, let's get a move on. No telling how far we're going to have to walk today." She settled her sword on her shoulder once more and strode off ahead.

Eric glanced across at Ria. Her face was expressionless, except for a coolly-raised eyebrow. Yeah, I know this looks bad, Eric told her in his thoughts. But it was the only idea any of us had. And I'm not sure even a few test runs would have prepared folks for this-and it might have alerted Aerune to our plans.

"So how come we're taking the scenic route instead of the express?" Kayla wanted to know, thumping Eric on the thigh to get his attention.

"Believe it or not, this is the fastest way, or at least the fastest safe way," Eric told her. "There aren't any straight lines through Underhill, not really. It's more like playing Connect The Dots. And based on some of the things Jeanette has told Hosea, one of the important things about finding our way to Aerune's involves not getting killed in the process."

"I'm behind that. But I'd kind of like not to starve to death before we get there."

"Don't worry," Ria called to her from Etienne's back. "I've packed a lunch. And if we choose our Gates carefully, Aerune's kingdom won't be too far from here."

This was one of the smaller domains-at least, the dry land part of it was-and a few minutes more brought them to the next Gate, the one that would take them further into Underhill and possibly to a destination one of them recognized. It lay in the depths of a sea cave hollowed out of the black rock by the -unceasing caress of the ocean, the smooth black walls glowing greenly with phosphorescent algae and luminous starfish.

They waded inside through the shallow water, leading the elvensteeds. Kayla stood at the back beside Ria, holding Lady Day's reins. The keys for this Gate were in the form of small seashells embedded in the rock almost at random, but their aura of Power made them easily visible to Eric, and probably to the others as well. Eric and Hosea considered where the Gate might take them.

Hosea's hands fanned over the strings of the banjo, calling forth silvery whispers that echoed in the darkness.

"That one," Hosea said, pointing.

Eric touched it, feeding the Gate with his Bardic Power to activate it. The back wall of the sea cave dissolved as he keyed the Gate, and the seven adventurers could feel a cold wind blowing over them from whatever lay beyond it, but no light spilled through the opening.

Cautiously, Eric and Hosea stepped through into the darkness, followed quickly by the others. The Gate closed when the last of them had passed through, and Eric could feel winter-dry grass crunch beneath his feet. But no matter how hard he strained, he could still see nothing.

A chill monotonous wind blew steadily, making him shudder more than shiver as he looked around blindly, unable to keep from trying to see. If not for the evidence of the sound and feel of the wind, and the dry scent, like musty hay, that assailed his nostrils, he would have wondered if he'd wandered into some trap that had stolen his senses. But only sight was missing.

"Eric . . . ?" Hosea sounded-not frightened, exactly, but concerned. The kind of "concerned" where if you don't get answers in a hurry you might start screaming.

"Wait." I know this place.

Eric summoned a ball of elf-light, and saw what he had expected to see: a broad and featureless plain that seemed to stretch a thousand miles in every direction, its short dry dun-colored grass trampled as if herds of animals had been running across it.

Urla had brought Eric here-to what Eric thought of as the Blind Lands-when he was bringing Eric to Aerune. There was a Gate directly into Aerune's domain from here.

Somewhere.

"I get the feeling it isn't a good idea to linger here," Ria said, summoning her own light. Etienne was fidgeting wildly under her, and Eric could tell that Lady Day was equally spooked. The black elvensteed pulled and fretted against Kayla's grip on her reins.

"Me neither," Eric said. "But I don't want to end up right in Aerune's lap, either. I've been here before. The Gate here leads directly into Aerune's domain."

"Does it lead anywhere else?" It was Toni who asked the question. Eric's eyes widened in surprise as he looked at her. The sword in her hand was glowing brighter than the elf-light, the blade as fiery as a bar of burning phosphorus.

"We'll have to find it to tell."

A tremor suddenly shook the ground, as if something heavy-many somethings-ran hard nearby, but even with the elf-light, Eric could see nothing. The two elvensteeds trembled like mad things, eyes rolling and coats dripping with foam, but stood their ground.

Turn back, look for another direction? They could wander Underhill for years and miles and come no closer to Aerune's domain than this-and Jeanette had said that most of the pathways to the Goblin Tower led through worse places.

"We need to get out of here," Paul said, his voice tight. He gestured at Kayla. The young Healer stood, staring around her with eyes wide and terrified. Her fists were clenched at her sides, and her whole body was rigid.

"Everything's afraid," she said in a small voice.

As if her words had shaped the thing itself, Eric could suddenly feel the fear pressing in around him, waiting only a kindling spark of their own terror to fill them all with panic. Urla must have had some sort of safe-conduct, to bring him through here unscathed before. The seven of them had nothing.

And Hosea began to play.

The banjo's notes sounded flat, almost muffled. For a moment Eric thought he'd stop, but the novice Bard persisted, playing grimly, almost doggedly. A moment later he began to sing. " 'You couldn't pack a Broadwood half a mile-You mustn't leave a fiddle in the damp-' "

The sense of panic drew back, as if affronted.

When all else fails, try Kipling. It was "The Song of the Banjo," set to a tune of Hosea's own creation, one as impudent and saucy as its bragging words. Hosea strode forward, moving as easily and certainly as if he knew precisely where he was going. Only Eric saw the strain and concentration on the big man's face, the effort it took to keep his own fear out of his voice and the music.

The chorus came round, and now Ria joined in, her voice soaring bell-like over Hosea's rumbling baritone. Eric joined her, his clear tenor soaring and twining with the other two as though they'd rehearsed for months. Whether by accident, or good guess, Hosea was moving in the direction of the next Gate; Eric walked back to Lady Day and swung up into her saddle. The elvensteed was quieter now, though she still trembled.

Paul handed Kayla up to Eric. She held on tight, and he could feel the shudders that racked her body, but she took a deep breath and added her voice to the others. Eric dug the flute from his gig bag and began to play, the flute weaving its silvery counterpoint into the banjo's sparkling melody as the black mare trotted after Hosea. The music seemed to form a bubble of protection in which they could move safely through the mad blind terror that surrounded them.

They did not dare stop singing. It did not matter that between the light and the music they were attracting the attention of anything within ten miles. It was one of Kipling's longer poems, and Hosea knew every word, but he'd reach the end eventually, and the music they made was the only thing that would keep the Blind Lands' utter despair at bay long enough for them to cross it alive.

The song ended. It was Ria, surprisingly, who saved them then.

"Oh, what do you do with a drunken sailor-" The chantey had dozens of verses, and new ones were easy to make up on the fly. Eric sighed with relief. They could keep this one up for hours-and he had, on occasion.

And so they arrived singing at an enormous henge whose black stones were the size of city buses. Eric dismounted, handing Kayla Lady Day's reins, and advanced upon the Gate.

Only two destinations were coded, the other four left blank, their buttons dark and lifeless. As he touched each of them, an image of the place formed in Eric's mind. One led to Aerune's domain. The other probably led someplace worse-he jerked his fingers back with a gasp, heart hammering, with a confused impression of an arctic wasteland filling his mind. They wouldn't last ten minutes there. The weather alone would kill them.

One or the other, and both choices bad. But Eric was a Bard, and there were four unused destinations available. With skill, and luck, he could make the Gate take them where he chose.

Only he'd have to withdraw his magic from protecting the others to do it.

He had no choice.

He reached out and touched the Gate itself. The stone was as cold as dry ice beneath his fingertips, burning painfully. This must be what Kory, what any of the Sidhe, felt when they touched Cold Iron. He imagined blisters welling up, bursting, the blood freezing as it oozed over this cold burning.

He shut out the pain, reaching into the stone with his magic. Its music was dark, unsettling, sliding off-key in a jangle of minor chords before settling into a new mode for a few -seconds. He could feel a dim slumbering mind deep within the stone, passive yet malevolent. An echo of the magic that had formed it. He fought to control the shifting chords he heard in his mind, to make sense of them.

Here.

Yes, here was Aerune's domain. The shape and sense of it filled his mind in a wordless knowing impossible to explain. But that wasn't where he wanted to go. Near it, yes, but outside. Just outside, into the unclaimed Chaos Lands where every stray thought could become real. Had he warned the others about that? Could any warning be enough?

He forced himself to concentrate. To shape the sense of his destination was like transposing music into a different key, adapting a known melody to the needs of an entirely different instrument. With the way into Aerune's domain to guide him, he changed, edited, added, and at last produced what he could only hope was a viable direction.

He opened his eyes, not remembering when he'd closed them, and saw that now three, not two, destinations were marked with a cool blue-green fire on the Gate's surface. How long had he been entranced? His Bard's silks were drenched in sweat, and every muscle ached. He withdrew his hand from the stone, feeling a pang of relief that the skin was whole and unburned. Had the pain been only an illusion? Or would the damage have become reality if he'd failed?

Ria's elf-light and the two Guardians' swords were their only source of light here in the Blind Lands. The singing sounded ragged-they'd moved on to a startlingly bawdy ballad, of which only Ria seemed to know all the words. Hosea's playing sparkled with metronomic precision, but Eric could sense the other Bard's weariness at the unfamiliar exertion.

Wonderful. We're all exhausted before we start. Great tactics, Banyon.

But there'd been no other way. They couldn't Gate directly to their destination, and they couldn't drive there either-or ride. This was the best they could do. Maybe they could win a breathing space before Aerune noticed them. God, I sure hope so. He won't even break a sweat if he takes us on while we're in this condition.

But to delay here a moment longer than they absolutely had to would be fatal, with only their magic to protect them from the baleful influence of this realm. Eric took a deep breath and keyed the Gate to the destination he'd chosen. The opening shivered and went white. The glare made his eyes water after so long in the Blind Lands. He waved the others forward.

SIXTEEN:

## WELCOME TO MY NIGHTMARE

"So where are we now?" Toni wanted to know, resting her longsword point first against the ground and leaning upon its quillons. She took a deep breath of relief, seeming to regain more strength with each passing moment.

Everything around them was grayish-white and misty, with the flat even illumination of indirect lighting, or of sunlight on a very cloudy day. Even the ground beneath their feet was colorless and springy, as if it were made of modeling clay.

Hosea stopped playing, and the banjo's silver strings whispered to silence. He rubbed his fingers, grinning at Eric reas-suringly.

Eric grinned back-it had worked! They were all here, all safe-or as safe as you could be in the Chaos Lands. And they could find another way home.

"We're . . . exactly nowhere," he said in answer to Toni's question. She made a face. "No, seriously. This is what Underhill looks like when nobody decides to impose their own reality on it. They call it the Chaos Lands."

"Which means that nobody here better think too hard," Ria said, "because whatever you think about is likely to come walking out of that mist and bite you."

"We're shielded, of course," Paul said. "I'd say that being here is pretty similar to casting a spell-the magician had better keep a tight rein on his intention. But that may make it a little hard for Aerune to find us when the time is right."

"Oh, he'll find us," Ria said darkly.

"I don't think Aerune will notice us until we make him," Eric said hopefully. "Let's take a breather. Is everyone okay?"

The others nodded. The Guardians looked shaken, but not as worn down by their ordeal as Eric had feared. José was his usual imperturbable self, Paul looked like a cat with a new toy, and Hosea and Toni were looking better by the minute. Even Kayla managed a grin and an impudent thumbs-up when he looked at her. She reached down to pat Lady Day's neck, and the black elvensteed shook herself and tossed her head, making the silver bells on her tack jingle.

I wonder why she chose to be black for this trip? Eric thought. The question wasn't an idle one. Elvensteeds could look like anything they chose and Lady Day usually had a reason for choosing to be a particular color or shape.

"Everything's just ginger-peachy," Kayla said sardonically, swinging a leg over Lady Day's back and dropping to the ground. "Sheesh! And I thought L.A. had some bad neighborhoods."

"Jeanette says there're worse ones here. Much worse," Hosea said.

"I don't want to go there," Kayla answered simply.

Ria dismounted from Etienne, patting the elvensteed on the neck. The white mare was ghostly, almost insubstantial, in the formlessness of the Chaos Lands. It was good camouflage. She nuzzled her mistress as Ria reached into one of the saddlebags and pulled out a two-quart hiker's canteen.

"Water, anyone?" she asked, passing the canteen to Kayla.

The teenager twisted off the cap and drank thirstily, passing the canteen to Hosea. "Good job with the tunes, stud," she said.

Hosea actually blushed, pulling out a bandanna to wipe his face. "It wasn't anything more than a bit of plinking. If I thought this Aerune'd answer to that kind of medicine, the rest of you could have stayed home."

"So what do we do now?" José asked, looking from Toni to Eric.

Eric reached into the bottom of his gig bag for the little wooden box. He opened it and took out the maze-seed. Its magic buzzed in his hand like a trapped honeybee, stronger now that it was back in the world it had been made for. All they had to do now was get Aerune here and trap him inside.

"We call him," Eric said grimly. "And then we lock him up forever."

Aerune mac Audelaine, born to the Bright Court, later called among mortalkind the Lord of Death and Pain, sat in his dark throne room in the heart of the Goblin Tower, contemplating his own thoughts.

The encounter with the upstart Bard should have been more satisfying. Certainly it had been an elegant insult to gift him with Aerune's mortal hellhound, knowing that her dying would wound the soft-hearted mortal far more than the loss of her would inconvenience Aerune. But there was something about the whole matter that left Aerune feeling vaguely unsettled, as if he had made some unfortunate mistake.

But there had been no mistake. The hound's death was meaningless and completely inevitable, once he had lifted the spell of timelessness that kept her alive in mortal lands. She had never been more than a diversion for Aerune, her real worth lying in his ability to withhold her skills from his foes. It was true that he had so far forgotten himself to boast of his plans to the mortals, but again, there was no loss to him in doing so. Though the conspiracy was small and inconsequential now, what he had set in motion in the World of Iron would thrive-with his help-until it had consumed humanity utterly. Aerune was an excellent judge of men, and he had chosen Parker Wheatley well. The man's ambition and self-hatred would lead him to follow Aerune's plans blindly, unable to see anything beyond his own immediate advantage. The simple toys with which Aerune had provided Wheatley had helped to befool him-artifacts from an Underhill realm where the memory of magic lost had caused the inhabitants to craft ever more subtle engines to counterfeit its actions. As the first small blemish upon the apple presages the destruction of the entire fruit, so did Wheatley's first faltering acts herald humanity's doom-a war against the Underhill realms which would cause the Sidhe, both Bright Court and Dark, to rise up and destroy the World Above.

No, all went forward as it should-but in that case, wherein lay his unease? No enemy raised its banners before his gates, nor sought to gain entry into his realm by treachery.

But there was something . . . something well-known to the point of invisibility, that teased his ethereal senses with its elusive familiarity.

From the magic that surrounded him, Aerune formed a familiar, a part of himself in the shape of a great black bird, and sent it forth to search. It soared over the bone-wood, finding nothing, and he sent it through his Gate to the Chaos Lands beyond, searching.

There!

The hound. His hound. His toy and victim, here--Under-hill-and alive!

Infuriated by the insult, Aerune sought no further. He strode from his throne room in a black fury, shouting for his horse and his hounds. He would reclaim her, whip her to his kennels, and make her beg for the death he would forever deny her.

The first hint they had of disaster was when the landscape around them began to darken. The mist boiled away to emptiness at the touch of another's mind.

:Trouble . . . : whispered the banjo. :He's coming.:

There was no need to ask who.

The Guardians formed a circle around Kayla, facing outward. Ria and Eric stood outside it, preparing to take the first assault. Eric heard a crashing major chord-someone opening a Portal-and then Aerune was there, astride his black stallion. Giant black dogs crouched at his horse's feet, and behind him, changing and nebulous as fog, rode the hosts of the damned, called from nothingness by the power of Aerune's will.

"Fascinating," Paul said. There was a hiss as he pulled his blade free of the sword cane. "A classical Northern European Wild Hunt."

Aerune glanced at him, eyes blazing red, but Paul did not hold his interest. Toni did. The Latina Guardian held her sword in her left hand as she crossed herself, her lips moving in soundless prayer.

"So . . . you would use your iron nails to slay Faerie?" Aerune growled. "Die as all who have set the White Christ's magic against me have died!"

Eric was barely fast enough to shield Toni from Aerune's first attack-crash of major chords, high skirl of a piccolo, deep booming of a chorus of horns-but somehow he couldn't draw Aerune's attention to him no matter what he did. Something about Toni infuriated Aerune to the point of recklessness. He concentrated his fury upon her, and she barely held her own, though her blade glowed so brightly that Eric couldn't even look in her direction. He had problems of his own, though-the shadowy creatures that rode with Aerune-monsters and damned souls all, if the legends held any truth-were spreading out to encircle them. He moved forward, searching for an opening, his fingers clutched around the maze-seed, raising it up and-

-rubbing the smoothing stone gently along the shaft of the bone flute.

The afternoon sun was warm against his back as he squatted here in the clearing in the center of the crescent of turf huts that made up the village of his people, and from time to time he would stop, holding his work up to the light so he could judge his progress. Once he had scraped the bone smooth it would be time to drill the holes along its length with a sharp deer-horn drill, then polish it again with fine sand and deer hide until it was as smooth as river-tumbled stone, then rub it with beeswax until the bone turned a translucent gold. When he was but an apprentice Bard, his teacher had told him it was important to make the bone as thin as possible so that the sound would be pure, and he had always remembered that. Only the very best was worthy to be offered up to the Bright Lady Aerete, source of all Bardcraft and magic.

Eric frowned, his thoughts elsewhere. They would need their best if they were to win their next battle with the Eastmen, who had come to the Isle of the Blessed in their wooden boats to kill and enslave the Folk, armed with weapons of the gray metal that broke stone and bronze as if they were nothing more than rotted wood.

But they would win. Eric was a Bard of a Hundred Songs, blessed by the Lady herself, and his apprentice, whose instrument was the harp, had already learned his spells and genealogies, and had made a good start on learning the songs which contained all the wisdom of the Folk. In the doorway of their hut he could see Hosea putting fine new strings of deer gut upon his bride-harp, whose white body was carved from the shoulder of a black bull which had been slain at the start of the Dark Year. His songs could soothe the sick and ailing, ease a wounded soul's transition to the Summer Lands.

Reluctantly, Eric set aside his work, wrapping it tightly in a painted doeskin to keep it safe. He could not spend as much time as he wished here. It was time to go among the wounded once more, to add his magic to the Healers' craft. Too many of their village's warriors lay wounded, kissed by the deathmetal of the Eastmen despite all the protection spells Eric had laid upon them.

He got to his feet. Hosea looked up, willing to follow, but Eric gestured for him to stay. It was more important now that he finish restringing the harp, so he could play their warriors into good heart for the morrow. Meanwhile, Eric would see to their wounded.

Eric walked through the village, greeting his clan-fellows. His creature was the lark, as was fitting for a Bard, for birds were especially sacred to the Bright Lords. All bowed their heads in respect, for a Bard was second only to the Lady herself, and the equal of kings and the Chief of all the clans.

The High House was his destination. The great hall stood upon the earthen mound his ancestors had erected when they had first come to this land, beneath which, in vaults of dressed stone, their dead-too many dead, these days-were laid to rest to provide counsel and wisdom to their children. He walked up the hill, toward its carven gateway painted with the totem animals of each clan of the tribe, along the path bordered in white stones.

Ria, chief of the fighting women, approached him as he neared the door. She wore a loincloth of white doeskin, and gold at her throat and upon her arms, for she was a lady of high rank and a king's daughter. Her hair was braided into one long queue, wrapped with a red cord and studded with the raven feathers of her totem. The marks of warrior's magic still showed, pale azure against her fair skin. Tonight she and the other warriors would dance to his playing, singing the war-songs and painting themselves afresh for tomorrow's battle.

"I greet you, Bard," she said formally, though Eric could see that she seethed with impatience at being denied entry. Those whole in body, and not bound to the Bright Lords as Eric was, were not permitted to enter the High House when there were injured present, lest their war magic disturb the healing magic.



"I greet you, Ria of the warriors," he answered. "How may I serve you?" I would serve you in all ways I have not pledged to the Lady, did you but allow it.

"I would know how it will go with us upon the morrow," she answered, her voice as harsh as that of the battle-raven.

"Only the Bright Lords may know that," Eric said sharply, for in truth he was afraid to look into the future again for fear he would see another defeat. "Ask of the Lady, not of me."

He frowned, seeming for a moment to hear the echoes of battle in another place, but surely it was only the ghosts of the newly slain, hovering among their kinfolk to give what comfort they could before making their journey to the Summer Lands to dwell forever with Aerete in her shining -palace.

Ria sighed, as if he had given her only the answer she expected. "Then tell me how my sword-sister, Toni, fares, of your courtesy, Bard. I would sorrow to go into battle without her to drive my chariot."

Eric smiled, glad to be able to give some good news. Toni had taken a blow from a deathmetal sword in the last battle, but had killed her attacker with her spear. The cut was healing nicely, without fever.

"You will have no cause for sorrow," he said, "for she will be at your side. The Lady wills it."

The Bright Lady Aerete had been tireless in employing her healing magics for the good of the tribe, and many more than had died in the battles would have been lost without her protection. But no one was all-powerful, not even the Bright Lords, and even her power could not save those whom deathmetal had wounded too deeply. Fortunately, Toni's cut had been shallow.

"That makes good hearing," Ria said. "I will leave you to your work."

She bowed to him formally and turned away, walking down the path to the village through the pale spring sunlight. Eric watched after her for a long time, before turning and ducking through the hanging hides that shielded the doorway to enter the High House.

Inside, a peat fire smoked fragrantly on the round stone hearth, giving heat to the injured. He could see Paul and José moving among them, bringing healing brews and changing the poultices upon wounded limbs. The Lady Aerete had taught them all that mortals could learn of her healing magics, and even Eric stood in awe of their power, that could trick Death when even his songs could not.

He went first to Toni, who was drinking soup from a wooden cup. She smiled when she saw him, though her dark eyes were shadowed by recent pain.

"Ria was asking after you, warrior," Eric told her, smiling as he knelt beside her. "I told her you would be with her soon."

"The healers say I may leave the High House at sunset," Toni told him proudly. "And I will stand with her at the war-fire tonight."

"And ride with her to victory on the morrow," Eric said, feigning a confidence he did not feel. Toni was Ria's charioteer, and such brave warriors, who rode into battle unprotected by bull's-hide shield, faced greater peril even than the foot spearmen.

Suddenly the air was filled with music, and Toni's face lit with pleasure. "Ah, Bard, see-the Lady comes!"

Eric got to his feet, turning toward the dais of limewashed stone that stood at the north end of the High House. A light as bright as the sun shone there, and as it faded, the form of Aerete the Golden was revealed.

She wore a white gown woven of Underhill magic, and her long golden hair was garlanded with blue flowers that shone as brightly as the stars in the night sky. Their perfume filled the High House, mingling with the scent of peat smoke and healing herbs. She was more beautiful than any woman of the Folk, tall and supernaturally fair, and her long graceful ears proclaimed her Otherworldly lineage plain for all to see. Since before Time began, Aerete had been their Lady, guarding and guiding them, protecting them from the dark spirits of glade and pool. She had taught them the arts of music and poetry, of healing and metalworking, protecting women in childbed and sending game to the hunters' nets. She was Aerete, and they were her people.

Eric knelt in reverence, as did Paul and José. Aerete moved slowly among the wounded, pausing to caress a bowed head or bring ease to a painful wound. At last She came to where Eric knelt, and he shuddered with pleasure at the touch of Her hand. All he asked from life was to serve Her, who was so wise and just.

Again that moment of discordant music. But when he looked up into Her sky-colored eyes, the pang of unease faded.

"Bard," She said, and Her voice was a melody. "Walk with Me, and tell Me how goes the day."

Jesus. Kayla made a rude noise of disgust. She didn't know who the blonde elf-bimbo was, but the way Eric was looking at her made Kayla want to puke. He was practically -drooling.

She aimed a hearty kick at his backside, but though she felt it jar through her as she connected, he didn't react.

None of them reacted. Not Eric, not Ria, not José or Paul. Even Hosea hadn't noticed her, no matter what she did.

It was creepy. One moment they'd been in Hell's Own Kitchen, with Aerune about to eat them all for breakfast, and the next minute . . . here, in some kind of place that looked like a cross between a retro Braveheart and Merlin: The Lost Years. The whole Quest For Fire look had been amusing for about five minutes-who'd'a thought José was so buff under all those workshirts?-but the whole body paint and loincloths thing got old real fast. Everything looked real, felt real, smelled real-but her friends couldn't see or hear her. She wasn't even a ghost.

What had Aerune done to them? Was this real-whatever "real" meant, when used in the same sentence with "Underhill"? And if Aerune was behind this, shouldn't there be more dead people around? Shouldn't they be dead?

Helpless, angry, and far more frightened than she was willing to admit, Kayla trailed after Eric and the elf-lady. Everybody was talking like an episode of Masterpiece Theater-as if they'd forgotten all their usual words. Hosea'd even lost his homefolks accent, and Kayla would have been willing to bet good

money this morning that wasn't possible.

And Eric . . . ! Eric didn't grovel, which was what his -conversation with this "Aerete"-bimbo sounded like to Kayla. It was like they'd all been replaced by pod people. And if they had, why wasn't she included?

Were they dead? Was she dead? And if not, could I just wake up and go home? Please?

She trailed farther and farther behind Eric and Aerete, not having the stomach to listen to them. If Eric was groveling, then Aerete was talking to him like he was the family dog-kindly enough, but not as if she was particularly impressed by his intelligence.

Kayla passed the hut where she'd seen Hosea before, but he wasn't there. Probably off making daisy chains or something.

:Kayla . . . :

She stopped with a gasp. Someone was calling her from inside the hut-a faint voice, almost a whisper-but when she went in, there wasn't anyone there, just a bunch of bearskins and the harp Hosea'd been working on before, sitting on top of the pile.

:Kayla!:

It was the harp.

"Okay, the harp is talking to me."

:It's Jeanette.: The harp sounded impatient. :Can you hear me? Kayla, this isn't real.:

"News flash," the young Healer muttered, going over to pick up the harp. When she touched it, she almost dropped it-it was warm, and seemed to vibrate faintly in Kayla's hands. "So it isn't real. I got that. So what is it?"

:I don't know. I think Aerune's dreaming. They don't sleep, you know, but they dream sometimes while they're awake. And he's caught the others up in his dream.:

Elves dreamt awake, she meant. But somehow the humans had gotten caught in it.

"So why not you or me?" Kayla asked.

:I'm dead,: the harp whispered, and Kayla could swear the thing sounded smug about it. :And I don't know. Maybe you can fix whatever he does to you before it affects you.:

Wonderful. "What do I do? We have to get out of here," Kayla announced, hating the fear she heard in her own voice.

:Follow Aerete. Maybe she'll lead you to Aerune and you can find out what's going on. Maybe you can wake the others up . . . :

The harp's whispering speech stopped. Kayla stared at it for a long moment, then set it down gently and ran out of the hut, looking around wildly. Aerete and Eric were standing a few yards away, talking. She

leaned down and kissed him on the forehead, the way a mother might kiss a small child. Then he turned back toward the village, and she walked on.

Kayla hesitated, unsure about which of the two to follow, then shrugged. Might as well take Jeanette's advice. How could she be in worse trouble than she was now? She sprinted after Aerete.

If she'd hoped Aerete would be able to see her, Kayla's hopes were quickly dashed. The woman walked on as if she were alone, though Kayla was beside her close enough to touch her dress. The elf-woman's destination seemed to be a ring of standing stones that stood on the crest of a low hill. They weren't all that impressive by Stonehenge standards-the tallest of them came up only to Kayla's shoulder-but if you had to find them, dig them up, and hump them up to the top of the hill with muscle power alone, she guessed they represented a considerable effort. The hill was taller than it looked, too. By the time they reached the top, Kayla was panting, though her companion showed no sign of strain.

Aerete walked into the ring of stones and vanished.

For a moment Kayla stood watching, unable to decide what to do; then, muttering curses, she followed.

There was the eye-blink transition she'd gotten used to going through the Gates. She was in a hall. It was like the one back in the village-round with a round firepit in the middle-but everything here was of finer construction, as though someone had taken the other and improved upon it. Eric says the elves can't create things, only change them. So I guess if this is the Bronze Age, they've got to be Bronze Age elves. The walls here were of polished golden oak, and the torches set in the walls in golden brackets burned with a clear smokeless flame. Where the dais had been back at the High House was a block of polished white marble draped with bright silks, and on it were two chairs-Roman, by the look of them-and a table with a goblet and decanter on it.

Aerune was sitting in one of the chairs.

Kayla shrank back with a hiss of dismay, but he didn't seem to see her. He was looking at Aerete. Kayla studied him. Aerune looked different than the dark monster she had faced twice before. He wore a golden crown around his forehead, and was dressed in tunic, leggings, and boots in shades of green and gray.

Aerete walked forward until she stood at the foot of the dais, and knelt. Aerune sprang to his feet to raise her up.

"Aerete, my heart-you must never kneel to me!"

"But I would ask for your help, Lord Aerune," Aerete said, and there was real pain in her voice for the first time.

Guess she can drop the Lady of the Manor act here.

"Anything-you know you have my heart, Aerete. What can you ask for that I would not give you?" Aerune told her passionately.

"Kindness for my people, Lord Aerune."

Kayla saw him wince, as if Aerete had touched on a sore point. "They are not worthy of your love, my heart. Creatures of mud who return to the mud in the wink of an eye. How can we, who are formed of

the stuff of stars, care for such as they?" There was pleading in his voice, as though it was an old argument he knew he couldn't win.

"I had hoped your love for me had softened your heart, my lord Aerune," Aerete said softly. She settled into the chair he offered her, and Aerune hurried to pour her a cup of wine.

"Have I not avoided their villages at your request? No longer does my Hunt ride among them. I take neither their children nor their maidens for my sport, all because you have asked it of me. Tell me what troubles you," Aerune begged, leaning toward her.

He really loves her, Kayla realized, impressed. She knew that Aerune was old even as the Sidhe reckoned years, and that what she was seeing now had happened a long time ago, if it had ever happened at all, but right now Aerune seemed a lot like the bangers she'd known back in East L.A.-proud, touchy, desperately in love and afraid of looking stupid.

He seemed very young, somehow. Young, and vulnerable.

"They die," Aerete said sorrowfully. "They die and I can do nothing to save them. Strangers from across the water invade their lands, and harry them far worse than you ever did, Aerune. Many die, and I am powerless to save them. I have gone to the chief of the Eastmen and asked for peace. The Isle of the Blessed is wide, and surely there is room for all to live there in peace. But he does not know our kind, and there is a strangeness about these Eastmen. My magic has no power to soften his heart."

"Let me rip it from his chest, and you will find it soft enough, Bright Lady," Aerune said. Aerete sighed and turned her face away, bowing her head.

"They live so short a time-must we take even their brief span of years from them? I want peace, Aerune, not more death."

Aerune sighed and shook his head-unwilling to say anything that would hurt her, but certain he was right, Kayla could tell.

"The mortalkind are not like us, Aerete. Their lives burn as hot and bright-and brief-as the fires they kindle upon the hills in spring, and their hearts seethe with emotions so raw and ardent that to feel one tenth of their passion would destroy any of Danu's Firstborn. Their lives are too short for them to value life; they spend their hatreds thoughtlessly, welcoming the death they have not the wit to understand. And so I tell you plainly-the only comfort your folk may find is in death. And the only peace you can find for your mortal pets is in the death of their enemies."

Aerete bowed her head. "I know you would never lie to me. But is it the only way to save them? I had hoped for another answer."

"Would you bring them Underhill and dare Oberon's wrath for your disobedience?" Aerune asked. "Or fly for sanctuary to the Dark and put yourself and them at the mercy of Queen Morrigan? The halls of the Dark Court are not for such as you, my love. I have walked them. I know."

"Then must they die?" Aerete asked, and Kayla saw tears glittering in her eyes. "Must they all die?"

"They must fight against the Eastmen, and live as best they may," Aerune answered. "Only with the death of their enemies can they live as you hope them to."

Aerete rose to her feet, her face sad. "I thank you for your wise counsel, Lord Aerune. I must go now. They face their enemy in battle on the morrow, and I would not deny them what comfort I may give them in the little time that remains."

"Will you come to me again?" Aerune asked her eagerly, reaching for her hand. She clung to him a moment, as if drawing strength from his touch, then pulled away.

"When the battle is done. When they are safe, Lord Aerune, I will come to you again."

This is bad, Kayla thought. For all Aerune's fancy talk about not having human feelings, she could tell he loved Aerete with all his heart. I've got to warn him that she's gonna die tomorrow-

But suddenly Aerune's hall was gone. Kayla stood upon a hillside overlooking a wide valley through which a shallow stream meandered. It was early morning, and she shivered with cold even with the protection of her mail tunic. Mist still covered the ground, and the sun hovered just above the horizon. Below her, on the hill, she could see the warriors of the village gathered in battle array-chariots at the front, pikemen behind. She saw Ria and Toni in one of the chariots, Eric standing beside them with a flute in his hand, his hair garlanded with flowers. Hosea, Paul, and José were at the back, among the spear carriers. There were too many people here to count, but less than a hundred, Kayla thought. More like one of those SCA events Elizabet took me to in L.A. than a real army.

And across the valley, five times their number. The enemy wore armor, not painted skins, and she could see strong wooden shields and spear tips glittering with metal.

They're gonna get creamed!

There was a shimmer and a flash of light, and suddenly Aerete was there beside Eric. She was mounted bareback upon a white elvensteed, dressed now in the fashion of her people, wearing nothing more than the white doeskin loincloth and short red-dyed leather cape that her lady warriors wore into battle. Painted runes gleamed on her skin, as blue and bright as neon, and her hair was braided and feathered as theirs was. She obviously meant to ride into battle with her warriors, to ensure their victory by fighting beside them. Was she that brave-or did she not know what the iron spears the enemy carried could do against elven magic?

"No! Don't do it!" Kayla shouted, running down the hill toward the war host.

But before she could reach them, a horn blew from somewhere in the ranks of the villagers, answered by a deeper horn from the other side of the valley. A cheer went up, and the chariots began to roll down the hill. As the enemy saw the host begin to move, they began to howl, beating their swords against their wooden shields with a sound like distant thunder, surging forward to meet their foes.

Kayla barely reached the bottom of the hill-too late to stop the charge-when the first bright agony lanced through her as one of the spears found its mark. She had one brief moment to realize that coming to a battle was probably a pretty stupid thing for a Healer to do.

She concentrated on her shields, gritting her teeth and forcing herself to stand where she was, willing herself not to feel. In moments the orderliness of both armies had dissolved, and there was only a mob of men and women armed with swords and spears trying to kill each other. Aerete was in the forefront of the charge, as visible as if God was shining his own spotlight on her, and even in the brightening day Kayla could see the flashes of blue fire as she struck at the enemy with her levin-bolts. Kayla felt every strike, every sword-blow, that either army landed, but distantly, as if the pain were being felt by someone

else. Shunt it aside, Elizabeth had told her. Be the rock in the stream, unharmed by the water's flow.

Kayla was glad to be so far away that she could not see what was happening clearly. What she could hear was bad enough—the screams of people and horses, the dull thick sound of metal hitting meat. She held her breath, crying without knowing it, digging her fingers into the palms of her hands. What could possibly be worth this much pain? Couldn't they see—couldn't they feel—what they were doing to each other?

For a while it seemed as if Aerete's presence would be enough to gain victory for her folk. Despite their superior weapons and numbers, the enemy had little taste for facing one of the Sidhe upon the battlefield, and stayed away from her as much as possible, allowing the spearhead of Aerete's warriors to plunge deep into the shield line. But Kayla knew how this story ended.

She didn't see who threw the spear. She only saw the moment when Aerete's white horse plunged sideways, the moment when its shining rider fell to earth. There were groans and cries of dismay from Aerete's folk; Kayla watched through tear-blurred eyes as they clustered around, trying to save her. But the blow delivered by the spearhead of Cold Iron was mortal.

Suddenly the sky darkened, as if there were about to be a thunderstorm, though a moment before the sky had been clear. Cold winds whipped up, driving black clouds before them, covering the sky. Aerune appeared, standing where Aerete had fallen. He knelt beside her and saw that she was dead, then rose to his feet with a howl of despair that could be heard above every other sound upon the battlefield.

And then he began to kill.

Kayla watched in horrified fascination, unable to look away. He must know now that the weapons the enemy carried could kill him, but it didn't seem to matter to him. None of them touched him or the creatures he summoned to aid him—black wolves the size of ponies, ravens bigger than the biggest eagle ever hatched. It was like watching something out of a horror movie, like watching a harvester move over a field of standing grain. Aerune moved across the field, his sword spinning in his hand, and every time it struck an enemy died.

The Eastmen would have fled or surrendered, but Aerune did not let them. His creatures harried them from behind, keeping them on the battlefield, herding the invaders toward Aerune's sword as the storm he had summoned gathered and finally broke, the rain turning the blood-soaked battlefield to a sea of red mud. In the end, the Eastmen were fighting one another to stay away from him, killing nearly as many of their own in their frantic attempts as Aerune did.

Aerete's people watched in stunned amazement, the survivors of their army standing huddled together about their fallen lady. At the bottom of the hill, Kayla watched it all, battered by their pain and grief, too numb to think about what she was seeing. It was so horrible it was unreal.

It's a dream, it's a dream, oh please please please let it be a dream-

At last no Eastmen were left alive. Aerune turned back in the direction of his fallen love, and saw her people gathered around her, weeping. For a moment he hesitated, and Kayla held her breath.

Then he slew them all, lashing out at them with levin-bolts until none stood, howling his anguish over the sound of the storm. Kayla screamed too—no shielding could withstand such agony. She fell to the wet grass, trying not to see what she could not help seeing. She saw the Guardians die, Eric and Ria and Hosea all cut down by Aerune's madness, and screamed until her throat was raw.

And then the storm and the screaming was gone, as if someone had changed the channel.

For long moments she was too stunned to care, huddling in a tight ball of misery, feeling the anguish of the dead vibrate along her nerves. She tried to breathe as Elizabeth had taught her—slow deep breaths that drew strength from the earth and let the pain flow away—but it was hard. She choked and gasped, fighting against herself, until at last she found the rhythm. Slowly her muscles relaxed, and the memory of the pain eased. At last Kayla came back to herself enough to realize that her eyes were closed, and opened them warily.

The sun of an unblemished spring day shone down upon the small village. She was huddled beside the well, curled against its rough warm stone. In the doorway of a nearby hut, Eric and Hosea worked on their instruments. She pulled herself to her feet and leaned against the sun-warmed stone, dizzy with nausea and disorientation. The screams of the dying still echoed in her ears, but the battle had been wiped away as if it had never been.

Because it has never been. It's still in the future, from here. This is the way it started when the Chaos Lands went away. This is where I was when it began. Oh, God, is it all going to happen again? I can't watch that happen again. I can't!

Maybe she was dead, because living the same two days over and over again, with the same terrible ending, was a pretty good approximation of hell, in Kayla's opinion. She took a deep steadying breath, welcoming anger.

No. It ain't gonna work out that way. This time I'm gonna make them hear me if I hafta grab each one of them and wrestle 'em to the ground to do it!

"Jeanette!" she shouted at the top of her lungs, but the harp that was Jeanette Campbell's form in this world was in Hosea's hands. Unstrung. Voiceless.

Kayla wasn't in the mood to let something like that stop her. She wanted to talk to Jeanette, and concentrated with all her fear and frustration, all her Healer's power, on making that happen.

"What?"

Jeanette walked around the well and stopped in front of Kayla, hands on hips. She was hard to look at; her form kept shifting back and forth between the sleek leather-clad hellhound that Aerune had made of her, and a dumpy irritated woman in a leather jacket and jeans. Neither form seemed really real.

"Why are we back here?" Kayla asked hoarsely. "If this is Aerune's way of attacking us, he won. So why do we have to start over?"

"Oh, you aren't dead yet," Jeanette said airily. "Out there you're still fighting. None of you will stay dead here until he kills you there."

"That's comforting," Kayla muttered shakily. Even if trying to think about it makes my head want to explode.

"Of course, each time he kills the others here, he weakens them there. It's quite elegant, really. As for you, you might just go mad, seeing the same disaster happen over and over." Jeanette sounded wistful, as if death were something desirable.



Should'a thought of that before you decided to become a banjo until the end of time! "You are being so fabulously helpful," Kayla said through gritted teeth. "I thought you wanted to make up for killing all those people."

"I don't know how!" ghost-Jeanette cried in real exasperation. "I'm no good at being nice-only at knowing things and telling them to people if they want to listen. If you want to change things, you've got to make the others realize this is a dream. There's no point trying to wake up Aerete or any of the other villagers. Only Aerune or the people you came with can deviate from the script, because they're the only ones who are real. And if you wake them up here, it might distract them enough so he kills them there. And then he'll have you." Jeanette shuddered and bowed her head. "Don't let him. Die first."

"But you know what's going on in both places," Kayla said. Jeanette nodded reluctantly. "So tell Hosea there, so he can tell the others, while I try to wake them up here. Are you with me, Banjo Girl?"

"You say it like it's so easy," Jeanette said sullenly. "It might not work-don't you understand? If I try, if I do it wrong, I could kill them!"

"That's what you're here for," Kayla said grimly. "To try. Do it."

Jeanette turned away, and her jangling discordant image vanished. Kayla was alone again in Fantasyland.

What do I do? What do I do? She felt a panicky flutter in her chest. It wasn't as if she was a stranger to tough situations and sudden death, but this time she wasn't just fighting to keep herself or her friends alive in a place where she knew what the ground rules were. She was trapped in a dream world whose rules she didn't understand. It wasn't enough to get out-if she couldn't figure out the right way out, she and all her friends would be tortured to death, and then Aerune would start on everyone else. Everyone she'd ever met. Everyone she'd ever known. Just . . . everyone.

The pressure made her feel ill, made her want to go off somewhere and hide and pretend it wasn't happening. And if she did that for long enough, everything would come crashing down and she'd never have to try . . . and fail.

She wished with all her heart that she could believe she was going to do that.

She squared her shoulders and headed over to where Eric sat.

"Eric." She kicked at the squatting figure halfheartedly. He didn't move. "Eric!"

That didn't work either.

How did you wake someone up who was already awake? It was like trying to heal somebody who wasn't hurt.

Hurt . . . heal . . .

Eric wasn't hurt, but he certainly wasn't all right. Could she tap into the power she used to heal to rouse him to wakefulness? And if she did, would it doom him in whatever passed for the Real World here?

If it's a choice of dying quick or dying slow, I know which one Elizabet's favorite apprentice picks. . . .

She stepped up behind him, and hesitated. Healing someone was easy-or at least, it was natural to her. The injury itself was what called forth her power, and though she directed its use, its scope was defined by what it healed. Most of a Healer's training involved learning to not use her power: to shield, to disengage, to hold herself back in the face of a serious hurt, lest in trying to heal it, she spent all of her own life-force.

Now she was essentially trying to call up that power without that sort of stimulus, doing consciously what she normally left to instinct and reflex. It was like trying to figure out what you needed to do in order to walk. Biting her lip, Kayla touched her fingers to Eric's temples, trying to push the power out through her skin. For a moment nothing happened, then it welled up and rushed out of her as if she'd pulled the cork out of a bottle.

Eric, wake up! Eric, see me! And try not to get killed in the process, she added as an afterthought.

Eric jerked as if he'd been stung. He turned and looked up at her, his eyes foggy and unfocused. "Who are you?" he said blankly. He didn't know her, but at least he saw her. That was a start.

"I'm Kayla. You're Eric-Eric Banyon. None of this is real, Eric-it's some kind of a dream!"

"We're all dreaming," he told her kindly, getting to his feet. "Are you a spirit?"

Kayla ground her teeth. He could see her, but the rest didn't look promising. "I'm your friend. New York-the Guardians-Aerune-Hosea-remember?"

"Hosea is my apprentice," Eric told her, still with that maddening kindly smile, like he'd joined some kind of mind-control cult. "Have you come to bring him visions? I think he will be a very powerful Bard, when he is trained."

"I think you are all going to die tomorrow, if you don't get with the program! This is Aerune's nightmare, and it's only got one ending. You've got to change that!"

"Your words are strange," Eric said. "And your clothes are, too."

Look who's talking. "Eric, please, try to grow a brain! Remember Aerune, the psychopath on the big black horsie? This is his dream. He's cast some kind of spell on you to make you forget."

"I forget nothing!" Eric snapped, suddenly very haughty. "Spirit, I am a Bard of a Hundred Songs."

Kayla wanted to shake him. "Then be a Bard! Wake up! Try to remember-you, and Hosea, and Ria, and the other- -Guardians-Aerune's got you all playing roles in his dreams, but you've got to make the dream come out differently."

"Ah." Comprehension seemed to dawn, and for a moment Kayla believed she'd reached him, until his next words made her heart sink. "You come to bring word of the future. Tell me, Spirit, what shall I do to save our folk?"

"Tomorrow the Eastmen are going to kill Aerete. You have to stop them."

"Aerete the Golden cannot die." Now Eric looked troubled, but he was worrying about the wrong thing. "She is one of the Bright Lords. No weapon made by men can harm her."

"Iron can. The Eastmen are carrying iron weapons. She's going to die."

"Master?" Hosea came over to Eric. "Master, you speak to the air."

"A spirit has come to foretell the battle," Eric said, turning to Hosea. Kayla tried not to look-it seemed as if wherever this was, it was strictly clothing optional.

"Do we win?" Hosea asked.

Kayla saw the sorrow in Eric's eyes, and knew he was going to lie.

"Yes. She promises us a great victory."

Hosea smiled with relief. "We should tell the others."

"Tell Aerete!" Kayla urged, knowing that warning her would do no good. Eric had his stubborn look on-that hadn't changed-and she could tell he'd made up his mind not to pay any attention to her. She turned to Hosea, grabbing his arm.

"Hey! Farmboy! Look at me!" The power flowed out of her more easily this time, as if it had learned what to do.

Hosea's eyes focused on her and alarm replaced relief. "Kayla?"

"Hosea-remember Jeanette! None of this is real! It's a dream that repeats over and over-you have to change the ending or we aren't going to be able to get out of here to fight Aerune!"

"Eric." The big man moved slowly, as if he were under water. "Eric, it's Kayla. Wake up. Jeanette says . . ."

For a moment the world shimmered, and Kayla caught a flash of the Chaos Lands. But before she could get her bearings, they were back in the village again, and both men were staring at her with identical looks of horrified comprehension.

"Jeanette. Jeanette. Kayla-what?" Eric stammered.

"Oh, thank God!" Kayla gasped, but the moment of relief made her lose her concentration. The village blinked out of existence, and she was back on the hillside, overlooking the field of battle.

No-no-no!

She closed her eyes, dropping to her knees where she stood. Once more she heard the cheers, the rumble as the two armies clashed.

The screams. She hugged herself, moaning, trying not to be there. She heard a howl of despair from the villagers, and knew that once more Aerete had died. Once again the storm came. Kayla opened her eyes, knowing she couldn't bear not to see, and Aerune moved through the enemy army, cutting them down with his sword of elvensilver. Once more they all lay dead, and Aerune turned upon the remnants of Aerete's army.

But this time Ria rode out to meet him, Eric at her side.

This isn't the way it went before! Kayla thought with a pang of hope.

Ria leaped down from her chariot, raising her spear. Aerune sliced it in half with a single blow, his sword so covered with blood that it sprinkled the Bard and the warrior who faced him with tiny drops of red.

Both knelt before him, offering their necks to his blow.

And Aerune stopped.

Turned away.

Left.

And Kayla stood once again beside the well in the sunlight, back in the village, staring at Eric, who was staring back at her, bewildered and appalled. Whatever had happened this time, he remembered it too.

It wasn't enough. It didn't work. Even if he spares the villagers, Aerune still blames humanity for Aerete's death.

"We have to get out of here," Eric said. He stared down at himself, frowned, and the loincloth and Celtic jewels vanished, to be replaced by elven Bardic silks.

"Get the others," Kayla said pleadingly. "Help me make them remember."

"The real question is, how long is this taking? What are we doing out there while we're in here?" Paul asked.

The four Guardians, Eric, Ria, and Kayla, were all gathered in Eric's hut, while outside the afternoon of the dream played itself out. It had taken hours of subjective time to gather them together and break the others free of the dream-spell, but even that wasn't enough to free them from the larger dream. They were still here-though at least they all had their own clothes back. That helped.

"It's a dream, you said. If that's the case, it shouldn't be taking any time at all," Toni said.

"That's about right," Hosea said, stroking the neck of his banjo. "I can see it-what's going on there-kind of, through Jeanette here."

"We don't dare let him keep the advantage. We have to get out of this loop, or we're going to die-here and there," Eric said. "If I used magic-"

"Jeanette doesn't think that will work," Kayla said quickly. "She thinks trying that here will be enough of a shock to get you killed there."

"Maybe," Ria allowed grudgingly. "Maybe not. But I think we should save the heavy artillery for a last resort. If we're inside his mind, we're also inside most of his defenses. Maybe we can stop him here."

"How?" Eric asked. "I'm open to any and all suggestions." He looked at Kayla.

She took a deep breath. "We have to derail the dream, make it come out differently, break the cycle. Jeanette said that the only ones who can affect the outcome are us-or Aerune."

"He isn't likely to want to help us," Ria said.

"But he will!" Kayla said. "Or at least, the dream-Aerune will. He's not like the other one." Although he's still a pain in the you-know-what.

"But he will become the Aerune we know, when his lady dies," José said. "Her death, it is a terrible thing. She was so beautiful, and so kind."

And treated you all like pedigreed lap dogs! Kayla thought rebelliously.

"And we stop that-how?" Ria demanded.

"Tell him," Eric said. "Tell Aerune she'll die if she rides into battle."

The others slowly nodded, agreeing. The dream-Aerune was the vulnerable point of the Aerune who was trying to kill them now in the Chaos Lands. If they could change him, they might be able to affect the outcome of that battle as well.

"Kayla, can you take us to the Gate Aerete used to get to Aerune's Hall?" Eric asked. "I think we'd better all stay together. That way, if anyone starts to . . . forget . . . the rest of us will be here to yank them back."

"Sure." Kayla got to her feet. The next mad elflord's dream world she got trapped in, she vowed, was going to have chairs. "Come on."

She walked to the door of the hut, and stopped. "Uh-oh."

Eric shouldered past her. "This isn't good."

The rest of the village was gone. When they'd gone into Eric's hut to plan, a cluster of sod huts had stood around the base of the fairy howe and the High House erected upon its summit. Now the mound was empty, and only a few huts besides their own remained, and those looked fake and shadowy.

"Have we gone further back in time?" Toni asked, bewildered.

"No . . . the High House was here first. I think," Eric said. "C'mon, we have to see if the Gate is still there."

The village wasn't the only thing that was different, Kayla realized, as they hurried along the path that led to the ring of standing stones. Before, everything had been realer than real, down to the tiniest detail of flower and leaf. This time, it looked almost like a soundstage-things near them were still sharp and clear, but the farther away they got from the main road, the less detail everything had. It was creepy.

"I just thought of something," Ria said suddenly. "What if we win? What if we kill Aerune-out there?"

Nobody answered her. But if they killed Aerune, odds were they'd die with him, dying as his mind died.

Kayla did her very best not to imagine what that would feel like.

To her immense relief, the standing stones were still there. Kayla ran up the hill and stopped at the edge of the ring. "She just walked through. And then she was there."

"Let's try it," Eric said, taking her hand. "Everybody, stay close together. Kayla, think hard about what you saw on the other side."

Holding hands, the seven of them passed through the stones. Kayla closed her eyes tightly, thinking hard about Aerune's Great Hall.

And they were there. Aerune sat upon his chair, a pack of shaggy black hounds at his feet. One of them lifted its enormous head and growled, staring at the intruders with baleful red eyes.

"Can he see us?" Paul asked in a half whisper.

"I hope so," Eric whispered back. "And I hope he doesn't recognize us."

"Who enters my domain?" Aerune demanded, staring around the room. "Show yourselves!"

He gestured, and Kayla felt magic touch her skin like an icy spray of water. Aerune leapt to his feet, staring at them in shock.

"Great Lord," Eric said boldly, stepping forward, "we come to bring you a warning." He managed a courtly bow.

"Who are you?" the Sidhe lord demanded, staring at them in something very much like fear. "Mud-born? I can send you to realms of nightmare with but a single thought-and I shall!" He raised his hand, but hesitated, obviously bewildered by their outlandish appearance and clothing.

"Lord Aerune, how can it harm one of the immortal Sidhe to hear our . . . humble . . . petition?" Ria stepped out from behind Eric and bowed her head meekly.

"We beg this boon in the Lady Aerete's name," Paul added quickly.

"So you are her folk," Aerune said, sounding reassured. "You grow strong in your borrowed magic." He settled back into his chair, and reached down to stroke the head of the nearest hound. It stopped growling and licked his hand. "Speak, then. For my lady's sake, I will hear you."

So the dream-Aerune didn't recognize them as his enemies. That was a point in their favor.

Eric took a deep breath and stepped forward. "Tomorrow the village faces the army of the Eastmen, and Aerete will fight at-our-side. But the Eastmen carry deathmetal, which is proof against all magic, and death even to the immortal Sidhe. If she goes into battle, she will die."

"Die?" Aerune got to his feet again and strode from the dais to stand before Eric, glaring down at him. "That cannot be! Her magic arms her against all the weapons of the mud-born!"

"Deathmetal destroys all magic, and burns the flesh of the Bright Lords. She will die," Eric said.

Aerune raised his hand to strike Eric, and seemed confused when Eric didn't cringe away from the blow.

He lowered his hand again.

"Great Lord, what does it matter if the Bard is right or not?" Ria said smoothly, diverting Aerune's attention. "Your course is plain. Fight in her stead, slay her enemies, and preserve her from harm. Is that not the duty of a lord to his sworn lady?"

"Am I to take counsel from mud-born animals?" Aerune growled. He looked more closely at Ria. "You are not as they. How can this be?"

"The blood of the Sidhe runs in my veins," Ria answered carefully, "and by that blood, you know what I say is true. You must save your lady from those who would harm her."

"I-" Aerune began, and for a moment he looked very young, and very frightened. "I- She cannot die!"

The world rippled around them. They were back on the hillside. By now Kayla was almost used to the jarring transition. Though she cringed inside at the thought of the slaughter to come, she tried to take comfort from the fact that this time they all stood together, watching the two armies prepare to fight.

"This has happened before," Eric said quietly. "I . . . remember it. I think. What happens now?"

"You fight, Aerete dies, Aerune kills everybody in sight," Kayla said tightly. She pointed, to where Aerete and her elvensteed stood beside the first line of chariots. "That hasn't changed."

"But we've warned him. And we're here, not there," Toni said.

"I've got an idea," Kayla began. Then the horn sounded, and the two armies rushed to converge.

But before they could meet, Aerune was there. This time he did not wait for Aerete to fall, but turned upon the enemy host, sword flashing.

Kayla closed her eyes and leaned against Hosea's shoulder, trying to shut it all out. Hosea put his arms around her and held her tightly, but she could still hear the shocked sounds of horror and dismay from the others as they watched. In a much shorter time than before, there was silence.

She turned in Hosea's arms and opened her eyes.

The enemy army lay dead-all of them. Aerete's people were untouched. Some knelt. Other lay full-length upon the ground in terror, prostrating themselves before one of the Bright Lords. Only Aerete stood tall, proud and angry, mounted upon her shining white mare.

Aerune walked slowly toward her, his sword dripping red and wet in his hand. But when he would have knelt at her feet, she stopped him with an imperious gesture.

"Stay back!" Aerete cried, and in the utter silence, her words carried clearly to the watchers upon the hill. "You disgust me. How could I ever have thought to love a monster who kills so easily? Go, and never come before me again till the end of your days, Aerune mac Audelaine!"

"This isn't working," Eric said wearily.

They were back in the hut. Kayla supposed that soldiers in battle must look the way they did now-shell-shocked and browbeaten. She felt like crying, but refused to give in to it.

"It seems we are doomed to replay the seminal event that formed Aerune's character forever, in every possible variation," Paul said slowly. "Once he loses Aerete's love, he begins to hate humanity."

"And even if we save her, that doesn't change," José said flatly. "She rejects him for them, and he turns to the Dark."

"And breaking out of here by magic still carries the same risk. Kayla. Back there, on the hill, you said you had an idea," Eric said. "I think we could all use a good idea right now."

"I think . . . Paul and José are right," Kayla said slowly, piecing the words together as she spoke. "Aerune's hurt. That's why we can't make this come out right. When Aerete died, something inside him broke, and everything that comes afterward comes because of that."

"So what are you suggesting?" Ria snapped. "Tea and sympathy? He's trying to kill us-and doing a damned good job of it!"

"We can't raise the dead," Eric said sadly, and Kayla knew he was thinking about Jimmie.

"No," Kayla said slowly. "But we can heal the hurt. If he never sees Aerete die, then all the rest won't happen."

"Kayla," Eric said gently, "we can't do that. We can't go back in time and change the past that way. What else would change? It's like that SF paradox: if you go back in time and shoot your grandfather, you're never born, so you never go back in time and shoot your grandfather."

"I'm not even sure that saving Aerete would be a good idea," Toni said musingly. "I-remember-what it was like to be one of Aerete's people. She was a loving mistress, but Aerune was right about one thing. We were pets. And I don't want to be somebody's pet, no matter how kind they are."

"We don't have to change the past," Kayla insisted. "Just change his mind, change the hate. Look, this is one of the things Healers do. Take the bad memories and make them stop hurting so much. Elizabet told me once that a Healer can even erase memories-make them go away for good. But it's dangerous-both to the Healer and the person they're working on. And it takes a lot of power. More power than I've got."

"Which brings us back to 'how,' " Eric said. "If we broke out of here-got ourselves back into real time somehow-"

"We'll be toast," Ria said succinctly.

"Sounds to me like the little 'un's right," Hosea said suddenly. "Can't we just make Aerune forget that his lady friend's dead? If we could, it wouldn't be in the past. We're in Aerune's mind now, not then."

"We can't make it so tomorrow never comes," Eric said. "But you're right. If we can make it so that Aerune doesn't remember that it ever did . . ."

The seven of them looked at each other.

"We'd better hurry," Kayla said, looking toward the door of the hut. "Because I think the sun is going



out."

SEVENTEEN:

## THE MAGNIFICENT SEVEN

Eric stood in the corner of Aerune's Great Hall, playing a soft tune upon his flute. Into it, he put all he knew of Aerete from this journey through Aerune's memories. The cloaking spell he had set in motion before they passed through the ring of standing stones kept Aerune from sensing their presence, and in a few moments, if this worked, it would no longer matter whether it held or not.

Behind him, the four Guardians stood in a ring around Kayla and Ria, their arms crossed, holding each other's hands to form a tightly-woven ring of protection around the two women. They were taking a mad gamble-that the source of their power was compatible with Kayla's healing ability-but it was their only chance. Undermine Aerune's power here, the power that fed on his rage at Aerete's murder-or break free of the dream by force and face him in the Chaos Lands, with Aerune at the height of his powers.

If this worked, Kayla would be able to reach into Aerune's mind to erase the memories that caused him such pain. They would be free of Aerune's dream, back in the Chaos Lands, and-if they were lucky-Aerune would be off-balance for the precious moments they needed to set the dragon labyrinth around him.

If Kayla could heal him. To do it, Kayla would have to go deeper into the elf-lord's mind than any of them were now. Even with Ria to act as her anchor, there was a real possibility that Kayla might lose herself. And without Kayla to bridge the two worlds-the real and the dream-the rest of them would fall back into Aerune's nightmare once more, this time for good.

And they'd die.

Eric concentrated on his playing, on creating the imago of Aerete. To remove the memories without Aerune noticing and fighting back, there had to be something both to call them to the surface and to go in their place. That was where Eric came in-to craft a dream of Aerete, alive and loving and whole, to set in the place of the memories of sorrow and loss.

It could be Kory up there, Eric thought fleetingly. Kory, with Beth dead and no way to get her back.

Then there was no time for such thoughts. He threw himself into the music and the spell.

Kayla clutched Ria's hands tightly, trying to think of nothing but the healing she was about to attempt. She and Elizabet had done this before-with Beth, with Ria, with others who came to Elizabet to heal wounds not of the body, but of the spirit. But what she was about to do now bore the same resemblance to that work as the Space Shuttle did to the Wright Brothers' first airplane. To do it, she would have to become both surgeon and scalpel, drawing upon the energy the Guardians sent her just as she normally drew on her own life-force. The attempt could kill them all.

But hey, who wants to live forever, especially on Aerune's terms?

Slowly, she reached out to the Guardians, touching their power. It spilled into her like sunshine, and she took a steadying breath. Okay so far. She didn't need to touch Aerune to do this-she was already inside his mind, inside his defenses, inside his dreams. That was the only reason this could possibly work. She closed her eyes, concentrating on Eric's music.

Aerete. Think of Aerete.

The Great Hall and her companions were gone-she was deep in Aerune's memories, seeing through his eyes. She could smell the blood, hear the moans of the dying. She-he-they held Aerete's body in their arms, felt her cooling blood upon their hands, and Aerune mac Audelaine knew that in this moment his world had ended. Men had done this, men had killed his love, and in his dead love's name, Aerune swore that their treachery would be repaid. He had shown them mercy for her sake, and now that they had slain her, they had slain all mercy and kindness as well. A cold fury welled up in him, destroying all other thoughts, all other purposes. For so long as Time itself endured, they would be his prey and his enemy, and he would not rest until he had slain them all-

Kayla felt his agony rip through her like a high wind. He had killed elves before, though Death was a rare visitor to the Sidhe. Among the mortalkind he had seen Death in all its guises, but no death had ever touched him until now. It was unendurable pain, and only hate could protect him from it. Never again would he love-he would hate, hate forever the worthless animals who had destroyed him and slain his love. In her name, he would hate forever, until the very sun grew cold. . . .

She reached out, taking his pain and letting it flow through her. Again and again she reached out, smoothing away the pain and loss until nothing of that terrible moment remained. Kayla gasped with effort, feeling her heart thunder in her distant body. The memory of Aerete's death was gone, but that wasn't enough. There was still too much pain. She had to take every memory of Aerete from his mind, leaving Aerune only the loving presence of the Aerete in Eric's music. She closed her eyes, and let the music lead her deeper into Aerune's mind.

The firelight flared, and Kayla opened her eyes. As she did, the world came real-the smell of fragrant wood smoke, the cold bite of the winter night, the sound of drums and piping. She was Aerune.

There was a bonfire ringed by dancers. The lines of men and women wove in and out, and every few moments one of the dancers would rush toward the center of the ring and leap the fire, to the accompaniment of much laughing and shouting. The firelight gleamed on their oiled skin, and Kayla saw the shadowy marks of tribal paint and tattoos.

And Aerete danced with them, her bright hair shining, her jewels gleaming with elvish fire. She leaped into the circle and over the fire, and all her people shouted with joy. Kayla felt Aerune's anger, his uncomprehending pain and sullen hurt. How can she love them, who does not love me?

She touched the memories with her power, soothing them away. Gone. It was easier this time. And Eric's music pulled her elsewhere.

The walls of Aerune's Great Hall gleamed golden in the light of torches. Banners of bright silk hung from the ceiling, waving softly in the updrafts of warm air from the fire in the firepit. The ivory dais was draped with rugs of jewel-bright weaving, and on it stood a gaming table, its surface covered with carven

counters of gold and precious stones. Aerete leaned over the board, her pale hair a fall of shining silk, regarding its surface intently. Suddenly she saw a move and pounced, sweeping the enemy counters from the board. She clapped her hands and laughed, as happily as a child, and Aerune knew there was nothing in all the worlds as beautiful as her face, that without her there was no happiness anywhere-

Gone.

The air was filled with flowers and the scent of new green life. They rode through the early morning mist, he on his black stallion, she on her white mare, and all the time-bound Earthly world was their dominion. In her hair she wore a garland of his weaving-May flowers, as pale and perfect as her silken skin. Her arms were full of flowers, their petals showering down like warm soft snow. The air was filled with birdsong, and larks wheeled and darted about her head, teasing and calling. For her sake, he had forsworn the Hunt, and no longer took the Children of Earth as his rightful prey. She held out her hand, and the birds of the air came to her call. He prayed that this moment would last forever, that she would not turn again to the mortalfolk, those unworthy recipients of her precious love-

Gone.

He rode forth with the Hosts of Hell at his back-landless knights cast out by their hames, Low Court spirits bound to him by magic-to hunt and harry where he would, for this time-bound world had long been his playground. Once this land had been green and silent, but then Men had come to it, hunting the red deer and the gray wolf, cutting down the great trees. Now he rode toward one of their villages of sticks and mud, intent upon their destruction.

But as he rode toward them, a lone rider blocked his way. He thought to run her down, but then recognized that she was of his blood, as fair as the undying lilies of an Elfhome. A woman, little more than a child, who gazed at him fearless and unafraid.

"Yield the road to me, child. I ride to the village beyond," Aerune said harshly.

"Not this day, nor yet any other, while I live," she answered boldly.

"Child, do you know me? I could slay you with a thought."

"All in this realm know you, to their sorrow, Aerune mac Audelaine, Lord of the Hunt. Too long have you harried the folk who cry out to me for protection. I would have you cease."

He gazed upon her shining form, he who had never bent to another's will, and something in her fearless gaze reached a part of him that he thought could never yield to the touch of another. Aerune hesitated.

"Tell me who you are, that I may tell your kinfolk who to mourn."

"I am Aerete, child of Melusine, and I will not let you harm my people."

He gazed once more into her face, and saw that she would not yield. He had slain others as he would slay her now, and forget her death before the sun set in this mortal world. And so he raised his hand-

He could not do it, and did not know why. And the Hunt turned aside-

Gone.

Gone. All gone. The flash of her eyes, the scent of her skin, the touch of her hand. Joy and sorrow, love and hate, gone. All gone, smoothed away from his mind as if they'd never been, Eric's spell set in their place. All the memories, all the pain, gone, gone forever-

:KAYLA!:

Ria's mental cry jolted Kayla from the healing trance. She staggered and fell, crying out with despair at the beauty she had destroyed-gone forever, all gone-

She fell to her knees on the misty ground of the Chaos Lands. Time ran normally once more, but Kayla hardly cared. She was sick, she was cold . . . and tired, so very tired-

"Get back-get back!" Toni shouted, sweeping her sword up to meet Aerune's blow. There was a ring of metal on metal, a hiss as elvensilver met Cold Iron. Someone grabbed Kayla by the scruff of her mail shirt and flung her away like a bag of dirty laundry. She hit hard and rolled, fetching up at Lady Day's feet. She clung to the stirrup of the elvensteed's saddle, dragging herself to her feet.

It seemed that only seconds had passed since Aerune's arrival, and the discord between that fact and what she remembered made Kayla lightheaded. She heard music, buffeting her as if she swam in an ocean of harmony, being pulled this way and that by clashing currents, and heard the flat boom of a big-bore handgun, its bark louder than the roaring of the hellhounds. Toni and José were circling Aerune, trying to draw his attack while Paul and Eric-and Hosea-shielded them with magic. Ria stood in a shooter's brace, both hands together, firing at the creatures that followed Aerune, and every shot found its mark. The Unseleighe creatures burned where the steel-jacketed slugs had hit them, collapsing inward around the lumps of deathmetal like ice thrown onto hot coals.

Was it only hope, or did Aerune's attack seem the least bit uncertain, as if he were no longer quite sure why he fought?

A thousand thoughts clamored for attention in Eric's mind, but he forced them back. There was no time to think, only to be, responding to each of Aerune's attacks with the swiftness Master Dharniel had drummed into him through long and painful lessons. He knew that they could not win this way. They had to stop fighting a purely defensive battle, knock Aerune back long enough to plant the dragon seed.

Then Aerune swept through Toni's guard, hammering her to the ground with one blow from his black mailed fist and catching José off-guard with a backswept blow from his longsword. He raised his sword to deliver the deathblow to the fallen Guardian-

And suddenly there was another warrior here, between Aerune and Toni. Her plate armor was the deep blue of the midnight sky, and her sword burned like starlight.

"Jimmie . . . ?" Eric whispered, unable to believe it.

Knowing it was somehow true.

Jimmie fought Aerune back with a flurry of sword-blows, forcing the elf-lord to give ground, moving him away from the downed Guardians. Each time their swords met they gave off a shower of sparks. Jimmie moved with superhuman grace, as though Death had burned away all that was gross and mortal, leaving behind only the beautiful spirit of the -warrior-mage.

"Eric!" she shouted over the clang of metal. "Do it!"

This is the only chance. Eric ran forward, the labyrinth-seed clutched in his fist. Aerune was totally focused on this new opponent. He paid no attention as Eric raised his hand and dashed the seed to the ground. As he did, Jimmie slowly faded away, her last work done.

What happened next was over in an instant, and at the same time seemed to uncoil so slowly that he could see every detail. As the maze-seed struck the ground it began to sprout, unfolding layer after layer of labyrinth, with Aerune at its heart. Walls and passageways, chambers and blind turnings, twisting and twining and leading back into themselves with a mad geometrical complexity. And then-instantly, eventually-there was nothing there but a silvery latticework sphere hovering a few feet off the ground, its shining tracery winding all the way to its heart.

Silence, and the impossible memories came flooding back, making the Chaos Lands reel around him.

Eric stared around at the others. They were all here, all alive. José was helping Toni to her feet. Ria stood head bowed, her gun held out stiffly in front of her. The elvensteeds huddled together, and Kayla, green-faced, was clinging to Lady Day's stirrup, as if that were the only thing holding her upright. As he watched, she let go and sank to her knees, retching. He took a step toward her, but his knees buckled under him and he fell.

Ria ran past him, cradling the fallen Healer in her arms and wiping her face with a handkerchief. After a couple of tries, Eric managed to stagger over to join her.

"Kayla! Are you all right?"

She winced at the loudness of his voice. "Backlash," she whispered, and groaned as Ria lifted her in her arms. "What happened?"

"We won," Eric said.

"Good," Kayla muttered, and closed her eyes.

"Is she . . . ?" Toni asked. Eric looked around. Toni looked battered and drained by the fight, and the mail across her chest was charred and blackened where one of Aerune's levin-bolts had struck. A bruise was rising on her cheekbone where Aerune had struck her, but her eyes were clear.

"Sleeping," Eric said. He rubbed his eyes, realizing he still held his flute clenched in his right hand. He looked at it. The silver was twisted and fused, distorted beyond repair, but he could not remember when or how it had happened. Too many contradictory memories fought for possession of his mind-had they fought Aerune here, or in the shadowy corridors of the elf-lord's mind? Which had been the real fight?

"I thought I saw . . . Jimmie," Toni said slowly.

"I saw her too," Eric said, unsure now of what had been real and what had been a dream. "She saved us. She saved all of us."

Ria laid Kayla down and got to her feet. She put an arm around his shoulder. He could feel her muscles trembling with exhaustion. "Try not to think about it," she advised kindly. "Maybe it was her. If it wasn't, it was something that wanted us to win. These are the Chaos Lands. No one can really say what's

possible here."

Eric glanced back at the dragon labyrinth. "But what did we do?" he demanded in frustration, looking around at the others.

"Healed him. Imprisoned him. Either way it's over," Paul said heavily. He wiped his blade with a silk scarf, and slid it back into the cane-sheath, then leaned upon it as if he needed its support.

"But if we did the one, we didn't have to do the other. Right?" Toni asked, sounding as bewildered as Eric felt. She reached out to touch José's shoulder, as if trying to convince herself he was there.

"But the village . . . Aerete . . . it all seemed so real," José said, sounding lost. "The beautiful lady, like the Virgin come to Earth-"

"It was. And it wasn't," Eric said. But it was real enough that he mourned its loss-the sense of security, of home. If they had won, it had been at a cost. Even if they had erased Aerune's memories and his pain, they would all now carry the scar of Aerete's death with them until the end of their days.

"I think we did heal him, or maybe gave him a chance to heal himself," Hosea said slowly, answering Toni. "And if we did, that labyrinth is the best place for him, now. Think about it." He ran his fingers across the face of the banjo, but the instrument was silent, its strings broken and twisted.

"Aerune made a lot of enemies in his life," Eric said, reasoning it out. He was so tired-every fiber of his being screamed for sleep, for rest-but the Chaos Lands weren't safe to linger in. "But-if it worked-he won't remember any of them. Us."

"He'd be helpless against them," Ria said. "But locked up in there, he'll be safe. And the cream of the jest is, he probably won't even notice he is locked up. He'll have Aerete-the Aerete you made for him with your music, Eric-and she'll never die. I suppose you'd call that a happy ending." She gave Eric's shoulder a last squeeze. "We'd better go."

Toni cried out, pointing. A dark shape banked through the mist heading toward them.

"Something's coming," Paul said grimly, as the shape moved toward them through the mist. It landed, folding its great wings. Hosea turned, picking Kayla up.

Eric tried to summon the strength to face this new foe, and knew with a sinking sense of despair that the battle had taken everything he had. Then he saw what they faced clearly, for the first time.

"Pretty," Chinthliss said, craning his long bronze-scaled neck to inspect the shining silvery ball. "One of my more elegant creations."

"Is that . . . a dragon?" Toni asked in a tiny voice.

"A friend," Eric said, his voice shaking with relief. I hope.

The dragon turned its enormous head to inspect all of them, amber eyes glowing. "And an exquisite battle, may I say, Bard? My compliments to you and your friends."

"Thank you," Eric said. He tried for a courtly bow and staggered. He would have fallen if Ria hadn't been there to catch him.

"I would welcome the opportunity to hear the story of your success in detail," Chinthliss said. "Perhaps I might extend the hospitality of my humble domain to you all until you have rested? I fear such prodigious magics as you have done here today will inevitably attract such persons as you will not wish to meet at this time."

Or ever. "Thank you, Lord Chinthliss. We would be-"

The dragon spread its great wings.

"-honored?" Eric finished weakly, boggling at the sudden smooth transition from there to here.

The Chaos Lands were gone. The seven of them-and the two elvensteeds-stood suddenly in the inner courtyard that Eric remembered from his last visit to the dragon's domain, and in place of the enormous bronze dragon stood an elegant Oriental man in a bronze silk suit.

"Madre de Dios," José said, crossing himself fervently.

Blessed Lady, hear our call, we who are Your folk . . . Eric shook his head, wrenching himself out of the automatic prayer, too exhausted to think straight. There was no point in praying to the Bright Lady Aerete for her aid as his instincts and memories demanded. Aerete was gone, gone with the paradise she had created, leaving only them to mourn her.

"But come," Chinthliss said, clapping his hands to summon his servants, and drawing Eric's mind back to the here-and-now. "Rest, and awaken refreshed."

Eric didn't even remember making it to a bed. But he dreamed.

Aerune mac Audelaine, child of the Sidhe, walked the halls of his silver castle beyond the stars. He did not know how he had come to be here, and did not care. He walked in music, his heart filled with the gentle melody of his beloved, a shining presence that accompanied him always. Around him bloomed the undying gardens of Underhill, and the rooms of his dwelling were filled with beauty, harmony and light. He had no reason to venture forth, no interest in the world beyond his domain.

Aerune knew he was loved. He was content.

EIGHTEEN:

JOURNEY'S END

"Wake up, sleepyhead," Ria said. She sounded amused.

Eric opened his eyes and found himself staring up at an unfamiliar canopy of yellow silk. He tried to remember how he'd gotten here, but his mind felt . . . bruised, and all he could dredge up at the moment were confused memories of Maeve's ceileighe, of the enormous wonders of Underhill. He could hear

birds singing, and morning sunlight was spilling in through the windows. He felt as if a long time had passed, but wasn't sure exactly how much. It must have been one hell of a party. . . .

"Where . . . ?" He sat up with a groan. Every muscle felt stiff, as if they had been strained to their limit, and that recently.

"Lord Chinthliss' palace, everyone's fine, you've been asleep for a day and a half, and some friends of yours are here, and very anxious to see you," Ria rattled off, as if reading the headlines.

Eric shoved the hair out of his eyes and blinked. Ria was sitting on the edge of the bed, dressed in an elaborate scarlet silk kimono, her hair swept up in a pair of ornate jade combs.

"Friends?" he asked groggily. Memories came jangling back in a confused indigestible lump. The Chaos Lands. The fight with Aerune. The village. Aerete. Jimmie.

Seeing from his face that Eric was finally awake, Ria got to her feet. "You might as well come in," she called. "He's just washed his brain, and he can't do a thing with it."

"Eric!" Beth bounced onto the huge bed in a flurry of motion, and snatched Eric into a bone-crushing hug. "Are you all right? What happened? What are you doing here? Chinthliss wouldn't let anybody wake you up, and- Are you okay?" she demanded in a rush, not giving Eric a chance to get a word in edgewise.

"He is alive," Kory said, settling at the edge of the bed and putting an arm around both of them. "And from what little young Kayla has told us, that alone is a great accomplishment. You should not have faced such a foe alone, Bard," he added sternly. "Not without your friends."

Great. I save the world and get scolded for it.

"I-" Eric began. His stomach rumbled loudly. "I'm starving." The last meal he could remember was a hurried breakfast, and he was no longer sure how many days ago that had been.

"Then come and eat," Ria said. "There's enough food here to feed an army."

Breakfast was waiting in the outer room of the lavish suite. Eric wrapped himself in a robe-sky-blue silk embroidered with silver and gold cranes-and followed the other three out of the yellow silk bedroom. The Guardians and Kayla, Ria told him, had been up for almost a day already. "Everyone's doing pretty well-just minor bumps and bruises, even Kayla, but Chinthliss wanted to wait until he could see everyone at once before hearing the story of what he calls our adventure. Better brace yourself, O Bard of a Hundred Songs. I think he's going to want you to set it to music."

Eric winced. Adventure, yeah. I guess that's what you call it when everybody comes back alive.

Over breakfast-a smorgasbord of delicacies from bacon and eggs to lox and bagels, all kept hot beneath enchanted silver covers-Eric gave Kory and Beth an abbreviated story of what had happened since the last time he'd talked to Beth a few days ago. A lot of his recollection of the fight was still jumbled-human language wasn't very good for explaining what you'd been doing when you felt like you'd been in two places at once-but he managed to cover the important points.



"But why did you not ask for our aid in helping you defeat Aerune?" Kory demanded again. "In the face of such a threat, surely Elfhame Misthold, at least, would have sent allies to your cause."

Yeah, and if I'd known how powerful Aerune was going to turn out to be, I might have asked for them, no matter what Dharniel said. I'm not sure now that the labyrinth would have held Aerune if Kayla hadn't drawn his fangs.

"I didn't want to involve the Sidhe," Eric said, thinking it over. "After what Dharniel told me when I spoke to him, I wasn't sure they'd be too hipped on having a bunch of humans take out a Sidhe-and by the time I convinced them Aerune was a real threat to them, too, it could have been too late."

"Maybe it's already too late, if what we ran into in Las Vegas is any indication," Beth said unhappily. "Nuts in green suits with flying cars-that has to be Aerune's work, doesn't it? His human helpers?"

"Maybe," Eric said. "But without Aerune's backing, they won't find it as easy to swing government support for their elf-war any more."

"Especially after I make a few well-placed phone calls," Ria said contentedly, biting into a slice of crisp toast slathered with orange marmalade. "In the course of straightening out the Threshold mess from last year, I've met a lot of interesting people wandering around the corridors of power, and more than a few of them owe me favors. Big favors. I'll make some calls when I get back. It may not be fast, but we'll get everything fixed up eventually." Her eyes glittered. "There's one good thing about the black ops people so far as we're concerned. They're all so paranoid and so greedy about getting bigger slices of the black-budget pie that all you have to do is set one project off to discredit another one, and the next thing you know, you've got internecine warfare that makes the Blue and the Grey look like Woodstock." She laughed-and to Eric's relief, there was actually some real humor in it. "You just leave that part of it to me. A hint here, a budget page carelessly left there-I just wish I could be a fly on the walls."

"But what about you?" Eric asked Beth and Kory. "You've heard my story, now what about you two? You went to Chinthliss for help-how did that work out?"

Beth's face fell, and her eyes filled with tears of angry frustration. "Not well," she said. "He gave us everything I asked him for . . ."

"And it was not enough," Kory said bleakly. He put an arm around Beth, and Eric saw her force herself to smile reassuringly.

This is not good. "But what did you ask for?" Eric asked.

"Oh, never mind that now," Beth said crossly, wiping at her eyes. "I screwed up. It happens. We can go into it later. Right now, I don't think you should keep Chinthliss or your other friends waiting-and I want to hear the rest of the story-the real story, including the parts you left out just now."

Eric wasn't sure where his own clothes had gotten to, but the ones the geisha servants had laid out for him when he returned to the bedroom were lavish enough to replace even the finery of an Underhill Bard-wide pants in heavy black silk that shimmered in the sunlight, a dark red ghi top woven in a geometric brocade and a long gray and maroon robe embroidered with birds and flowering trees to go over it, held in place with a long gold sash. For his feet, there were ankle boots of soft doeskin leather, held closed with a carved jade button at the outside of each ankle. I've worn weirder stuff. But I feel like

an extra in Shogun.

When he was dressed, Ria rang for Charles, and Chinthliss' butler conducted the four of them to the very English drawing room that Eric had seen before.

Kayla and the four Guardians were there waiting for them, along with a fox-faced young human man with unkempt black hair, dressed in a T-shirt and jeans. The others were wearing opulent Oriental garb similar to Eric and Ria's-except for Kayla, who had somehow managed to convince Chinthliss or his servants to provide her with an approximation of her glitterpunk garb-tight silver-scaled leggings mostly covered with black thigh-high stiletto-heeled boots, and a brief tube top that looked as if it was made of marabou feathers. Her face was elaborately painted in geisha fashion-Kayla's notion of a concession to the prevailing dress code-and her silver batwing earrings flashed in her ears.

Eric was relieved to see that the others all appeared well and healthy-Toni's face wasn't even bruised-though Paul looked as if he were bursting with a thousand unasked questions. Even Hosea's banjo was restrung with shining silver strings.

Good as new, whatever that means in this situation. I hope Jeanette's all right. She did her best for us back in the Chaos Lands. Without her, we might never have made it out of Aerune's dream.

"My, my, my-you're looking good these days, Eric," Toni said with a grin and a nod toward his Oriental finery. She came over and enfolded him in a quick fierce hug. "For a while there we were wondering if you were ever going to wake up."

"Slugabed," Hosea said, with a broad smile. "Glad to see you back on your feet."

"Glad to have feet to be back on," Eric said. "Folks, I'd like you to meet two other friends of mine, Beth and Kory. Guys, you've already met Toni Hernandez from when I moved in, and you remember Kayla, but this is Paul-José-and Hosea, who in addition to being a Guardian, is also an apprentice Bard."

"An' this is Tanim," Kayla said, pulling the dark-haired man over to greet Eric. "He drives race-cars for a living. How cool is that?"

"She makes it sound more glamorous than it is," Tanim said, smiling. "I'm really more of a test driver, not a competition racer." He held out his hand, and Eric shook it, feeling the hard calluses of a mechanic's hands beneath his grip.

"You're with Elfhome Fairgrove, aren't you?" Eric asked. The Fairgrove elves took a far more active part in the world than the elves of Elfhome Misthold.

Tanim grinned wider. "What can I say? I've always had a taste for fast cars and low company, which is probably why I hang out with Chinthliss so much. But I never thought I'd meet another Guardian-let alone four of them."

"You've met Guardians before?" Eric asked, surprised.

"One, once. At my high school prom, if you can believe that, so don't ever let anyone tell you that Oklahoma is dull. But we'll have to save that story for another occasion, because I've got the feeling the show's about to start."

As if speaking his name aloud a few moments before had summoned him up-and in Underhill, such a

thing wasn't as impossible as it seemed-the double doors at the far end of the salon opened and Chinthliss strode in.

"Ah, my young friends. I hope the day finds you well? Now that you are rested, I am eager to hear all that transpired."

The party seated themselves in comfortable chairs arrayed around a low table laden with cups and half a dozen carafes of wine and juice. Chinthliss waited until everyone had served him or herself with their beverage of choice, then folded his hands and regarded them all expectantly.

"Well," Eric said hesitantly. Everyone was staring at him-even Ria-expecting him to start things off. "I guess it more-or-less started the night Aerune showed up at the apartment building, but maybe the real beginning was a few weeks ago when I was coming home from school and found Hosea busking in the subway. . . ."

The tale took longer to tell to Chinthliss' satisfaction than Eric had expected, with each of the others contributing their own version of the events they'd taken part in.

Beth and Kory added the full story of their meeting with the Men In Green at Glitterhame Neversleeps, which did seem to be tied up somehow with Aerune's plans, though "now" in the World Above for Eric and the others was still August, and Beth and Kory's "now" was November.

When I get out of this, no more trips to Underhill for a long time. Time travel-if that's what it is-makes my head hurt! One more paradox, and I think it'll melt completely.

At last they had finally answered all of Chinthliss' questions as well as they could. Telling the story over also helped them to sort it out in their own minds-if what they remembered wasn't exactly what had happened, it was close enough for folk music and government work, as the saying went.

"So . . . what now?" Toni asked, looking around the table.

"Now, my young friends, you return to your own worlds and your own lives," Chinthliss said. "Do your best to forget what transpired on your journey through the fair and treacherous realms of Underhill, remembering only what you must. It will be more . . . comfortable for you thus."

"I don't know," Toni said consideringly. "Comfort has never been really high on the Guardians' list of priorities. And I think this is going to put a whole new spin on the way we look at the world."

"Amen to that," Paul said. "Knowing about Underhill, that it exists-that elves exist, and dragons . . . it explains so much."

"And raises as many questions as it answers," Chinthliss said, not unkindly. "Or so you will find. But for now you will do as seems good to you, and perhaps I can offer you one last word of warning, before you return to your own place and time: to think too much about a thing is often to call it to you, for good or ill."

"I don't know that we've got much to worry about there," Paul said. "Any elf that shows up in New York City is more likely to get mugged than be able to make trouble."

"As you say," Chinthliss said, nodding gravely. "But now you will be anxious to return to your home and loved ones. The battle you have fought has been a greater boon to Underhill than you can easily guess,

for if the Sidhe-Lord Aerune's plans had borne their intended fruit, it would have brought great disruption to this realm. And so in gratitude for all your labors, let me extend you one last small courtesy, and convey you swiftly and safely back to your own place-and time."

There was a moment of silent consultation, and Toni shrugged minutely, getting to her feet. "Sure. Thanks. I'm not sure how long we've been gone, but the kids are probably driving their aunt crazy by now."

"My little ones will miss me," José said, rising to his feet as well.

"And Columbia will miss Kayla," Ria said meaningfully, regarding Kayla.

"Eric?" Paul asked.

"You guys go on ahead. I've got a few things to take care of here-if that's alright with you, Lord Chinthliss?"

The dragon lord bowed his head in agreement. "Please accept my hospitality for as long as you care to enjoy it, Bard Eric. And now, my young friends, if you would care to accom-pany me . . . ?"

Chinthliss left the room, ushering the others before him.

"I think I've gotta go water some plants or something," Tanim said, grinning as he got to his feet. "You folks look like you've got serious stuff to discuss." He followed Chinthliss out, and they could hear him start to whistle before the doors to the salon closed again, shutting off the sound from the corridor.

Eric looked at Beth and Kory.

"Okay. I've been patient. Give."

"This is the library," Beth said, a few minutes later.

Eric stared at a room the approximate size of the Houston Astrodome, completely full of books.

"Free access to his library, and all it contains," Kory quoted bitterly. "That is what we bargained for, and that is what we received. But there is no catalogue of these holdings, no order to them-and no way to find the information we seek."

"Ah, there you are," Chinthliss said, strolling into the room. "You will be pleased to know that your friends are all returned safely to their homes, the very day they left them-though Mistress Ria did say something about needing a tow truck for a Rolls Royce. Splendid vehicles," Chinthliss said musingly.

"You tricked them," Eric said hotly, unable to contain his anger. "You tricked my friends!"

Chinthliss gazed from Eric to Beth, his face blank with surprise. "But I did not. They asked for the use of my library, and bargained well for the privilege."

"Because they thought they could find what they needed here. You told them they could-you told them the information was here," Eric accused, unable to stop himself.

"And it is," Chinthliss said, sounding even more baffled at Eric's anger.

"Dragons are notorious packrats," Tannim said, coming out of the stacks, holding a book. "But nobody ever said they were organized. He didn't cheat your friends, Eric. The old lizard is used to just hunting through things until he finds what he's looking for-I told you that you needed a librarian for this pile, didn't I?" he said to Chinthliss.

"And refused to undertake the task yourself," Chinthliss said, sounding hurt. He looked hopefully at Beth. "Never would I have made a shoddy bargain with you, Lady Beth. The book you seek is indeed here."

"Somewhere," Kory muttered under his breath.

"All that remains is to call it forth," Chinthliss said.

"Which means calling in a little help," Tannim added.

"And that's where I come in," a familiar voice said out of nowhere.

Beth turned around. Eric stared.

There was a cartoon fox, standing in Chinthliss' library about twenty feet off the floor. It was wearing a red James Dean jacket and a gold pendant around its neck that said "FX," and instead of one tail, it had three. On its long vulpine nose were perched a pair of overlarge black horn-rimmed glasses giving the creature an unconvincing intellectual look.

"Do you know him?" Eric asked Beth.

"Know him!" Beth yelped. "He's- I- If I'd just listened to him back at the Goblin Market- That's Foxtrot-X-Ray," Beth finished weakly, disbelieving mirth bubbling in her voice. "He's a kitsune-a fox-spirit. Kory and I have met him before."

As they watched, Fox sank slowly toward the floor, walking in neat circles as though descending an invisible spiral staircase.

"Heya, cupcake, dry those tears. When you absolutely positively have to have something yesterday, just whistle. You know how to whistle, don't you? Just-"

"The book, Fox?" Tannim asked, trying to hide a smile of his own.

"Oh, that." Fox reached into his jacket, and produced a book approximately as large as he was. It had a red leather binding and gold clasps, and had several gold ribbons bound into it to serve as bookmarks. "Here it is. Dixon's Guide to Interspecies Reproduction, Fifth Edition. I've marked your place." He held the book out to Beth, smiling coaxingly.

Beth took the volume, staggering under its weight-it was heavier than Fox had made it look. With Kory to help her hold it, she opened it to the page the gold ribbon bookmark indicated.

"To conceive a child of the Sidhe by lawful means-" she read aloud, and skipped quickly through the entry. "It says the magic of two Bards working in harmony is needed to channel the power of Underhill to

the mortal partner. Two Bards! You were at the ceileighe, Eric-getting two Bards to do anything together is like trying to herd cats!"

Eric grinned, and leaned across the book to kiss Beth on the nose. "Well, almost. But not always, as it turns out. Hosea isn't a full Bard yet, but he will be, soon, and we work together just fine. So I'd say that if this book is right, it looks like there won't be any problem with you giving Maeve a little brother or sister when the time comes."

Beth stared, and slowly dejected disbelief turned to radiant happiness, her eyes sparkling with tears of hope. "But will he-? Would he-?"

"He will, and he would," Eric said firmly, recklessly promising Hosea's aid as he closed the book. He already knew enough of the big man's character to feel safe in making such an offer. Kory handed the tome back to Fox, who staggered under its weight this time.

"And I think that calls for a little celebration."

-- Mad Maudlin --



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Prologue:

The Strayaway Child

She had once thought that all the lands of Underhill were as familiar to her as the bounds of her own Domain, but the realms Rionne ferch Rianten now rode through were known to her only through the tales of Court Bards and the descriptions in the oldest books in her liege-lord's library. She was certain of only one thing about them: if she were caught here, she would be slain outright, without the privilege of fair combat, of trial, of Challenge. These were the realms of the Great Enemy, and Rionne slunk through them as a thief in the night, her every breath a prayer to Danu that her passage would go unnoticed. Each Gate she managed to pass unchallenged was both a gift and a curse, for even as it sped her on her journey, it meant that Jachiel had gone before her, deeper into peril, though he had as yet no more than a child's magic to call upon.

Jachiel. Each thought of him endangered was like a blow to the heart, filling her with the strong emotion that was the Sidhe's greatest danger. But she had accepted *thegeas* willingly. Jachiel ap Gabrevys was a prince, and a prince's son, and his father's Court was beset by enemies. That much she had known from the moment he had been given into her hands at his Naming, she to be mother and father to him both, for his Lady Mother was untimely slain in the Chaos Lands defending their realm, and the Lord Prince his father had no time for mewling infants. As the boy had grown toward adulthood, she had faced the day when she must give up some of his care to those others who had stood up at his Naming, those who would teach him the arts of war, of sorcery, of music, and of torture. Those arts would make him strong. He would have less need of her strong arm to protect him, and that was good; she could look to the day when she could seek Healing for the bond that had grown up between them, for passions so intense were not meant to be among their kind. When Jachiel was an adult, and the term of her Oath was run, she would seek, as she was bound to, a Court far from this, so that the memory of him would fade into simple friendship, nothing more. But until that day she had sworn herself his Protector, his shield against all the world's ills.

And she had failed him.

How not? Why else had he fled from her? For it must be that—no enemy could penetrate his father's Court, subvert Prince Gabrevys' Mages and Knights to carry off the young Prince. Only Jachiel himself

could have borne himself away from Prince Gabrevys' Domain.

And Rionne must find him, wherever he was.

She had told no one of the young Prince's disappearance. Any Ruler's Court was a place of shadow and intrigue: what could not be done by force might well have been done by trickery, and it would place a weapon in the Enemy's hand to let him know he had succeeded. No. She had summoned up her elvenhound and elvensteed and followed her charge as quickly as she could. Let the Court think they had gone together, and think nothing more. Prince Gabrevys was away, as he so often was, and no one else would have any right to summon the young Prince into their presence. Only Jachiel's Lady Mother would have had that right, she who had been dead these many years.

If she had lived—if she had not died fighting monsters in the formless lands—would it have made any difference?

*No! It is I who am his Protector! Mine is the responsibility for his safety, until the day he can guard himself!*

And so she would guard him.

The Domain she rode through was green and pleasant, its boundaries firm with long definition and the work of many generations of Elven Mages. It lay in endless twilight, a parkland with no strollers, perfectly groomed and perfectly lovely—perfectly insipid, but then, that was the hallmark of the Enemy. And this made her move faster; now he was in lands that were firmly in the Enemy's hands. She followed Jachiel's trail as swiftly as she could, but no matter how fast she rode, no matter the spells of Tracking and Finding that she unloosed, he was always before her. The Gate that was her current goal lay only a short distance ahead, and as she approached it, Rionne's heart sank. Always the Gates led outward and upward, toward the World Above and the lands of Mortal Men, a place Rionne had never been.

It was a place filled with danger unimaginable—with poisons that could destroy the Sidhefolk, with metal that could burn away both magic and life, and with worse than these: with strange temptations that could destroy both sanity and grace. Her great-grandmother had been the last of her direct Line to walk among the Mortalkin, in the days before the High Court had summoned all the Princes of the Land to Council, to determine whether the Children of Danu would yet live among the Children of Earth.

Woe betide the High King for that summons! For—so song and legend had it—before that Council there had been no Dark Court and no Light, and the High King and the Queen of Air and Darkness had shared one throne and one bed. But the Princes of the Air could not agree to quit the treacherous pleasures of the World Above, even to save themselves. Instead of agreement, there had been war. Some, like Rionne's folk, had gone Underhill at once. Some had stayed. The Council had ended in strife and disarray, without a ruling being handed down, and from that moment, Oberon and Morrigan had ruled two separate Courts, the High King took himself a new Queen, and the Children of Danu were at war among themselves.

All for Earthborn whose bones were now less than dust upon the wind, so brief were their lives. Yet how enchanting, how dangerous they must be, to destroy so many Sidhe lives and noble houses!

Rionne hoped she would never see one.

As she approached the Gate, her every instinct cried warning, and she slowed, approaching warily. It was impossible that the Enemy would leave a Gate in their Domain unguarded.



Farras growled, his hackles rising. She had raised and trained the elvenhound herself, and knew his senses were keener than her own. She reined in her 'steed, loosening her sword in its sheath. Aeldana was tired; she must conserve the elvensteed's strength as much as possible, for at any moment she might face the need to fight or flee. She had pushed Aeldana hard in her search for Jachiel, but she had not dared to claim hospitality from any of Prince Gabrevys' allies, lest the fact that Jachiel was not with her be discovered. Any delay on her quest could prove disastrous to her charge—she must find him!

With a flicker of light, the warrior guarding the Gate dropped the *glamour* shielding her.

"Halt!" she said. "Who goes there?"

Without hesitation, Rionne set Farras on.

The 'hound struck the defending Sidhe like a bolt of silent thunder, slamming her armored body to the grass. She hadn't been expecting an immediate attack. Good. It would buy Rionne the time she needed.

It was an unequal match, war-hound against armored foe. Farras could not win, but Rionne knew that the Enemy would show him no mercy because of that. And she could not stay to save him. Her mission was more important. She must set love against love and choose the greater, though it wounded a heart already broken. She spurred Aeldana forward.

*There!* She could plainly see Jachiel's mark still on the Gate. Her way was clear. She keyed the Gate, turning in her saddle just in time to see the enemy warrior drag a dagger from its sheath and plunge it into Farras' side.

Thrusting the 'hound's dying body aside, the Enemy ran forward, drawing her sword. But Rionne was faster. Aeldana leapt through the Gate, and Rionne used a hoarded levin-bolt to scramble the Gate's settings behind her.

They went on, two now instead of three, and she no longer had any doubt of Jachiel's destination.

The World Above—the deadly and treacherous human lands.

*My heart, my heart . . . what are you seeking there?* Rionne mourned wildly. But then she shook her head, smiling grimly at her own foolishness. Undoubtedly she would find out.

If she lived to reach the deadly lands of the Sons and Daughters of Adam.

And lived past reaching them.

## Chapter One: The Fairies' Lamentation

The children huddled in the meager protection of the doorway on the Lower East Side across from the homeless shelter. They passed around hoarded cigarettes and drank from bottles of Coca-Cola swaddled in brown paper bags in imitation of their elders. None of them was older than eight or ten, but their faces were already hard and set, the legacy of a life spent on the street.

Monday was just another day if you didn't have anywhere else to be. School was something to be avoided. Too many awkward questions, too many meddling adults wanting you to get with the program—or into a program. Only a few of them were enrolled anyway. Enrollment required a home address, or a fixed address, and none of them had homes to go to. Not really. In the wake of the unfathomable disaster that had struck New York a year ago, the city's social services had been stressed even further than before. People who had been marginally able to cope before the disaster were no longer able to manage, and those who had fallen through the cracks were being buried beneath the avalanche of lives falling through what were no longer mere cracks, but canyons in the system. New York these days, as many social commentators had said, was one large enclave of post traumatic stress disorder, and, as always, it was the children who were the invisible and largely-unnoticed victims.

For these kids as for many others, home was a single room occupancy or a bed in a shelter, if they still had a family. If not, it was whatever refuge they could find out of the chill November wind. And every one of them already knew that refuge came at a price.

Most of them were dressed in hand-me-downs and cast-offs, worn, dirty, nothing quite the right size, nothing quite warm enough for the cold November day. When clothes were so hard to come by, it was better to get something you could keep as long as possible, and not have to give up because it had gotten too small—though one boy in the group was wearing a new well-fitting leather jacket over a hoodie. The jacket was shiny and cheap, the thin leather already starting to craze and crack, but even so, it marked him out as someone with more resources than his peers. All of them kept a wary eye out for adults, ready to run if they were challenged, but the few pedestrians paid no particular attention to the cluster of young street kids.

\* \* \*

"Where you been, Elio?" a very small child piped up—impossible to tell if it was a girl or a boy.

"Yeah—you got girlfriend?" Definitely a boy, this one, elbowing the kid in the jacket with a sly look.

Another about the same age, with an even more knowing look. "Nah—Elio's got *aboy*friend!"

"He give you that mad jacket?" asked a third, with great interest, perhaps wondering if it was worth going that way himself.

"Cut it out, guys!" Elio hunched his shoulders, pulling his hood up over his head and leaning against the side of the building. He stared down at the ground.

"I seen her."

"Seen her? Seen who?" the little kid asked, not getting the hint.

"I seen *her*." Elio's dark face was pinched and pale, and so terrified that it was utterly blank. "*La Llorona*."

There was a moment of confused silence, as if his listeners wanted to ridicule him, but didn't quite dare. Finally another boy—darker-skinned than Elio—stepped forward.

"Yo, dog, you can't be just saying her name out like that."

"I seen her," Elio repeated, looking up into the other boy's face, sharply, his eyes dull and hopeless. "She's real."

"Then you gotta say," the other boy said. "That's the rule."

Elio took a deep breath. His face twisted, as if he wanted to cry, but when he spoke, his voice was flat.

"I was over at my uncle Esai's place. He had his crew there, and there was like a dozen pizzas, and everything, and he said I could eat as much as I wanted, and he let me watch 'toons on his big-ass television, and gave me a beer and everything."

Murmurs of derision and veiled disbelief greeted this part of the narrative, but nobody challenged it openly. They wanted to hear the rest, the part about *La Llorona*.

"And he had to go out on, you know, his business, but he said I could stay, on account of Mama was working late, and everybody was still being nice to me 'cause Julio got whacked last month. So I fell asleep on the couch, but in the middle of the night I woke up, on account of beer makes you pee, and I went into the bathroom, and . . . there she was, in the mirror."

Elio's voice dropped to a whisper and his listeners drew in closer.

\* \* \*

None of them noticed the older boy around the corner of the building. He'd been loitering, waiting for them to leave before going into the homeless shelter across the street, not wanting to be noticed—the oldest of them might be a good six or seven years younger than he was, but there were at least eight of them, and he knew several of them carried knives. Not good odds if they decided to mug him, and with that many of them, they could swarm him and cut anything off him that they wanted.

And besides, the story interested him. . . .

Elio's voice, thin and shaky, just carried to where he was skulking. "She was all blue, and wearing this floaty stuff, like curtains, and it was all blowing around her, like in the movies when there's a ghost. And she was crying, only it was all black, like blood, and *she didn't have any eyes.*"

The other children backed away now, as if suddenly afraid that the boy in the leather jacket had become dangerous to know. There was a moment of frozen silence, and then they all started talking at once, their voices low and urgent, creating a babble out of which a few shrill phrases emerged.

"Why'd you look?"

"Why'd you tell us?"

"You shouldn't have looked in the mirror."

"If you didn't see her, you'd be okay."

Then the oldest boy, demanding. "If you seen her, how come you still alive, Elio? Everybody know if you see the Crying Woman, you going to die."

No one laughed.

"I guess it too soon," Elio said, shaking his head, in a voice utterly without hope. "I guess I am going to die, just like Julio. She just waitin'."

"Maybe . . . maybe she didn't see you, dog."

The oldest boy smacked the other across the back of the head, and now *his* voice shook with fear. "You dumb or somethin'? Of course she see him! She in the mirror, ain't she? And once Bloody Mary see your face, you gonna die, you know that. She gonna find E. wherever he go, track him down an' drag him down to Hell. She a demon. She got *powers*. Once she see you, ain't no escape."

\* \* \*

From his hiding place around the corner of the building, Magnus watched as the boy Elio tried to put a brave face on things, and failed. He hugged himself tightly, his heart beating in fear, watching the other boy. Bloody Mary—*La Llorona*—the Crying Woman. Now he had a name for the woman he'd seen.

It should have been easy to make fun of what he'd overheard. Just little kids telling each other ghost stories. Just urban legends, after all. Schoolyard tales.

But it wasn't quite so funny when you'd seen her yourself.

And if what the rest of what they said was true . . .

Elio ran off down the street, hitting out angrily at his friends. They followed at a little distance, still subdued, and watching him the way that cats watched one of their number that was dying—wary, and frightened, and a little in awe. It was easy to see what was uppermost in their minds. *It wasn't me. Thank God, it wasn't me.*

Magnus moved cautiously away from the building in the opposite direction, his intention to visit the shelter forgotten.

Bloody Mary. He winced. It was like that story he remembered from when he was a little kid, that if you went into the school bathroom alone on a Friday and stood with your back to the mirror and chanted "Bloody Mary" three times and turned around really quick, you'd see a horrible demon face in the mirror.

And . . . something . . . would happen. He forgot what it was supposed to have been. Something terrible. Maybe there was a movie about it, too.

Only this was real, because he'd seen her, with his own two eyes.

Last week he'd gone out walking alone. Ace hated it when he did that, but he didn't care. He didn't have any money, and who was going to bother him except to mug him? And except for the raggedy kids that didn't have enough clothes to keep warm, nobody wanted what he had.

She always worried that he was going to get dragged into a big black car for a "date," but with his chestnut hair, green eyes, and choirboy looks, Magnus had learned how to deal with *that* sort of thing a long time ago. Besides, people looking for rentboys cruised under the West Side Highway or down on the Strip, not up in the Bowery, so he figured his virtue was pretty safe. And it wasn't like Ace needed help to watch Jaycie. Jaycie slept most of the time, anyway.

It'd been late, maybe two or three in the morning. He'd done gone out just to do it, just because he could, because there was nobody around these days telling him to do this, do that, be good, behave. Besides, he'd wanted to be alone. It was pretty noisy back at The Place at night. Most of the kids were up and out, but if they were there, they wanted to party, whether or not they had anything to party with.

And he'd seen her—the woman Elio had talked about.

He'd been all alone on the street—or he'd thought he'd been.

Then all of a sudden *she* stepped out from between two parked cars, right in front of him.

Tall. Fashion-model tall. And somehow he could see her clearly, even though it was dark and there weren't any lights on the side street. She hadn't been glowing or anything; it was just that somehow she was bright enough to see even in the dark. Pale blue draperies flowing around her, rising and settling, constantly in motion, even though there hadn't been much wind. Black tears flowing down her face out of two black holes where eyes should have been, and he'd been so freaked, because she'd *just appeared*, out of nowhere, that he'd barely had time to start getting really frightened when she vanished again.

He hadn't stayed to look around. He might have been in New York for only about three weeks, but he wasn't an idiot. He'd beat feet back to The Place, and by the time he'd gotten there, the snapshot image of what he'd seen—kind of like the Blue Fairy on crack—had fully developed in his head: tall, willowy, eyeless, weeping tears of black blood.

He didn't know where she'd come from, or where she'd gone, and he didn't care, just as long as he never saw her again.

And to tell the truth, even now he didn't want to admit, even to himself, how scary she was. In seventeen years of disappointing experiences, Magnus had learned that the best way to handle things he didn't like was silence. If you didn't talk about things you didn't like, you could pretend they hadn't happened, and sooner or later, it was almost like they never had. So he hadn't said anything to anyone about what he'd seen, not even Ace. And he hadn't gone out alone again late at night, either.

But now these kids said one of them had seen her too, and they'd all seemed to know about her.

Right. He had to think about this, right now, real hard, before he scared himself into holing up in the Place and never coming out. Did that really mean what he'd seen had been no-shit real? Or had the whole thing been a goof staged for his benefit?

Magnus considered the idea carefully. No. They hadn't known he was there, so they hadn't been putting it on for his benefit—and how could they possibly have known what he'd seen? Besides, they'd been *littlekids*, half his age—and kids that age weren't that good at acting—not that kind of acting, anyway. The oldest of them couldn't have been more than ten. And he didn't even know them. Okay. They hadn't seen *him* even if they'd seen him, they didn't know him. Why should they bother to ring his chimes?

That only left the other explanation. The worse one.

She was something *real*.

And—if the rest of what those runt losers said was true, too—she was going to find him and kill him, because he'd seen her and she'd seen him.

Bloody Mary.

Magnus shivered, heading for home—or what passed for home these days. Even at its worst, it was still better than the one he'd left.

Even if it was going to kill him.

At least when it did, it would kill him on his own terms.

\* \* \*

The Jacob Riis Shelter in Lower Manhattan occupied what had been—a century before—an upper-middle-class home in what had then been a well-to-do residential district.

Times had changed.

Now, suitably renovated—though too long ago, on the slenderest of shoestrings—the aging brownstone did the best it could with what it had to provide: beds, hot meals, and counseling to an ever-shifting population of the city's poor and homeless. These days, that was a precarious interlocking web of grant money, city stipends, and private donations, less every year, though sometimes there was still a little money for "extras"—the things that shelter director Serafina Macunado knew weren't extras, but necessities, if they were to bring any light and hope into the lives of their youngest clients. Color, creative play, laughter, music.

\* \* \*

Hosea Songmaker shrugged Jeanette's strap higher on his shoulder and smiled down at the circle of children who surrounded him. Some of them—those who had been here longest—smiled shyly back. The others regarded him with expressions ranging from shocked blankness to outright suspicion.

For the last six months, Hosea had been spending four days a week here, providing "music therapy" to the shelter's children, a simple enough task for an Apprentice Bard, and one that required no more credential than his New York City busker's license and a willingness to help. The director insisted on paying him—he made sure that it was a pittance, the minimum he could get away with and still be taken seriously. He enjoyed working with the children, and—since the previous autumn—had found his skills especially needed.

Paul and Toni were handling most of his training as a Guardian, and Hosea had been frankly surprised to find out how little there was: becoming a Guardian seemed to be pretty much a matter of "sink or swim." His lessons with Eric made a lot more sense, to his way of thinking—after all, he'd come East looking for someone to teach him the music magic in the first place. Eric took those responsibilities seriously, and Hosea felt he was making progress there. Well, Eric said he was, and one Bard couldn't lie to another, even if it had been in Eric Banyon's nature to lie to anyone. Which it wasn't, not unless there was a lot of call to lie, or the need to lie, and besides, they were both Bards, and Bardshad to be honest with each other.

But this Guardian business was enough to scare a man blue, when it wasn't downright confusing, and Eric couldn't help him there. Haunted subways with phantom trains, were-coyotes in Central Park, stuff in the storm sewers that was *alot* stranger than the alligators and giant rats in the urban legends, rogue gargoyles, that cursed opera up at Lincoln Center haunted by the ghost of its composer . . . Hosea'd begun to wonder why *anybody* would want to live in New York.

He'd barely begun to settle in to his dual duties as Guardian and Bard last autumn when the disaster had hit New York. Two numbers and a slash; say 9/11 and that was all you had to say these days. It had changed everything in ways that no one could have imagined before that morning. From now on, there was Before, and there was After.

It was not only the shock, the pain, and the trauma, the sudden senseless deaths of so many that hurt the soul of the city and the nation; it was the need for everyone to fight their way past the knee-jerk flash of hatred and the lust for revenge to an understanding that what was needed was not just an end to this, here, but an end to anything like this, everywhere, for all time. That was the aftermath. Going on. Living day to day in a world where all the rules seemed to have changed. Living in a world where the illusion of safety—and it had never been more than that, not really—had been brutally ripped away, a kind of innocence destroyed forever. Living in a city where every breath of air for months and months carried the stink of burning in it, having to run air filters for most of a year, having every air conditioner within a mile of Ground Zero break in the first couple of weeks on account of all the crud in the air; and where, for the psychically sensitive, every moment of every day was awash with tears enough to fill an ocean.

But . . .

Each day of After brought a small triumph for the city—the Thanksgiving Day parade, held right on schedule; the Christmas Tree Lighting at Rockefeller Center; the July Fourth fireworks display. Every day of business as usual in the months that followed was a triumph for New York and a defiance of the forces of darkness and destruction.

The healing was slow, but healing there was, and Hosea, working at the shelter with the most damaged of the city's residents, saw it clearly. The spirit of New York was as indomitable as the green of the Spring. Nature went on, no matter how cruel the storms of Winter. Life would go on. Everything was changed, but they would all go on.

But lately, here at the shelter, Hosea was hearing things that disturbed him: small, subtle things, too vague to be even called rumors, from the most unlikely of sources.

The children.

"What shall Ah play?" he asked them, his broad Ozark drawl bringing giggles from all but the most withdrawn. After a moment, one of the boldest children offered a suggestion—it was, as usual, a current hip-hop hit.

As always—it was a practiced routine by now—he only got a few bars into the melody before getting it hopelessly tangled up in something else. This time he chose the Muppets' "Rainbow Connection," slipping back and forth between the two tunes as if they were two warring radio signals. Finally he stopped and grinned at the children.

"What's that you say, Jeanette? You don't like that song?" Hosea asked, cocking his head toward the banjo and strumming its strings lightly.

:I said, these rugrats have no imagination.,:Jeanette answered acidly.

Hosea pretended not to hear. Though he talked to his instrument for the children's benefit, only he knew that the spirit that inhabited it could hear him—and answer.

Jeanette Campbell had been an outlaw chemist, creator of the drug T-6/157—known as T-stroke—that had been responsible for hundreds of deaths in the city last spring before she'd been dragged off Underhill to serve the Unseleighe Sidhe Aerune mac Audelaine. Poisoned by her own creation, and faced with the choice between dying and going to Hell or staying in the world to try to make amends somehow for the wrongs she'd done, she'd elected to be bonded to Hosea's banjo until she had made reparations for the damage she had done in life—in effect, haunting it.

"You want me to play something else, Jeanette? Well, Ah guess Ah'll let you pick the song, then." And he segued back into "Rainbow Connection" again, by now with all the children sitting forward, and with some of them clapping enthusiastically.

Before they had come to Jacob Riis, many of his audience had never heard a live performer, unless it was a street-corner, trash-can drummer or a rapper. Hosea fascinated them, and music was a way of bringing even the most withdrawn children out of themselves, encouraging them to talk about their troubles. For the next hour, he played for them—simple songs, weaving a tiny thread of Bardic magic into them, small spells of joy and hope, encouraging the children to sing along, until all but the hardest to reach were participating.

It was little enough that he could do for them. The shelter was not a permanent home—it couldn't be, with so many in need of its services. No one was allowed to stay at Jacob Riis for longer than two weeks now. The shelter was only a waystation, while the overworked staff frantically tried to find permanent accommodations for those who came to them, though that wasn't easy these days. Fortunately there was no limitation on its drop-in services, other than space and money. The shelter fed hundreds every day, for as long as the supplies held out, and was frequently the only place the city's burgeoning homeless population could go to get a shower, clean clothing, and even rudimentary medical attention.

Sometimes "his" children came back for weeks, sometimes even for a month or two, giving Hosea time to learn their names, and start to form friendships with them. But in the end, they always disappeared. Sometimes Serafina could tell him where they'd gone, but more often she'd only shrug wordlessly and turn away.

"Try not to care too much," she'd told him when she'd hired him. "It will only break your heart."

\* \* \*

Music Therapy ended, and the children were herded off to Art Therapy—the grant-approved name for an hour spent with paints and crayons. One little girl hung back. Her name was Angelica. Hosea guessed that she was about four, but she wasn't sure herself.

She'd been here for a month now, in defiance of all the shelter's policies, but there was simply no place to send her. Her mother had begged them to keep her. The woman's name was Erika, Hosea remembered. No one had seen Erika for a week and a half. Next week Serafina was going to have to go to Child Protective Services and get them to take Angelica away. Serafina had done all she could, hoping Erika would come back, hoping they could get her into a program that would let her keep her daughter; hoping that Erika wouldn't simply come back and take her baby back out onto the streets.

Angelica's drawings were . . . disturbing.

Not in the way some of the other children's were, when they drew pictures that were obviously portrayals of violence or abuse at home, depictions of gang shootings, or worse. Angelica's were different. As if she was trying to set down on paper something that she'd seen, but as if that something



were so far out of the ordinary that a four-year-old couldn't manage to share it.

"Would you like to hold mah banjo?" Hosea said, still sitting on the floor, running his hand lightly over the strings to make them shiver.

*:Don't let her near me, you troglodyte!:*

Angelica came shyly forward, reaching out to pluck at one of the silver strings with a chubby baby hand.

"Sometimes she sounds like that," Angelica confided. "When she's the Blue Lady." She ducked her head. "I'm not supposed to tell you," she whispered confidentially. "Cause you're a grownup."

"Ah'm not so growed-up as all that," Hosea said, willing a thin thread of Bardic magic—what he'd always called *hisshine*, before he'd met a real Bard—out to enfold the little girl. He needed to hear more about this, and he suspected he didn't have much time.

He'd started hearing hints of what he thought of as Blue Lady stories a few months ago, but he suspected they'd been going on for a lot longer than that. They were stories the youngest children told each other when they thought the adults couldn't hear, but there wasn't much privacy in a shelter crammed to overflowing. The Stories were things the children shared to give themselves hope in a world where all hope was dead. Slowly, from bits and whispered pieces, Hosea had started piecing the whole larger story together.

"They're a Secret," Angelica told him sternly, kneeling beside him. "They're the Secret Stories."

Hosea—over Jeanette's protests—slipped the strap of the banjo over his head and settled the instrument in Angelica's arms. She cradled it like a doll.

"But you wasn't going to tell me anything secret," he coaxed. "You was jest going to tell me about how the Blue Lady sounds like ol' Jeanette here."

"When she's nice," Angelica agreed. "Because sometimes she still is, almost like if you know her Secret Name. Bloody Mary is bad. It says on television. She makes girls her slaves, or to be in gangs. But sometimes, one in a thousand girls with no home is a Special One. When Bloody Mary comes to take her to Hell, the girl is so smart and brave that Bloody Mary disappears and the Blue Lady comes, and the Special One can protect all the other kids from Bloody Mary. Since I don't have a home anymore, do you think maybe I'm a Special One, Hosea?" Angelica looked wistful. "Like Buffy on television?"

"Ah think yore purty special, Angie," Hosea said softly. "Can you tell me the Secret Name?"

"Nobody knows—" Angelica began.

Just then Serafina came in. "Oh there you are! Run along, Angie—it's time to go draw pictures, okay?"

Sighing in disappointment, Hosea got to his feet and took his banjo back from Angelica. The little girl ran off into the other room.

"I just got off the phone with Child Welfare," Serafina said with a grimace. "They asked if we could keep her one more night. They'll be sending a caseworker down for her in the morning."

Hosea nodded. He'd known it was inevitable, but that didn't mean he had to like it. "What's going to

happen to her?" He knew he shouldn't ask, but he couldn't help himself.

"We always hope for the best," Serafina said, her voice colorless. "She's a sweet kid. If she's placed with a good family. If her mother shows up again and releases her for adoption. If." Serafina shrugged. "Come on. I'll sign your voucher so you can get out of here. Unless you want to hang around and wash dishes?"

\* \* \*

It was cold but clear—last winter had been mild, but this year seemed determined to make up for it—and Hosea decided to walk home. He wanted the exercise, and few people would bother a man his size, even in this neighborhood. Besides, he could use the walk to get Angelica's story—the Secret Stories—clear in his head.

Only the youngest children told them, and only to each other, though Hosea had managed to overhear quite a lot. He'd never heard them from any child older than twelve, and the boys seemed to concentrate on a different aspect of the Stories than the girls did.

All their tales spoke of a grim and frightening world—though no worse, Hosea imagined, than the one they themselves lived in.

In the Stories, God was dead, or gone away somewhere. Once he'd lived in Heaven in a beautiful palace of blue-moon marble, until on Christmas night a horde of demons led by Bloody Mary had come over the wall and smashed his palace to dust. Now Heaven was gone, and God was missing in action.

The reason that adults didn't know this had happened was because TV news had kept it secret, but word had gotten out, brought to the children themselves by their dead relatives. Now Earth itself was the battleground. Here angels fought in God's absence, defending His last Earthly strongholds from demonic attacks. The demons' gateways into the human world were mirrors, abandoned appliances, dumpsters, and SUVs with black windows. The demons' stronghold was a place called "Ghost Town," where the dead lived.

The dead figured more frequently in the childrens' tales than angels—dead relatives who paid them visits to warn of trouble, or to give them information to help them survive on the streets. Since Heaven was gone, the good dead had no place to move on to, but that didn't worry the children. In the Secret Stories, the good dead joined the angels in hidden military camps, fighting the ongoing war against the demon armies. They encouraged the children to study hard, and to be brave and strong and not get sucked into the gangs, so that when they died, they could be good soldiers too, and fight against the gangs who did the demons' work. Every child knew that the gangs belonged to Bloody Mary and worked for the demons.

Bloody Mary, the children's particular enemy, was feared even by the demons, even though she had led the assault on Heaven. As far as Hosea could tell, she took special joy in the destruction of children—they said she crooned with joy when a child was murdered. All the children knew that once Bloody Mary had seen them, they were marked for death. All knew that Bloody Mary could enter the heart of whoever a child trusted most, causing that person to betray them to the demons and their human helpers. It did not occur to most of the children Hosea met through the shelter to seek out adult help or protection, for adults had failed all of them—and in some cases, more than failed them—and they no longer trusted the adult world. Adults were the enemy, the predators—or at the very best, fellow victims. The best of the children wanted to grow up to be strong enough to protect themselves, and the rest . . . well, the rest of them hoped to grow large enough and strong enough to become predators themselves.

For them, it was better to get into the gangs and serve the enemy—the demons—because at least in the gangs, you had some protection from the real world, and as for the other, well, if you served Bloody Mary, she wouldn't come looking for you.

The girls told a special story about Bloody Mary as well, about how Bloody Mary could invade the souls of girls, making them become her slaves; drug addicts and whores for the gang members. As soon as a girl-child down here on the mean streets could walk, she knew just what the girls in the thongs and fishnets, the high heels and miniskirts were peddling. And she knew that one day it was likely that someone would be making her peddle the same commodity—and in the Secret Stories, that someone was Bloody Mary.

And now Hosea knew—thanks to Angelica—about the Special One—the one girl in a thousand who could resist Bloody Mary, making the Blue Lady appear instead.

Hosea knew that the Blue Lady was the homeless children's chief ally, a beautiful angel with pale blue skin who lived "in the ocean." She loved the children as much as Bloody Mary hated them, and often spoke to them, giving them messages of love and reassurance, but the demons had rendered her powerless with a spell. Only if her true name were known could she regain her full power and defeat Bloody Mary forever.

And Angelica said that nobody knew it anymore.

*Well, here's a fine kettle o' fish,* Hosea grumbled to himself. The Secret Stories might be just that, and known in their entirety only to the very youngest, but even the gangs believed in Bloody Mary. Just the other day, Serafina had told him about an execution down by the river, where the body of the victim had been left on top of a pile of broken mirror glass. According to the children, mirrors were demon gateways, but they were particularly special to Bloody Mary, who often appeared in them, and possibly came through them.

The execution—had it been an offering . . . ?

Or had Bloody Mary come to claim one of her own?

It didn't take a rocket scientist to see that the little'uns weren't just creating stories to make sense of their lives. They were doing more than that. As a Guardian and a Bard-in-Training, Hosea knew perfectly well that nightmares could step out into the Real World if sufficient belief energy was poured into them. From Eric, Hosea knew that the elves thought that creativity was the human form of magic—elves didn't have it, and thought it was as amazing and mysterious as most humans thought magic was. In the right—or wrong—hands, there was a very fine line between creativity and magic, and kids, especially desperate kids like the ones that filled Jacob Riis at the moment, were just bursting with creative energy and, more to the point, *belief*. And if a lot of them had been believing in the same thing for a long time—long enough to create the elaborate tales that Hosea had overheard and pieced together over the last several months—they might have even managed to create what Paul Kern called *amythago*, a spirit form which had actual independent objective reality.

So Bloody Mary might be out there, walking around loose. Somewhere. And acting according to her created nature, as a sort of urban-techno Lilith: a night-stalking child predator.

Hosea considered the matter, turning it over in his mind. The trouble with being a Bardanda Guardian was that sometimes it was difficult to make up your mind whose business a particular kind of jinx or hoodoo was. But after a while, he decided to bring the matter to Eric first. It wasn't actually a problem.

Not yet. He wasn't *sure* Bloody Mary was "real." The gangs could just be aware of her legend, playing on it to scare their enemies — and, in the way of kids everywhere, each other. And with a little Bardic tweaking, he might be able to nip that in the bud. Remove Bloody Mary's power to frighten, and nobody would use her to frighten anyone.

Easier said than done.

The little'uns stories were so dark, so bleak. Even the Blue Lady, their only hope, didn't have any real power to help them. But maybe he and Eric could put their heads together and find a way to steer the Secret Stories—just a little bit. Maybe between the two of them, they could figure out a way to put a little hope into the kids' world, a kind of hope that didn't involve being dead first.

It was surely worth a try.

\* \* \*

This was the part that always made her nervous, heading back home carrying all this stuff and money besides, because if anybody started up with her, it would take her a minute or two to drop enough of it to be able to run, and a lot could happen in a minute or two. Lord Jesus knew she'd learned that already, to her sorrow and cost.

Ace winced, the way she always did when she heard herself taking the Savior's name in—well, in anything. When she'd lit out on Billy Fairchild and the Salvation Gospel Choir and Ministry, she'd sworn she was done with God, Jesus, and the Book. And with music most of all. If she never sang another note of music, it would be fine with her. The way Daddy'd always gone on about how what she could do having been sent to him from God . . . well, as much as he'd slung the Gospel, she'd never heard anything in it about God sending *anybody* the gifts of the Spirit just to make somebody else rich.

It'd been bad enough when she'd been a little girl, when Daddy'd had his salvation show, and they'd traveled on the big bus from town to town all through the hills, with Daddy pitching Gospel and Mama passing the hat, and her singing at the head of the choir from the time she was old enough to walk.

It'd been worse when they moved to Tulsa and Daddy'd gotten his television ministry: Billy Fairchild's Salvation Ministry and Gospel Choir. She'd been so scared to be up there in front of the cameras, even though he'd told her, "Heavenly Grace, you are the keystone of my Cathedral of the Airwaves." It had all sounded mighty fine, and they'd had a big house to live in with wall-to-wall carpets and a bathroom for each of them, and Mama had gotten a fur coat and Daddy'd gotten a big car.

And along the way there'd been more cars, and bigger houses, and she'd learned to hate it, and then to be afraid of it, but that hadn't been the worst of it. No, the worst was when Daddy Fairchild's new bad friend had showed up from somewhere. Gabriel Horn. And if Gabriel Horn wasn't Mr. Splitfoot himself, it was Ace's opinion (she'd always hated the name "Heavenly Grace," and nobody in New York was ever going to hear of it, if she had any say in things), that he was a very close relation. When she'd left last year, Daddy Fairchild was talking about moving the Ministry from Tulsa to Atlantic City, New Jersey, to minister to the sinners right in the heart of their damnation to hear him tell it. And that was all Gabriel Horn's notion. She knew that for sure. Mama was perfectly happy in Tulsa, and Daddy'd been happy there too, until Mr. Horn had shown up.

And Heavenly Grace was still going to be the keystone of Daddy's new cathedral. Ace had realized then that she was never going to get out—was never going to be *letto* get out. That Daddy and Gabriel Horn were going to use her and what she could do to keep the money coming in forever, and as much as both

of them talked about Jesus and the poor, she'd never seen the money going anywhere but Fairchild Ministries, Inc.

So she'd left. She'd hit the road and kept moving, always north and east. She guessed that New York was about as far from Jesus and Tulsa as it was possible to get, and maybe Daddy would give up on Atlantic City once his little "keystone" was gone.

She was almost back to The Place now. Once she was off the street and out of sight, she'd be as safe as safety came these days. Even all bundled up and with a hat pulled way down over her hair, she knew she didn't look right to be around here: too white and too womanly, and here and now, both those things were bad. She wished she wasn't *pretty*—she'd had to move on pretty damned quick because of it more than once, and here, it was just like having a target painted on your back—a big sign that said Fresh Meat: Come and Get It.

Not that it had been any better when she'd been a baby. Nobody'd ever looked at her *that* way, but what they'd done had almost been worse. Daddy's Little Angel, he'd called her, just like Mary in Heaven. They'd used to sell pictures of her on the Salvation Gospel Hour, until she'd felt like a doll, *athing*, something anybody could buy for five dollars and put up on their wall next to Jesus and Elvis and John F. Kennedy. Sometimes she'd used to wonder if she was real at all, or just something Daddy'd bought from the same place he bought all those boxes of white Bibles with his picture inside, and the robes for the choir, and the big cross he stood in front of when he preached once the money started coming in.

She wondered what Daddy would think if he could see his heavenly angel now.

Better not think of that while you should be watching the street, or you'll be a heavenly angel double quick, she told herself sternly.

She checked to make sure the block was deserted, and went around the side of the building, down the little alley, climbing up the fire escape to the open second-floor window. It was hard work with the heavy backpack and several full grocery bags, but she managed. She'd had a lot of practice since she'd found The Place last summer.

Everybody knew about The Place, she guessed, even the police, but as long as all the ground-floor doors stayed chained shut and the windows stayed closed, and there weren't any lights showing upstairs, it was safe enough. At least, no one was going to hassle the kids living here.

Until something bigger and stronger chased them all out.

She went up the stairs, carefully avoiding the holes in the treads and trying not to step on the garbage and trash that littered them. She was just as glad it was almost as cold in here as it was outside; that way the place didn't smell so bad—not like it had when it was warmer. It wasn't like they had indoor plumbing or anything, and none of them was old enough to rent a room anywhere, even if they could come up with the money. Apartments in New York cost as much as a whole house back in Tulsa, it seemed like.

She reached the fourth floor and looked around. Most of the interior walls had been torn down long ago. All that remained were the support beams of the large interior space. When the building had been condemned, the glass had been removed from the windows facing the street and replaced with large pieces of sheetrock as a defense against vandals. The kids themselves had covered the ones at the sides with sheets of cardboard scavenged from the subway, so that it was always dark now, except for the little light provided by candles and battery-powered lanterns.

The building's new tenants had also covered the walls with posters—stolen from the subways mostly—but nobody wanted to put up things they cared about too much. People were always stealing from each other, and anything you really cared about, you kept with you all the time.

Ace was pretty sure they wouldn't steal from her and risk being cut off from the shopping—and the handouts that went with it—but she knew too much about human nature to test the theory. Most of them—all of them probably, except for Magnus and Jaycie—were hooked on drugs, and would do anything to get the money for them.

She sighed, shaking her head. It was because of the street life, she knew that. The other girls were always urging her to come out with them at night, to meet their "boyfriends," to go on "dates." Ace had no intention of doing any such thing, but that meant she had to be very careful. She had to watch where she went, and who she was with—and what she ate and drank, especially here. She didn't begrudge the need for caution. It was the price of freedom.

And she knew Daddy and Mr. Horn must be looking for her. It'd been months, but she knew they wouldn't give up. Sometimes she wondered which one of them was looking harder. Daddy would be missing his heavenly meal ticket, but she hadn't liked the way Mr. Horn had looked at her, no, not at all.

Well, if she could be careful for long enough, it wouldn't matter. She'd be seventeen in a few months. That meant all she had to do was hide out for another year, and she'd be free. Eighteen was a legal adult. After that, there was no way anyone could drag her back. She wasn't afraid of work. She'd get a job—scrubbing floors, waiting tables, something. She'd save up her money, and then—

College. Just the way she'd always dreamed. She'd finish high school, get her diploma, get the rest of her schooling, and then nobody could stop her, nobody could touch her, ever again.

And she'd never have to sing another note.

As she walked into the center of the room—neutral territory—and set down the shopping bags, shrugging off the backpack with a sigh of relief, the inhabitants of The Place began coming over to her. There were about a dozen of them living here, and this early in the day, everyone was here—except Magnus, she noticed, taking a quick glance around. Everybody had their own space, with mattresses (of a sort) and blankets, and the edges of their area marked off in playground chalk on the dusty splintery floor. Some even had lamps and tables—whatever they could scavenge off the streets and get inside. You'd lose everything if you had to run, but at some point the need to have something that looked like a home outweighed caution.

*Sometimes I feel just like Wendy in Peter Pan*, Ace thought with a sigh. It had been one of her favorite stories, until she'd realized what Wendy must have gone through taking care of the Lost Boys.

Quickly, she handed out her purchases—batteries, paper towels, candy (a lot of candy), bottled water, condoms. Nothing she couldn't buy legally, and she'd *bought* all of it. She'd told them all her rules at the beginning: she wouldn't steal, and she wouldn't lie about her age to buy booze or cigarettes. If they had money, they had to pay for what they wanted. If they lied about not having money when they did, she'd know. And they couldn't bring their friends around for handouts, because the money would only stretch so far.

It had worked pretty well, so far. And thanks to Jaycie, there was always enough money so that nobody starved. Being the one in charge of the money gave her enough power to set a few rules, and to protect

Jaycie, though she wasn't sure how long that could last. If Magnus hadn't shown up like manna from heaven just when he did, her system would all have fallen apart. But that boy was as touchy as a wolverine with a toothache, and you just had to look at him to know you didn't want to mess with him.

Once she'd distributed the purchases—she shopped as often as she dared, about three times a week—the others went away again. Ace picked up the backpack once more—still half full—and went over to the corner she shared with Magnus and Jaycie.

He was curled up—asleep, as usual—with only the top of his hat showing at the top of the battered old sleeping bag. She watched until she was sure she could see the rise and fall of breathing, then sat down on her own sleeping bag to wait for Magnus to come back.

Neither of them knew anything much about Jaycie (other than that he had really long black hair and really green eyes) including his last name or where he came from—but then, neither of them knew that about each other, either. She thought his parents might be Scandinavian, because his skin was really pale, but he didn't have any kind of an accent. She also thought he might be sick, because he slept a lot of the time. Too much of the time, in fact.

He'd been here when she'd first found The Place last summer. He'd always seemed to have money—quite a lot of money, in fact. It hadn't taken her long to realize that the other kids picked on him and stole it from him like he was some kind of ATM, and that Jaycie didn't fight back.

She'd put a stop to that real quick.

But she'd known that wasn't a real solution. There was no way Jaycie would be let to just *keep* all that money when they knew he had it, and the fact of the matter was, he didn't really seem to want it, or know what to do with it. The important thing was to keep fights from starting—and the second most important thing was to keep everybody from getting their hands on wads of cash, because, well, they never used it for the things they really needed. Like food.

She'd gotten the idea of using it for the good of *all* of them, within certain strict guidelines, providing Jaycie was left completely alone. It worked for a while, but she didn't think she could have made it stick if Magnus hadn't shown up and backed her.

The weird thing was, as she'd quickly come to realize, was that Jaycie *always* seemed to have money, no matter what.

'Cause I'll be switched if I know where you get it, Ace thought, looking down at him. I never see you go out—so if you do go out, you sure aren't out long enough to earn it. And I don't think you're stealing it. Who'd be afraid of you? A high wind'd blow you away, and you never eat much of anything but those sodas of yours, and that awful Baker's chocolate. . . .

\* \* \*

It was a couple of hours later by the time Magnus reached The Place. He went inside cautiously, listening for sounds from upstairs. Everything was quiet, except for the sound of music played low and some conversation. It was a good day then. He hated it when there were fights, and it seemed like there was always something to fight about, especially things like clothes, makeup, batteries, CDs . . . and cigarettes, booze, and drugs, though it was easier for kids their age to get their hands on grass, lady, or crack than a bottle of Mad Dog or a carton of Marlboros.

Magnus shuddered. Drugs and alcohol didn't tempt him. He'd gotten drunk. Once. And long before he'd come here. There was something frightening about being out of control, about being in a condition where anybody could do whatever they wanted to with you and there was nothing you could do about it. He even hated *sleeping*, but there wasn't much he could do about that. Everybody had to sleep.

He reached the fourth floor and looked around. It was late afternoon. Everybody was up; he could tell by the number of candles that were lit. It gave Magnus a kind of creepy feeling, like living in a bombed church. Sometimes he thought it was cool; there was a kind of surrealness about it, as if he was living in an old war movie; he half expected to hear the tanks and the shells any moment. But right now it just irritated him. Why did they try to make it look like home when they knew they were just going to have to leave it all behind when they had to move on? Because eventually they would; sooner or later, one of the gangs would decide they needed The Place as a crack house, or the city would make the landlord tear it down, and they'd have to find somewhere else, probably on five minutes' notice.

He hadn't gotten to that point yet, the point of pretending he had a real home when he didn't. Everything he had was in a big backpack that was chained to a pipe in the wall with a tamper-proof bike lock. He knew the others could get into it if they were willing to rip it up, but this way they couldn't just take stuff without him knowing. And he didn't think they wanted to rip it up and piss him off, not with Ace and Jaycie to watch his back. And if they did, he wouldn't lose too much. Just some clothes, and his sticks.

Maybe it was stupid to pay that much money for a couple of pieces of wood, but he'd wanted them—wanted what they meant, what they represented, the freedom to do music *his way*, not the approved way. And the balance was so perfect; he knew that the moment he got them in his hands. A pair of Greg Bissonette signature sticks, extra heavy, the best hickory—clear-coated, which was a little disappointing, but it was the feel that counted, not what color they were stained.

His folks had been ticked when he'd spent his birthday money on them instead of on clothes or something they approved of. But a drummer needed good sticks. And he didn't have enough money for a drum kit, not that they would've let him bring it into the house anyway, or practice on anything but the piano. He hated the piano. He'd tried to get an electronic drum kit, but the good ones were all expensive, and his parents had kept him purposefully short of cash. He got everything *he needed*, and often things that *he wanted*—or that his parents said he wanted—so what did he need money for? Or a car, or a drivers' license, or—

Or, well, anything that would give him the freedom just about every other kid he knew had.

That was all over with. He didn't know what was going to happen now, but he knew he was never going to see Mr. and Mrs. My-Son-The-Artiste again. He hoped they thought he was dead, not that they'd care much. Well, maybe they would, because their ticket to Fortune and Fame was gone along with him. But that was all they'd care about. They'd have been happier with a robot than a kid.

Ace was already waiting there, sitting on her bag next to Jaycie. He felt a flash of relief; he knew it was dangerous for her to go out. He walked over, trying to look as if he didn't care.

"Hi," she said. "Did you find out about the showers?"

Magnus felt a simultaneous flash of guilt and irritation. The reason he'd gone down to Jacob Riis today was to find out if it would be safe for them to go there to take showers, or if they'd be busted: held to be sent home to their parents by a bunch of busybody social workers. But when he'd heard the street kids talking about *La Llorona*, he'd completely forgotten about it.



"Never mind," Ace said hastily. "I got your stuff."

Magnus felt his mouth start to water. "I'll wake up Jace."

He knelt beside the sleeping bag as Ace dug around in the backpack, bringing out the rest of her day's purchases.

"Jace? Hey, Jaycie? Time to rise and shine, guy." Magnus shook the sleeping bundle gently and stepped quickly back. You had to be careful how you woke Jaycie up. Sometimes he woke up screaming and flailing, and that upset everybody.

There was a pause, and then the contents of the sleeping bag began to shift. At last it began to move, and finally, with a sound of zippers, Jaycie sat up, pulling his cap—only the top layer; he wore several at once—firmly down over his ears and all the way down to the bridge of his nose.

Jaycie dressed like the original Homeless Person, in Magnus' opinion, though at least he didn't smell bad. Magnus had no idea how many layers of clothing Jaycie wore, since he'd never seen him remove any of them, but there had to be at least three or four sweaters under that battered Army jacket, and at least two or three layers of sweatpants below. Hell, the guy didn't even take off his *shoes* at night.

He was skinny enough, though, from what Magnus could see from his hands and wrists and throat, and as pale as a vampire, if there were such things. He had long hair like a Goth, too, though most of the time it stayed tucked under his jacket.

He smiled wistfully at Magnus, blinking the sleep out of his eyes, and Magnus, as always, felt a moment of pure *hate* for whoever had driven Jaycie out of his home and made him cry and scream the way he did sometimes. For a moment, Magnus allowed himself to live in a fantasy world where the three of them—him and Ace and Jaycie—had a place where they could all live together. Somewhere that they didn't have to hide. Somewhere with plumbing, and electricity, and Internet access where they could all be safe and warm and do what they wanted to do. . . .

"Did you go to the markets?" Jaycie asked hopefully of Ace.

"Yeah, I went shopping. I got your stuff," Ace said, handing him a wrapped bar of cooking chocolate.

Jaycie tore off the wrapper eagerly, and began gnawing at the thick block of bitter unsweetened candy.

"I can't understand how you can eat that stuff," Ace said, as she always did. "It tastes horrible."

"It's better," Jaycie said simply. "Oh. Here." He held out his hand.

In it was a crumpled wad of bills that would choke a very healthy horse. Magnus swore under his breath and grabbed it—quick, before anyone else in the room saw—and stuffed it quickly into his pocket. They could take it out and count it later.

Ace pretended to pay no attention. That was the way to keep a secret, both of them had learned. Pretend nothing was going on, and most of the time people would believe it. She pulled the rest of the backpack's contents out and arranged them on her own sleeping bag: a bag of fast-food hamburgers, two six-packs of Coke, a quart of milk for her (Ace hated soda and wouldn't drink it if she had a choice), and a box of Oreos. She passed a burger to Magnus.

By the time she and Magnus had worked their way through the hamburgers and milk, Jaycie had finished two cans of Coke (it was warm, but he didn't seem to mind) and most of the block of chocolate. Sighing contentedly, he wormed his way back down into his sleeping bag and went back to sleep.

"That's nothing like a balanced diet," Ace complained to the empty air.

"Who are you, his mother?" Magnus gibed.

"Closest thing he has, right here," Ace shot back without missing a beat. "And . . . I worry about him," she added, dropping her voice, though they both knew from experience that Jaycie would neither hear nor care that they were talking about him. There was something *very strange* about Jaycie, even by the loose standards of the street. Sometimes they'd speculated that he'd run away from some weird strict religious commune.

"Yeah, I worry about him," she repeated. "Like the money, you know?"

"Oh." Reminded, Magnus dug into his pocket, his body shielding the action from any watchers. They huddled together, as if they were necking, while they let just enough light show on the wad to make out the numbers. Carefully, they counted the wadded bills.

"Four hundred dollars," Ace said, managing to sound upset and frightened and disgusted all at once. "Where do you suppose he gets it?"

Magnus shrugged. He had no clue. He was just glad Jaycie *did* get it, wherever the source, because what he'd managed to bring with him when he bolted was long gone.

Ace frowned. "He's not mugging people," she said.

Magnus snorted and shook his head, unable to believe in that any more than she could.

"If he's turning tricks . . ." Ignoring Magnus' look of revulsion, she plunged on. "He could get sick. Or sicker, but this sleeping all the time, it doesn't look like AIDS to me, you know, like what Cleto probably had. I've tried to get him to go to one of the clinics, but he won't. And if he's sleeping all the time, when would he be going out and, well, *working*, if you know what I mean?"

Magnus made a face of disgusted acceptance, though he knew Ace was right. If you survived on the street, you sold your body or you joined a gang and did other things. And if you joined a gang, you had a clubhouse to live in, not a place like this. He'd even heard some of the girls talking wistfully about hooking up with a pimp, because a pimp would move them into a real apartment—one that they'd share with half a dozen other girls of his string, true, but . . .

"So where *is* she getting the money?" Magnus asked. It was the same conversation they had every time Jaycie came up with another wad of money, but somehow the question was like a sore tooth. You just couldn't stop poking at it.

Ace shrugged. "Maybe the Tooth Fairy's leaving it under his pillow. If she is, I sure wish she'd leave some stuff for me, like a valid New York State driver's license that says I'm twenty-one."

"You could rent an apartment then, if you had enough money," Magnus said, willing to play along, though even with a forged driver's license, Ace didn't look anything near twenty-one. He guessed she might even be a year or two younger than he was, though she'd never said.

Still, this was one of their favorite games. Ace sighed wistfully. "Take a shower, wash my hair. Have furniture . . ."

"A kick-ass kit, just like Rick Allen—"

"A television with all the channels—"

"Internet access—" That was what Magnus missed most, since half the time his parents hadn't known what he was doing on his computer, and what they didn't know, they didn't bother to forbid—or block. He'd spent hours on the *Modern Drummersite*, downloading clips and learning all he could. Someday—someday he was going to have a band. And it was *not* going to have a piano in it.

"A refrigerator and a stove," Ace said yearningly.

Magnus winced inwardly. Today the game wasn't going very well. He hated to see her like this. Ace was so strong; hard as nails, and ready to cut your throat if you looked crosswise at her. But sometimes she got a look on her face that made Magnus want to protect her almost as much as he wanted to protect Jaycie.

He'd never say so, of course. She'd kill him.

"Coffee any time you wanted it," Magnus said coaxingly, trying to make her feel better. It was what Ace talked about most, especially now that the days were so cold. She grinned at him.

"A bathroom and a door that locks," they finished in chorus.

Ace looked longing and vulnerable for just another moment, then the look was replaced with the determined one Magnus knew so well. "We'll have those things again. And on our own terms. You can bet the farm on it."

## Chapter Two:

### The Dogs Among The Bushes

The "Reverend" Billy Fairchild (the Title, like most of his other honors, was self-conferred) had risen up out of backwoods obscurity and touring tent-show revivals due to one fortunate circumstance: his beautiful blue-eyed daughter.

Heavenly Grace had been on stage from the very beginning—carried by her mother as a babe in arms, then toddling on alone as soon as she could walk. She'd always been a musical child, singing before she could talk, and if there was one day in his entire life that Reverend Billy had cause to bless, it was the day he got the idea to have her sing with the Salvation Gospel Choir.

An unbiased observer (had there been one) might have said that it was really Donna Fairchild's idea, or even little Heavenly Grace's, but Billy knew that all the ideas for the Billy Fairchild Salvation Gospel were actually his. Well, his and Jesus's, of course.

At any rate, Heavenly Grace—the Living Miracle and Pledge of God's Holy Love!—had come out to the front of the auditorium stage, dressed in her white Monkey Ward dress (the wishbook said it was a First Communion dress, but Billy Fairchild didn't hold with anything Catholic, and neither did his audience, because Lord knew, Jesus hadn't been any kind of a Catholic Roman) and looking like a little beauty contest bride or even Shirley Temple, and his heart had just swelled up with love. He had just known the collection plate would be extra full that day. She looked so pretty, it wouldn't have mattered if she'd sounded like a screech owl.

And then she'd opened up her mouth and sang, and the miracle had occurred.

Billy knew all about miracles. He'd been with Gospel shows in one form or another since his teens, and with a circus before that. A miracle was when the audience got up off its dead ass and put its hand on its wallet and came to Jesus, opening up those wallets so that Billy could go on doing the Lord's good work. He knew just about exactly how much there was going to be in the free-will love offering plates even before the audience sat down, just by eyeballing the crowd and figuring out how badly they needed to buy God's forgiveness, and how scared he could make them that they weren't going to get it without digging into the rent money.

But from the first time Heavenly Grace sang, all that changed. There was love in the air, and Billy was smart enough to know that the love wasn't for him, it was for that little girl with the golden curls and the golden voice. But when there was so much love going around, some of it just naturally slopped over onto him. And into the offering plates.

The take was a good twenty percent higher that day than he'd calculated. And it kept getting bigger. He had the sense to start the show with Heavenly Grace and keep her onstage as much as possible, and the audience just couldn't get enough of her and her singing. They opened their hearts and—more to the point—their wallets.

And Billy Fairchild never looked back.

By the time his daughter was six, he was able to put the traveling show behind him forever. He put down roots—bought a house in Tulsa—and Billy began building an empire.

At first it was guest appearances on other preachers' shows. Then a weekly half-hour of his own on a local cable channel. He'd worried at first that whatever gift Jesus had seen fit to give Heavenly Grace wouldn't work over the airwaves, but either it did, or once the studio audience got all worked up it didn't matter. He went to a weekly show, then to a daily show on a regular local channel, and at last to a syndicated national show airing six times a week, and along the way he built up Fairchild Ministries, Inc., doing God's Holy Work with pamphlets, books, CDs, documentaries, and recorded samplers of the Billy Fairchild Crusade.

But it all took time. And while he was building up his temple in this Godless Babylon, Heavenly Grace was growing up. She never lost her looks—thank Lord Jesus for that—but she was turning willful and mean-spirited, just when he needed her most. He had plans for Fairchild Ministries. There was room for expansion. America was crying out for good Christian leadership. A career in politics was not out of the question. He had an impeccable past. No breath of scandal had ever touched his family.

He'd been too modest, too self-effacing, to see that God was calling him to such a grand purpose. If not for Gabriel Horn, he would have spent the rest of his days crying out in the wilderness, hiding his light under a bushel basket. But Gabriel had a way of making everything seem so clear and right. It was only

right for a daughter to submit her will to her father, for example, just as she would submit it to the Lord Jesus.

Gabriel had appeared to help Billy run the administrative side of things, just when Billy needed him most. He was a man of vision and insight. He'd seen ways to make the Ministry even bigger and more profitable, to reach out to more people, so that Billy could go on doing God's work. And he'd been right to remind Billy that Heavenly Grace was the keystone of the plan. Wasn't Billy's little girl the living proof of God's Holy Favor? God had sent Heavenly Grace and her divine gifts to Billy for a purpose. He meant for Billy to use her powers, not let them go to waste. When the girl was older, she'd thank him for his wise guidance through the troubling storms of adolescence, when Satan was at his most powerful. Once Billy had moved to a position of national prominence—so Gabriel counseled him—the child would understand the importance of his work, and submit her will to his in a proper Godly fashion. Why, all you had to do was to read the Scripture—the Old Testament, of course—to see where, over and over, God gave his command to children, especially girl-children, to submit their will to the will of their fathers. Fathers even had the right to have rebellious children put to death, not that *he would*, of course, but God gave that right, and no law of man could take it away.

Even Donna had agreed, but Donna Fairchild had always been a proper handmaid of the Lord.

The only person who hadn't seen the light had been Billy Fairchild's rebellious daughter. She had all kinds of ideas that weren't fit nor proper for a Godly child—college, and not even a proper place like Bob Jones neither, but some state university or even an abode of pagans like UCLA. She didn't need college! She'd got all the education she needed, home-schooled by her mother! He'd told her so, in no uncertain terms, the same way he'd told her she didn't need a drivers' license.

But the Devil had gotten into his child, somehow. Heavenly Grace had disappeared one day. Run off. Vanished.

At first Billy'd thought she might have been kidnapped. A man in his position, doing God's work, had enemies. He'd kept the police out of it, of course. Scandal was the last thing Fairchild Ministries needed. He'd hired some very discreet, very experienced professionals.

They'd found nothing. No ransom demand, no threatening letters had ever come, and slowly Billy had come to realize that his Heavenly Grace had committed the ultimate act of defiance: she'd *run away*.

He kept the professionals on the payroll. Gabriel had been a tower of strength. He'd sworn they'd find Billy's daughter, that they'd get her back. And meanwhile, her absence was easily explained: she was away at school—a good, God-fearing, private, Bible-based girls' school, away from all the temptations that the world posed for sensitive and vulnerable teenage girls.

It had to be done that way, Gabriel explained. It was important—for the future—that no breath of scandal be attached to her disappearance. There was Billy's future to think of. And Heavenly Grace's, of course. When she returned, their Prodigal Daughter, undoubtedly sorrowful and repentant over the tribulations she had caused them, naturally they would want her to be able to slip right back into her old life again without anyone knowing about her shame. That would be what *she would* want, as well.

Donna had been the hardest to convince, but she had doted on Gabriel Horn from day one, and finally she had given in. Gabriel had sworn to her that he would work day and night—over and above his duties for the Ministry—to find her daughter and return her to the fold of her family's love. Why, Gabriel had come to think of her as his own little girl as well. . . .

What could have been a more convincing argument than that? Nothing that Billy could think of.

\* \* \*

Humans were really a constant source of entertainment—when they didn't vex one half to madness.

The being who—in this time and place—chose to be known as Gabriel Horn closed the door to his private apartment in the Fairchild Ministries Tower and activated the wards that sealed the doors. No human could pass them now.

With a sigh of relief, he dropped the *glamour* that he wore among humans. It was necessary, but it was also rather demeaning to go about aping the appearance of one's inferiors. And the *clothes*! Gabriel shuddered. A second spell adjusted his garments to something closer to his liking; he inspected the embroidered velvet sleeve of his tunic critically, then headed toward the liquor cabinet and poured himself a large measure of a venerable single-malt Scotch.

Still, there were some things about the human world that Gabriel liked quite well. He stood for a moment, inhaling the complex scent and admiring the play of light through the facets of the cut-crystal glass.

He had come to the World Above to entertain himself, for what else was a Prince of Underhill to do? If one could not enjoy the pleasures of war among one's own kind, the next best thing was to make trouble among the Mortalfolk, yet in these degenerate days that was a delicate proposition, for there were always spies of the Bright Court ready and willing to meddle where they weren't wanted, as if all Mortalfolk belonged solely to them.

Finding Billy Fairchild had been a stroke of luck—the pompous fool was so easily manipulated, and came ready-supplied with a coterie of foolish followers. But Gabriel would have taken him as a momentary pleasure—a quick scandal, and the destruction of his "Ministry"—if it had not been for the daughter.

The girl had Power. Gabriel had known it from the moment he'd first seen her. The Power to bend human hearts to her will any time she sang.

She hadn't known him for what he was, of course, but she'd known enough to fear him. He couldn't beguile her as he could her parents, but that made things all the sweeter, to Gabriel's mind. And so he had abandoned his plans for the quick destruction of Billy Fairchild, and settled down to a longer and ultimately more satisfying game. He would use the girl to give Billy *real* power—the power to make great trouble in the land. The one thing that was guaranteed to make trouble among the mortals was *religion*. Religion had caused more wars, more scandals, more pogroms, and more death and torture than any other aspect of humans' lives—save, perhaps, money. And even then, it was difficult to tell which caused the most havoc, for religion and money were inextricably tangled among the mortals.

And what could his high-nosed Bright Court cousins do about *that*? They would never make war upon a human child. And the girl *was* but a child, well under the control of her parents. A pawn. Helpless. And that was even if the Seleighe Sidhe realized that *she* was the power behind Billy Fairchild's throne, which they likely never would.

Later it had occurred to him that perhaps he could even enchant the parents enough to make them give him the girl. And then, with time, he would wear away her will, and take her power for his own.

Or so he had thought, a year ago, as the Earthborn reckoned time.

A flash of anger crossed Gabriel's face, and the glass in his hand shattered. With an absent gesture, he made the shards of crystal and the spilled liquor vanish, turning away from the liquor cabinet.

But the girl had run. Against all prediction, against all expectation, she had fled—and not all his spellcraft had been able either to summon her back, or determine her location.

Impossible.

A fact.

Gabriel began to pace the room, his scarlet cloak belling out behind him. He was a Magus Major, a Knight and Prince of Elfhame Bete Noir: as the Unseleighe reckoned power, he was a mighty force Underhill. There were only three possibilities that would keep him from finding her.

One—that she was dead. And if she were dead, by now his sorcerous allies ought to have brought him some word of that, so while it was still a possibility, it was a very unlikely one.

Two—that she had been found and taken Underhill by the Enemy.

This was much more likely—he knew how much his Bright Court cousins liked to meddle, especially among Children of Power, and it was a possibility he could never rule out. But Gabriel had spies in a number of places, and there was always the possibility he would get word of her. And if he did . . . well, then he could always arrange for her parents to beg for her return. His Bright Court cousins were as soft-headed as they were soft-hearted, and would probably return her.

Of course, if she had fallen into the hands of some other faction of the Dark Court . . .

Why, then, he would merely *take* her back, and she would undoubtedly be so grateful to see him that she would fall in with any plans he made.

The third—and most vexing—possibility was that she had managed to flee to one of the blighted places in the Mortal World where Sidhe magic simply didn't work at all reliably. Unfortunately, there were more of them every day. Seeking spells wouldn't work there, in the lands where there was so much Cold Iron that spellcasting, even when the mortals did their petty and foolish spells, went awry. None of the Sidhe entered such places without good reason. In fact, very few of the Folk were even *able* to venture into such places at all—and he did not command such numbers that he could afford to search all such places in the world.

But even if the girl had gone to ground in one of them, if she used her Gift, he would know. He knew the signature of her magic, the scent and taste of it, and if she practiced it anywhere in the World Above or Underhill, he would know.

He stopped before a large cabinet on one wall of his apartment. It was an antique Chinese apothecary cabinet, filled with many tiny drawers. He opened the one he sought unerringly and took out a small silver casket. From it he removed a silver ring wrapped with a single strand of long blonde hair.

Hers. And by all the magical Laws of Consanguinity, still a part of her.

He turned away from the cabinet and gestured. A patch of air began to ripple, darkening and solidifying

until it gleamed as dark as any mirror, hanging before him in the air. He touched the ring to the mirror, but—as so many times before—nothing happened.

*Hide if you can. Flee if you will. But you can only escape me for a time, Heavenly Grace Fairchild. And when you fall into my hands again, you will be mine forever.*

With a gesture he banished the black mirror. Slipping the ring onto his finger, he walked over to the desk. There was much to do to prepare the world for the coming of Billy Fairchild.

### Chapter Three: Away We Go Again

This had been his last class before the Thanksgiving break, and why all the odd gods of scheduling had put it on a Monday was going to have to remain a mystery, because nobody he'd been able to ask had been able to explain things to Eric's satisfaction.

Even with all the makeups and takeover classes he'd had to do to compensate for missed coursework and failed exams (he'd been off saving the world, but sometimes the best excuses were the ones you couldn't use), he was finally going to do it. After an almost twenty-year interregnum, Eric Banyon was finally going to graduate from the Juilliard School of Music this spring.

And what then?

What did he want to do with his life here in the World Above?

He'd already rejected one life—that of a Human Bard at the Elven Courts of Underhill—and come back to finish Juilliard, just to see if he could. Well, it turned out he could. With his Juilliard degree, he could now get a legitimate high-class professional music gig just about anywhere, but that really wouldn't fit the life that had grown up around him in the last couple of years, and the need he'd discovered to be ready to deal with Evil when it showed up and had to be fought.

It sounded awfully melodramatic when he put it that way—as if he might have a cape and tights hanging in his closet—and as a matter of fact, he did, since they were common articles of apparel Underhill, where he still made frequent visits—but how else was he supposed to describe things like Threshold and Aerune, or Perenor, or the powers behind the Poseidon Project? Cranky? Bad-mannered? Socially unacceptable? No. They were Evil. Each of them, in their own ways, had been out to hurt or kill a large number of people for nothing more than their own personal gain, and if there was a better definition of Evil, Eric hadn't found it yet.

He wasn't going to waste his time on the differently social who just needed a little time to work out their personal adjustments. They might be really loud and hurt a lot of feelings, and maybe even leave a few bruises behind, but nobody was going to die. And for the average run-of-the-mill villain who killed by accident or design, there were a whole lot of people and agencies better trained than Eric was to take them down. Call 911, leak information to the FBI, but don't ring up Call-A-Bard.

But they couldn't go after people like Aerune. When people like that showed up (and if someone like Aerune *never* showed up again, Eric would be just as glad), even finding out about them was a job in itself, let alone stopping them. The police, the FBI, the CIA, even the Marines weren't the right people to



call when someone like that appeared on the scene.

Which still left the question: what *was* he going to do with his life? Because while taking out weird villains might be a mission, and a necessary job, it was hardly a career. You couldn't tell when or where—or if—those kinds of problems were going to happen, for one thing. What did you do with the rest of your time? Even Batman had a social life. Sort of.

Though Eric could spend the rest of his life living off *kenned* gold with the best wishes of Prince Arvin of Elfhame Misthold—who was, as the Seleighe Sidhe understood things, his patron—that wouldn't satisfy him either. He'd discovered in himself a need to be useful, odd as that would have seemed to him at twenty.

So what was he going to *do* after he left Juilliard, in between bouts of saving the world? Which—he devoutly hoped—might never need to happen again.

In front of Lincoln Center, he caught the bus and, after a series of transfers, reached Museum Mile.

It was like stepping into another world. Even though the Upper West Side, where Juilliard was, could hardly be said to be an area of New York lacking in money and class, Museum Mile was so different that by rights there ought to be a high wall around it. Museum Mile was old money, Edith Wharton money, and it showed. Even in an unseasonably cold November, everything was still green, and the air positively reeked of the kind of wealth that had nannies and live-in servants, that summered on Fire Island or Martha's Vineyard, that took its limousines for walks and thought that shopping at Bloomingdale's was slumming. Apartments in these buildings almost *never* came up for sale—they were handed down through the generations, like the Renoirs and Monets and the Limoges services for forty-eight.

His shrink lived up here.

Eric had seriously resisted the whole idea of professional counseling for too long. His parents had dragged him to far too many of them when he'd been a child, and he'd quickly realized that every single one of those professional "helpers" had been interested in only one thing: getting inside his head and turning him inside out, to get a handle on what would control him. And once they did, no matter what they said, no matter how many times they promised they'd keep everything confidential, they'd take back whatever they found to his parents to use against him.

*Bitter much?* Eric thought with a rueful smile.

This time, he'd nearly drowned in his own problems before he'd been willing to admit that they were bigger than he was. But the fact that he'd been seriously considering going back to drinking—had been standing outside a liquor store last September with money in his pocket, thinking about walking in the door—had finally scared him enough to take the problem to Hosea.

Hosea had listened and come back with a name and address. Eric had been furious—terrified, he was willing to admit now. But Hosea had been just plain stubborn. Eric had asked for help. This was help, the Ozark Bard had said implacably. What would it cost him to simply go and *see* the woman? He'd faced Nightflyers and Unseleighe Lords, after all.

Eric hadn't been willing—hadn't been able, really—to explain. So he'd gone, sure that all he'd find when he arrived would be one more clueless psychotherapist, probably with a specialization in substance abuse telling him things he already knew too well.

But this time, it had turned out to be a whole different gig.

For one thing, *he* was paying the shrink. For another, there were no secrets, because Oriana Dunaway was a magician herself, though Eric knew little more about her than that.

"You don't need to know about me, Eric, or about what I do," she'd told him at their first meeting. "All you need to know is that you can trust me. And that whatever you tell me, no matter how unbelievable it is by the standards of the Worldlings, I will believe that it is so, though I may require an explanation of it, should it lie outside my own experience. And so, shall we begin?"

He was a Bard. He knew the truth when he heard it. Together, the two of them had begun to try to make sense of a life that had been twisted and damaged long before the events of last autumn. He slowly came to realize that he had to get his head straight before trying to get on with his life, lest the past reach out and drag him under when he least expected it. He was a Bard, gifted with the power to make or mar. He *had* to be able to use it wisely. Sanelly. Because, if he couldn't get his own psyche in order, as the power within him grew stronger, so would it find the weakest places in him.

And to his surprise, Oriana's specialty was *not* substance abuse at all, but the problems of magicians, Talents, and nonhumans living in the World Above. That much she had been willing to tell him, though she would not otherwise discuss her patients.

*"And I tell you this because it is important for you to know that you are not alone, either in your strengths or your weaknesses, Eric. It is a small community—often it is not a community at all—but you are not unique."*

\* \* \*

He reached the door of her building—after almost a year of Mondays, the doorman knew him by sight—and went inside. He passed through the exquisitely tasteful lobby—it had always rather reminded Eric of a high-class mortuary, with its dark heavy furniture, gilt mirrors, and oriental carpets over parquet marble floors. All that was missing were the vases of funereal lilies; fortunately the flowers here ran to something more cheerful. Shrugging his gig bag higher onto his shoulder, he went down the hall to the bank of elevators.

If the lobby was a mortuary, then the elevators were surely top of the line sarcophagi, all highly polished, heavily ornamented bronze, lined with more mirrors, so the building's inhabitants could give themselves one last once-over before hitting the street. The infinite number of reflected Erics always made him faintly uneasy; he stared fixedly at the doors as the car made its leisurely way to his floor.

The doors opened. He stepped out onto the thick carpet of the corridor and headed down the hall. Right on time. Maybe even a minute or two early. He opened the door into Oriana's apartment.

As always, the wards she had set tingled faintly over his skin when he crossed the threshold. They were a necessary part of her work, given the people she saw. It wouldn't do to disturb any of the other tenants of the building with anything that happened in her sessions, or leave any psychic detritus lying around from one appointment to contaminate the next.

What would have been the foyer if Oriana had not chosen to see her patients in her own home had been set up as a waiting room. There were a couple of comfortable couches and a low coffee table, covered with the sort of bland, inoffensive, upscale magazines that filled any professional's waiting room, occupying the space now. Eric picked up a copy of *Architectural Digest* and sat down.

A few moments later, Oriana's previous patient walked out. Eric had seen him a few times, but had never spoken to him. He didn't even know his name. He was a spare, slender man, closer to fifty than to forty. His dark hair was several weeks late (always! How did he manage it?) for a haircut, shot with early silver, and his eyes were a curious light amber color, nearly gold, making Eric wonder if he might be one of Oriana's nonhuman patients. He was dressed for Wall Street, in a completely unremarkable business suit that would blend in anywhere in New York. The only thing at all out of the ordinary about his appearance was the scarab pendant in bright blue *faience* that hung from a silver chain about his neck, resting against the sober institutional necktie. He nodded slightly to Eric, recognizing him as well, then walked out.

Oriana poked her head through the inner door a moment later.

"Ah, good. You're here. A moment, please." She withdrew.

Eric occupied himself until her return looking at pictures of gold faucets and hand-painted French porcelain bathroom sinks, not to mention Jacuzzis big enough to seat the entire Elven High Court, and made a mental note to give Kory and Beth a subscription to this thing. The elves could find *some* way to get this stuff shipped Underhill, and both his friends were bonkers for bathroom gadgets of every kind. Hell, actually all things considered, the elves could probably make every bit of it. If they hadn't already—hadn't Kory said something about there being an Elven casino in Vegas?

Still, the last time he'd been on a visit, all that he'd seen was an old claw-foot bathtub (okay, it was solid alabaster, but still) straight out of a Victorian mansion. Most of the time the Underhill crowd seemed to go for hot springs in grottos—nice for atmosphere, but not exactly Jacuzzis. *I'll be remembered throughout history as the man who brought modern plumbing to Underhill.*

A few moments later Oriana was back. "I'm ready for you now."

Eric got up and followed her down the hall to her study.

The room was small and intimate and even more heavily shielded than the rest of the apartment. The walls were fully paneled in red pecan, and folding shutters covered the windows. Eric preferred them closed, and so Oriana always shut them before he arrived.

Between the shuttered windows was a range of shallow shelves, on which were a variety of enticing knickknacks for nervous patients to fidget with: glass globes, small toys, seashells, ornamental boxes—the sort of souvenirs any traveler might acquire. There was a chair for Oriana, with a small table beside it that held a clock, her notepad, and a box of Kleenex. There was a wastebasket, and a dimmable torchiere in the corner to provide light if the shutters were closed. Aside from that, the only furniture in the room was a large grey couch—"a non-directive couch," she'd said once, making a rare joke, "as you may sit, lie, sprawl upon it. Whatever you like. The couch does not care. And neither do I."

As always when he arrived, the room held a strong indefinable spicy smell. It seemed to fade during his session—though whether it faded, or whether he got used to it, was something Eric had never quite decided.

He took his place on the couch. Oriana followed him in, closing the door behind him, and seated herself in the chair, picking up her pad and pen and waiting for him to begin.

She was somewhere in her late sixties, Eric supposed, one of those lucky blondes whose hair simply

went silver with age. She was wearing an expensive, nubbly, cowl-neck sweater in ash-taupe shades that flattered her complexion—nobody who had spent any time at all Underhill could help having a good eye for clothes—paired with a pencil-thin tweed skirt and designer pumps. She looked like a psychiatrist in a movie, down to the half-glasses she wore on a chain around her neck, and he was pretty sure that she consciously dressed to play up the image.

"Do I pass muster?" she asked.

Eric grinned, refusing to feel guilty for checking her out.

"And how are you feeling this week?" she asked, prodding him to begin their session.

"I'm realizing that I have decisions to make," Eric admitted. "I graduate in the Spring. *I could* just coast. The money's there. But it feels dishonest."

"Good," Oriana said noncommittally.

"I know that I want to do *something*. Something worthwhile. But I know that whatever it is, it has to be something that will leave me the freedom to do the things that need to be done—as a Bard. And those things show up on awfully short notice."

Oriana pursed her lips, and absently tapped once on her notebook with her pencil. "Yes, they do. And they're things that can't always be explained to Worldlings, even when they find themselves involved. And, reasonably enough, you don't want to put yourself into a position where you might have to let someone down who depended on you, or hurt their feelings, even if that were necessary for the greater good."

Eric nodded ruefully. "And I know there has to be a way to do both—to do something meaningful and still have that freedom . . ."

For a few minutes he discussed all the various alternatives he'd considered—going back on the RenFaire circuit; playing solo freelance gigs in the New York area; finding work as a session musician; working as a tutor. All of them sounded attractive as he spoke of them, and all of them would give him the freedom he needed.

Oriana raised her hand, silencing him.

"Eric, I am not a placement counselor at Juilliard. I have no interest in your future employment opportunities. You're blowing smoke at me. Stop it, and tell me what's bothering you."

Eric sighed, feeling guilty and relieved all at once.

"I have no idea what I'm going to do when I graduate," he admitted. "I try to feel drawn to some particular course of action, but I don't. There must be something that's right—but I just can't see it. Am I ever going to be able to see it?"

Oriana took a moment to page through her notes.

"Eric, you've been coming to me for almost a year now. And you've made a great deal of progress in dealing with your emotional baggage in that time. But you're still holding back. Oh, not consciously. But let's review your background a bit.

"You were born with the gift of Bardic magic, into a family that had no understanding of your Talent and no idea of what magic is. Since Bardic magic is linked to music, you presented as a musical prodigy. Since your parents were ambitious, they perhaps placed too much pressure on you to excel in an arena that was not entirely suited to your actual Gifts. Yes, you're a talented musician, perhaps even a gifted one, but talent and Talent are two very different things, and young magicians should not be forced into the public eye. However, what's done is done.

"When your Talents made an explicit presentation of themselves at puberty, you began seeing Otherrealm creatures, which were drawn by your magic. Naturally, you had no idea of what was occurring. Your parents were . . . not supportive, insisting that you continue with your course of studies. Eventually, you had what amounted to a nervous breakdown upon seeing the Nightflyers at your recital at age eighteen."

"I ran away from home," Eric said sourly.

"Certainly we could see it in those terms," Oriana said, looking up from her notes. "It is equally valid to suggest that you *rantoward* your own self-preservation in the only way you knew to do it. However, you continued to make bad life choices. You became an alcoholic, a drug abuser, and a drifter, in an attempt to shut out your perception of the Otherworld."

Eric winced. It was an accurate, if very unflattering, assessment of his life before he'd met Kory.

"When you met Korendil and were forced by circumstances both to acknowledge and to take up the use of your magical Gifts, a great deal changed for you. For one thing, you received external validation of your world view—in layman's terms, you discovered you *weren't* crazy, and never had been. You received proper magical training from an Elven Bard. You acquired a replacement family, one that loves and supports you. You terminated your addictive and avoidance behaviors, which is a very important step in the healing process.

"But the damaged child created during the first eighteen years of your life, when our first perceptions and assumptions about the nature of the world are being formed, is still within you, and *he* is not lightly set aside. You have acknowledged in our previous sessions that your parents saw you less as a child to be nurtured than as an accessory to their own life-style: a trophy that would enhance their own consequence. A child derives his first image of self through his parents' image of him, and your parents, as you have told me on several occasions, never saw you as anything more than an object and a playing piece.

"I do not believe you will ever truly be able to understand what it is that you, Eric Banyon, actually want out of life, until you have fully externalized this image of yourself and set it aside once and for all."

"You mean I have to stop believing them?" Eric said.

Oriana nodded.

"But I don't!" he protested.

She said nothing, forcing Eric to think.

Was it true? He hated to think so. He hadn't thought about his parents—or his childhood—for years.

But, as she'd warned him, there were ways of not thinking about a thing that were just as poisonously

obsessive as thinking about it constantly. From the moment he'd walked out of that concert hall with nothing more than his flute and the clothes on his back, he'd built a wall between himself and his past, one that he'd allowed nothing to breach. He bit his lip, feeling himself start to shake.

In silence, Oriana passed him the box of Kleenex.

"I hate this," Eric said thickly, around a wad of tissues.

"Nobody said this would be either easy or fun," she answered quietly. "We defend the damaged parts of ourselves fiercely. It takes courage to confront our scars, and bring the shadowed parts of our deepest selves into the light so that they can be healed. Until you no longer see yourself as an object and a playing piece, you will not be able to accurately identify what you are feeling *now*."

He hated it, but he knew she was right. Because an object couldn't feel. A playing piece couldn't make decisions. And he had to do both. Right now he didn't know *what* he felt about so many things—Aerete's death, Aerune's imprisonment, Jimmie's death, Jeanette's transfiguration—there was so much to think about and get straight in his mind before he could move on. And he had responsibilities. There was Hosea to teach, and Kayla to keep an eye on, just for two. He was managing both of those responsibilities adequately so far, but if there was one thing Eric knew about any situation, it was that nothing ever stayed the same. Things always got better . . . or worse. And if he didn't deal with this ticking time bomb in his past, he knew which direction he was going to put his money on. And he had his own future to plan for.

"I think we've made some progress today," Oriana said gently. "And now, our hour is up. Call me if you need me sooner, and we'll set something up. Otherwise, I'll see you next week."

\* \* \*

Back home, Eric paced his apartment, a cup of tea in his hand. He felt restless and agitated, the way he always did after a particularly good—or bad—session with Oriana.

It was as if she'd opened a door in a wall, and things he hadn't thought about in years were boiling out. Sick, bad, frightening things.

But they had only as much power as he was willing to give them. Oriana had taught him that, had proved it to him over and over. Confront them; drag them into the light—painful as that was—and most of them would simply wither away.

He could do that now.

Inspiration struck, with a force that nearly made Eric drop his mug. So his past—his long-entombed image of his parents—was the root of his present problems, was it? Well, they'd just see about that. He'd confront his problem directly.

He'd confront his parents.

He'd been tying up all the loose ends of his life, hadn't he? Finishing up at Juilliard? Well, he'd been working his way backward to the beginning of his problems. That made sense, in a way. But now it was time to deal with the beginning.

Boston wasn't that far away—especially on his elvensteed Lady Day. He could get up there and back

tomorrow, and it would be a good run for both of them.

Even though it had been twenty years by the world's time since he'd left, he was sure they were still in the same place. You didn't give up a house in Cambridge lightly, and they were both undoubtedly still at Harvard.

And if they had—unthinkably—moved, they wouldn't be that hard to find. Not with magic to help.

Determined on a course of action—if not in the least settled in his mind about it—Eric was about to go in search of another cup of tea when he heard a knock at his door.

He went to open it, without bothering to first perform the New York ritual dance of peering through the peephole. For that matter, his door had far fewer locks on it than the usual door in even the best neighborhoods. Eric lived in Guardian House, and the House had its own unique security systems.

Hosea was standing on the doorstep, which was pretty much whom Eric had expected to be there, given the time of day and day of the week it was. Everyone else he knew was either at their mundane jobs or in class.

"Come in," Eric said, stepping back. He knew Hosea wouldn't come around on a Monday unless it was for something important. Everyone who knew about his sessions with Oriana—and that was everyone close to him—knew to give him a little breathing room after them. Though from the look of him—Hosea was still dressed for the outside, and still had Jeanette slung over his shoulder—Hosea had come straight from the shelter with something serious on his mind.

"Tea?" Eric asked.

"If it's no trouble," Hosea said, and Eric went to get him a cup.

Hosea was sitting on the couch when Eric came back with two mugs of fresh tea. He was frowning at nothing, Jeanette propped against his knee, still in her case. Hosea was normally as sunny as a spring morning; this must be something bad, or at least pretty complicated.

The last thing in the world Eric wanted to do right now was think about somebody else's problems, but he forced himself to take a deep mental breath and turn his thoughts outward, away from his own troubles. Hosea was his apprentice. That meant Eric had responsibilities toward him.

Responsibilities. There was that word again. Life had been so much less complicated when he'd been irresponsible—

"Want to tell me about it?" he said, handing over the mug.

"It might be nothin' but a bag o' moonshine," Hosea said, after a long hesitation. "Ah don't rightly know."

*But whatever it is, it was important enough for you to come by on a Monday, wasn't it?*

"Well, maybe we can figure it out together," Eric said. "Right?"

Hosea grimaced, and took a deep breath, preparing to begin. Slowly he explained to Eric all that he'd pieced together about the Secret Stories that the children in the shelter told—and that it wasn't just the kids at Jacob Riis telling them, but children in every shelter Hosea visited, and that *all* the children seemed

to know them. He explained about Bloody Mary, and how belief in her extended far beyond the very young children who believed in the Secret Stories—that, in fact, Hosea feared she might almost have an independent reality.

"So . . . one of the things Ah was wondering, Eric, was . . . is that possible?"

Eric considered, choosing his words carefully.

"Well, I know that belief can compel magic—or a creature of magic—to take a particular form. From what little Master Dharniel told me about the way humans and elves used to get along—*or not* get along, more to the point—together in the old days—the really old days—there used to be a whole school of human magic, now mostly lost, that could actually compel the Sidhe not only to appear, but to appear in certain forms. That's one thing. But it's not too likely that there's a Sidhe running around New York that somebody's twisted into a knot. Too much Cold Iron here—it weakens their magic, and makes it go all funny. They'd have to be seriously crazy in the first place—like Aerune was—to come here at all. And the creatures of magic that *can* stand up to Cold Iron aren't quite as vulnerable to the power of human belief.

"The other possibility is, if there's a pool of untapped power out there—and belief is power, if enough people believe hard enough, and you throw a few Talents into the mix—that much belief could take form and become what magicians call an Artificial Elemental."

"*Amythago*," Hosea said.

"You've been listening to Paul," Eric said with a faint grin. Paul Kern was the Guardians' researcher who, like Giles on *Buffy*, knew the pedigree and history of most of the Otherworldly threats the Guardians faced. "The label—ghost, *mythago*, Artificial Elemental—doesn't matter. What does matter is that as soon as it has any kind of a defined shape at all, it becomes a lot more efficient at absorbing belief energy and using it to define itself. It can begin to appear—manifest—and that, of course, encourages more and stronger belief, and sets up a whole feeding cycle. Hard to break, if it turns out to be something you don't happen to want around.

"So . . . yes, if your shelter kids are believing in something hard enough, it might start showing up. *Might*," Eric said firmly.

"Well . . . Ah'm not quite sure whether she is, or whether the gangs are jest ridin' on her coattails, so to speak. Either way, Ah'd like to do something about it. And it wouldn't hurt none to give the little'uns a hopeful spark in their lives," Hosea said thoughtfully.

"By making Bloody Mary a little less . . . bloody?" Eric suggested, thinking carefully. "That way she wouldn't be any more use to the gangs, . . . and the children wouldn't have to be afraid of her any more. It would be a delicate task." He thought about it carefully. "In fact, it would be a *Bardic* sort of task. A perfect apprentice piece for you, in fact." Eric grinned wickedly, enjoying himself now as he thought the matter over more thoroughly.

"Why don't you write some songs—the kind that kids would sing themselves—that shape the Bloody Mary story toward a happy sort of ending? When you've got some that you think will work, show them to me so I can approve them as your great and powerful Bardic Master. Then you can start sneaking them out into the shelters and let them work their way out among the kids on their own."

Hosea thought about it for a moment and then smiled slowly.



"Now that's a right sneaky plan, Master Bard. And if it works, Bloody Mary will dry up and blow away on her own, and maybe the little'un's'll be able to conjure themselves up a bit o' help now and then," Hosea said thoughtfully.

"It's worth a try," Eric agreed.

Hosea finished his tea and set the cup down. "If you don't mind mah bringin' it up, Eric, you look like a feller with more'n usual on your mind tonight," he said hesitantly.

"And here I thought I was doing such a great job of being the original Great Stone Face," Eric said, with a rueful sigh.

Hosea raised an eyebrow and said nothing.

"Yeah, well," Eric said after a pause. There wasn't any reason *not* to tell Hosea where he was going, and several good reasons to come clean. "You know I saw Oriana today . . . and, well, I just realized I've got some major unfinished personal business to take care of, and school's over for a few weeks, so . . . tomorrow I'm going to go up to Boston. To see my parents."

There was a silence while Hosea digested this. "Don't they think you're dead?" he asked at last.

"Probably," Eric admitted. "Think what a great surprise it will be for them when I show up, then."

The anger in his voice surprised even him. And there it was, out in the open: at least part of his reason for going was the desire, still not dealt with or satisfied, to balance the pain of his childhood with hurting his parents back. It was something he'd have to keep an eye on. He couldn't afford to act out of either anger or malice. No Bard could.

Hosea said nothing. Eric had never talked about his family before; Hosea knew nothing of his past before his time as a street musician. For his part, Eric knew that Hosea had never known his own parents; they'd died when he was very young, but he'd been raised by his grandparents with a great deal of love. Eric wondered if Hosea could even *imagine* having parents who didn't love you.

Hosea let the moment pass without further comment, and moved on to practical matters. "Won't seeing them be a tad awkward? Won't they expect you to look older'n you do?"

Eric frowned. That was a detail he *did* have to work out.

"I'm not actually sure I expect them to notice, frankly. And if they do, a little *glamour* will take care of that while I'm there, and afterward, they'll remember seeing what they expected to see. I walked out on them when I was eighteen. That was almost twenty years ago by the World's time. If I'd stayed in the World Above all that time I'd be—let me see—about thirty-six or seven by now? I look like I'm still in my twenties, and there are days when I feel like I'm about a thousand years old. . . ." Eric shrugged.

"Ah guess Ah'm not the man to change yore mind," Hosea said, getting to his feet, "but . . . are you sure you know what you're doing?" he asked.

*That's a question I ask myself every day.* "No," Eric admitted. "But I still think it's something I have to do."

"Well then," Hosea said, and he still didn't sound very certain about matters, "Ah guess Ah'll wish you good luck. And Ah'll see you when you get back?"

"Count on it," Eric said, feigning a cheerfulness he did not feel. "We'll go out and grab a couple of pizzas or something."

\* \* \*

He wasn't all that surprised to receive another visitor as soon as it was fully dark. There was a tapping at the window, and then the sound of the casement being raised, and the clicking of stone hooves as his visitor clambered daintily over the sill.

"Eric me lad, are you quite sure you haven't lost the few marbles you still have rattling around in that pretty skull of yours?" Greystone said.

Greystone was an actual, genuine, medieval-style gargoyle, one of four that decorated the top of Guardian House. He had a fanged doglike face and curling horns, long apelike arms, and hindquarters like a satyr's, right down to the cloven hooves. Great bat wings lay against his back like furred umbrellas, and in defiance of all aerodynamic principles, they could actually be used for flight. Except for his big dark eyes, he was a uniform, textured grey all over, right down to the soot smudges and patches of lichen that came from being exposed to all the wind and weather of New York City since the day he'd been carved. And despite the fact that he lived and moved and talked, and certainly ate and drank with every evidence of enjoyment, Greystone, as his name implied, seemed to be made of solid stone. He'd been Eric's first friend in Guardian House, coming that first night to Eric's tentative Bardic request for a friend. And Greystone had been a good one ever since.

He was also an inveterate busybody, being privy to all the conversations that went on in Guardian House, as well as most of the surface thoughts of the inhabitants, though he never gossiped, and didn't abuse the privilege that went with his power.

"Pretty sure," Eric said. "Popcorn and a movie?" Both were good ways to distract Greystone, he'd found; though the gargoyle could *hear* any movie the inhabitants ran anywhere in Guardian House, until Eric had invited him inside on his first night here, Greystone had never had a chance to *watch* any of them, and the chance to see the movies at last that he'd only heard for so long fascinated him.

"If that's what you're offering, laddybuck, I'll be pleased to accept. But I'll choose the movie."

Pleased to have gotten off so easily from what had looked to be shaping up to be a stern lecture, Eric went off to pop some popcorn while Greystone inspected Eric's daily-growing DVD collection.

But Eric was not to escape so easily. Halfway through *The Thomas Crown Affair*, Greystone returned to the subject he wanted to discuss.

"And that lady alienist. What does she think of this daft notion of yours?"

Sometimes Greystone's terminology was decades out of date—intentionally so, Eric was sure. Psychiatrists hadn't been called "alienists" for at least eighty years. "I haven't mentioned it to her."

Greystone snorted. "Nae doot she'd think it a fine idea."

"Your accent's slipping. And as a matter of fact, she would," Eric said, mentally crossing his fingers.

She'd said he needed to deal with the issues of his childhood. She hadn't necessarily said he should pay his parents a visit.

Greystone made a rude face, something the gargoyle's carved ape-like face was wonderfully well designed to do. "The young! Have they no respect for tradition, then? It's cruising for a bruising, plain and simple—and you of all people, Underhill's Bard, should know that!"

Eric turned to Greystone, studying him in puzzlement. He knew that going home again—not that it had ever been home, not really—was fraught with hidden land mines, but Greystone seemed to have something specific in mind.

Greystone sighed, and seemed to resign himself to putting all his cards on the table and speaking plainly.

"Going home. Going back to your mortal family. Seeing your parents again, after a sojourn in Elven Lands. It never turns out well, at least according to all the old songs."

Eric regarded Greystone. *That aspect of things* hadn't occurred to him.

What if the old ballads were right?

#### Chapter Four: The Job Of Journeywork

All the way here, his stomach had been telling him this was a mistake, but he'd come too far to back out now.

Maybe he wouldn't talk to them, though—at least not as himself. A little Bardic *glamourie* would be enough to ensure that they didn't recognize him—and it wasn't as if they were expecting to see him, after all. Like Hosea said, they thought he was dead.

Maybe just *seeing* them would be enough. Right now Eric was sure it would be *more* than enough. No matter how many times he told himself that they were nothing more than human beings—misguided human beings, to be sure—with absolutely no power over him, he was unable to shake the conviction that he was walking into a trap. That the moment he crossed the threshold of his old home, he'd find himself ensnared in the web of his childhood again, at the mercy of people that his subconscious insisted were monsters.

*Well, that's what this little pleasure trip is all about, isn't it? To prove that none of that is true.*

He found his old neighborhood without trouble. His parents had lived for as long as he could remember on the same spacious tree-lined street within walking distance of Harvard University. Everything had a refined and mannered elegance that set his teeth on edge; a self-satisfaction that bordered on smugness. It took a great deal of money to live comfortably in Cambridge, but it was the height of bad form to flaunt it in any way. These were houses—very large houses, of course, but certainly not mansions. They were set close together, and close to the street; Boston was a very old city, and its architecture reflected the fact. Volvo station wagons and the occasional chaste BMW were parked in the driveways and along the streets; nothing vulgar and flashy for the inhabitants of the People's Republic of Cambridge. Lady Day (not that she was vulgar or flashy!) stood out like a frog on a birthday cake.

*Good*, Eric thought with savage satisfaction.

The house looked just as he remembered it. There were two cars in the driveway; both unfamiliar, but that was only to be expected. He'd been gone for twenty years, after all. But maybe his parents weren't living here any more?

He supposed he'd better check.

He wheeled Lady Day in behind the second car parked in the driveway—there *was* just enough room to get her off the street—and swung off, pulling off his helmet and hooking it over the back. He patted her absently on the gas tank. "Be good," he told the elvensteed.

She flashed her lights in silent reply.

It was a little after two when he went up the steps and onto the porch, and only stubbornness kept him moving forward. For a moment he hoped he could give up, turn back—he could always try over at the university, after all; it was probably what he should have done in the first place—but no, the brass plate over the mailbox still said "Banyon."

He was in the right place after all.

He was about to leave anyway—going over to the university really *was* a better idea—when the front door opened, and Eric found himself staring at his mother.

*She's old!* was his first automatic shocked thought.

Fiona Sommerville Banyon stared at him without recognition, raising one well-manicured auburn eyebrow. She wore a cashmere twinset, tweed skirt, and pearls, his mother's uniform for as long as Eric could remember. Her chestnut hair was shoulder-length, carefully colored to mask any trace of grey.

"Thank you for coming," she said, opening the door wider and stepping back. "We're glad you could make it so quickly."

Feeling a growing sense of unreality, Eric opened the storm door and stepped inside. How could she have been expecting him? He hadn't known he'd be coming himself until yesterday.

Was this a trap? A trick? A spell?

Feeling tense and off-balance, Eric followed her inside, into the company parlor on the right. The music parlor was on the left; with an effort he kept himself from looking to see if the piano and the concert harp were still there.

They'd redecorated since he'd left. Some of the pieces, like Grandmother's antique sideboard and the long-case clock, were still there, though in different places than he remembered, but the couch and chairs were new.

And his father was there. Eric took a deep breath, willing his face to remain expressionless. He'd faced down Aerune mac Audelaine Lord of Death and Pain, and worse. He *was not* going to run from a college professor!

There was grey in Michael Banyon's hair now; distinguished silver wings at the temples, and Eric just bet that all the girls in his History of Music Arts classes just swooned over it. He advanced toward Eric, hand out.

They must think I'm someone else. I have got to tell them who I am!

But Michael Banyon didn't give him the chance.

"We're very grateful you were able to come on such short notice, Mr. Dorland. Our son is very important to us, and believe me, we will do *anything* to get him back."

He took Eric's hand and shook it firmly, in his strong musician's grip.

*Now?* Eric thought, stunned to silence. *They're looking for me now?* That made no sense at all. It had been twenty years, World time. And when he'd come back to live in the World Above, he'd covered his tracks very carefully—and Ria was doing a lot more to help. Certainly he was attending Juilliard as Eric Banyon, but it was a common enough name. And if his parents should have happened to hear about it, and connect that Eric Banyon with their vanished son, they wouldn't have needed to hire a private detective to find him. They'd just have gotten in a car and driven down.

"Would you like to see Magnus' room?" his mother said.

*Magnus?*

Suddenly Eric really did seriously wonder if he were under a spell, or if he'd fallen into a parallel universe. Or if this could somehow be the wrong house, despite the fact that he'd come to the right address, and these *were* his parents, twenty years older, and the name "Banyon" was still on the front door.

"Yes. Thank you." He managed to find his voice at last.

"You go ahead, Fi," his father said, sitting down on the couch. As usual, once he'd done the meet-and-greet, Michael Banyon thought his duties were discharged, Eric thought irritably. He followed Fiona Banyon up the stairs, to . . . *his*. . . old room.

But not his any longer. It, like the parlor, had been completely redecorated, and now bore a certain family resemblance (though without the black walls) to Kayla's apartment. It was obviously the room of a teenaged boy.

"We left it just the way it was when he . . . left," Mrs. Banyon said. "I don't know how many times I told him to take down those posters. Rock music! It's just noise. Not real music."

Eric looked around. He felt more comfortable here. At least this place looked completely different than everything he was used to.

"Why don't you tell me everything?" he said.

"But I told you—over the phone—"

"I'd like to hear it again," Eric said gently. "Sometimes the smallest details can be important." Such as what his parents were doing with a teenaged boy they were calling their son.

Fiona walked into the room and sat down. The bed had been made to Marine Corps standards.

"About a month ago—let me see, that would be, September 8th—I came home and Magnus wasn't here. He was supposed to come straight home from school; we'd grounded him because his psychologist said he'd respond well to limits. I asked Connie—she was our cook-housekeeper at the time—where he was, and she said she hadn't seen him at all that day. Naturally I fired her.

"We called the police. Michael even tried checking his computer, but he'd, oh, formatted the hard disk or something, and we couldn't get it to work. We went to the police and filled out all the papers, and they . . . well, frankly, I was very disappointed. We were devastated, of course."

She didn't sound devastated, Eric thought cynically. She sounded more annoyed than anything else. Of course, his parents weren't big on emotional displays, but he would have thought a missing child would be worth *something*. A few tears at least, or some evidence of sleepless nights?

"Mr. Dorland, I am terribly worried about my child. Magnus is . . . special. He's a gifted and talented musician. Both Michael and I have a certain amount of musical ability, but Magnus is a musical prodigy. He's been giving performances since he was four. But as you know, geniuses have certain . . . emotional problems, and lately he'd become rather, well, moody and rebellious. It was bad enough when he started listening to this rock music, but then he developed this obsession about actually performing it, and that, of course, we couldn't allow. Magnus is a pianist. He can't possibly be allowed to debase his gifts.

"Of course he receives counseling, and naturally he attends one of the best private schools in Boston."

"St. Augustine," Eric said. Of course it would be St. Augustine.

Her eyes widened in surprise. "You know it?"

"It's my business to know things, Mrs. Banyon," Eric said, covering his slip smoothly. He remembered St. Augustine, and not fondly: he'd gone there until he'd switched to Juilliard, and it had been several years of unmitigated hell.

"I've written *avery* stiff note to the headmaster there! What's the point of a private school if not to protect its students from unhealthy influences? But obviously Magnus fell in with a bad crowd there, because he's always been such a good little boy. . . ."

"And your son was how old, exactly?" Eric asked, sending out a thread of Bardic Magic to keep her from finding the question odd, to encourage her to tell him everything she knew, freely and without constraint. Whoever Dorland was, he obviously already knew the answers, and Eric wanted to know them too.

"He just turned seventeen in July," Mrs. Banyon said. "We'd wanted to send him to Juilliard, but he really needed more structure. Michael was thinking of a good boarding school, but . . . the music."

The music. It was always the music, wasn't it? You didn't think you could trust this kid in the big city, and if you locked him up somewhere, he wouldn't be around to feed your ego, would he? Eric took a deep breath, forcing his emotions down, away from the surface. He couldn't afford to show them. And he'd abandoned all idea of letting them know who he really was. Not now.

"Find him, Mr. Dorland. Bring him back. We'll put an end to this rock music nonsense. Magnus will

study classical music, just like. . . ." She faltered to a stop, looking confused.

"Just like who, Mrs. Banyon?" Eric asked softly, strengthening the thread of magic in his words. "Do you have any other children? Any other family? Someone he might go to?"

"Oh no," Mrs. Banyon assured him, her eyes clear and untroubled. "Magnus did have an older brother once. But Eric died before Magnus was born."

She got to her feet, looking around the room with distaste. "I suppose you'd like to stay here for a while and look around. I'll be downstairs if you need me for anything."

She walked out, leaving Eric alone.

Eric crossed the room and sat down at the desk, willing himself to be calm. He took several deep breaths, forcing serenity on himself as if he wrestled with a living enemy.

It was bad enough that he'd come here at all. That had been a stupid idea. But he knew now, it had been a bad choice made for a good reason, because if he hadn't done it, he would never have known that Magnus Banyon existed.

His brother.

*I have a brother.*

Not only was that unbelievable, it wasn't the worst part.

*If my brother is seventeen—and add nine months gestation to that—then about how long was I gone for when they decided to wash their hands of me and start over?*

Not long enough.

His parents had obviously learned nothing from ruining his life, and had in fact repeated their mistake line for line—another trophy child, another "prodigy." The only plus was that this time apparently they hadn't driven their son crazy, if reading between the lines was any clue. *Thisson* was no docile victim. He was a fighter, a discipline problem, a candidate for one of those boarding schools where the rich sent their children so they could be someone else's problem, safely out of sight, and controlled and confined so that any "unsuitable" tendencies could be eviscerated out of them.

And Magnus, who undoubtedly knew that, had run away before that could happen. And his parents had waited an entire month before bothering to apply their own resources to the hunt for him. Anything could have happened to him by now.

If anyone ever deserved full and proper punishment for their acts, it was Michael and Fiona Banyon. And Eric had the power to provide it in the last full measure. With a word, with a gesture . . .

*Wait! Stop it! What are you thinking?*

Eric forced himself to stop. Just . . . stop. He stepped back from his anger as Master Dharniel had taught him, as Eric was teaching Hosea, withdrawing himself from it until he stood outside it, until he could push it away from himself and set it aside. *If there is a proper day for this, then that day will come. But that day is not today.*

He could *not* think about this now. And he didn't really have the time. If *thereal* Dorland showed up while he was here, there would be explanations to make that Eric didn't have the energy or control for just now. The barriers he had just erected were fragile. He dared not test them.

And his mother was right about one thing. Magnus had to be found—and *he* had to be the one to do it.

Before they did. The elves that were his friends, mentors, and role models made it part of their life's work—and they had very long lives—to rescue abused children from their abusers. If Eric's own life was anything to go by, the Banyons, Fiona and Michael, certainly fit that description. The fact that Magnus was his own blood, his own brother, just made it that much more important that he be rescued.

And—hidden?

*Bet your sweet ass.*

He got to his feet and quickly searched the room. There wasn't much in the way of personal items—no letters or diaries—and when he turned on the computer, he found that it had, indeed, been wiped, and there were no backup disks or copies of personal files anywhere. *Clever Magnus!* he found himself thinking in approval. *Smarter than I ever was at your age . . .*

Tucked in the back of a sock drawer he found a bus pass with a picture on it, and for the first time got a look at his brother.

The same auburn hair—they both got that from their mother. Worn long—to make him look like a Baby Mozart, Eric guessed sourly. Green eyes, at least the bus pass said so. Girlishly pretty—Eric winced in sympathy, remembering the fights he'd had to get into as a kid because of his own looks—but the mouth was set in a permanent smirk that indicated this kid was nothing but trouble. *Good for you, kid.*

Eric tucked the bus pass in his pocket and kept looking.

In another drawer, he found a hairbrush, with several strands of long auburn hair tangled among the bristles. Carefully, Eric teased several of them free, winding them around his finger, and tucked them into his wallet. With those, and a little magic, he'd be able to find Magnus quickly and easily.

If he was still alive.

Eric winced, fighting down fear.

A month on the streets alone. Not everybody was as smart and lucky as Kayla had been. *As he* had been, face it. Kids died on the streets, every day.

If that had happened . . .

*Don't borrow trouble,* Eric told himself firmly.

He went down the stairs, schooling his face to blankness.

"I think I have everything I need here," he said, as the elder Banyons rose to their feet. "I'll be in touch."  
*When Hell freezes rock-solid.*



They walked him to the door. As he went down the steps, hearing the door close behind him, he realized there was one last thing he needed to do here.

Cover his tracks. It wouldn't do for them to tell Dorland he'd already been here when the man finally arrived, after all.

He turned back to the house, reaching out for his magic, feeling the music well up in him. He sighed a little with relief to have it come so easily, but the control he'd learned Underhill held firm after all, even rattled as he was. The song spilled through him, into the world; Eric pursed his lips and whistled a few notes of an old country air.

*Forget. Forget I was ever here. Forget you spoke to me. Forget . . . forget . . . forget . . .*

It was done. His parents wouldn't remember he'd been here, or that they'd spoken to him, or that they'd mistaken him for their Mr. Dorland. He swung his leg over Lady Day and backed out of the driveway, heading sedately down the street just as a sleek grey Mercedes with smoked windows pulled up in front of the Banyon house.

He didn't go far. Finding Magnus was the highest priority, and it couldn't wait. He headed over to Harvard, where there was a lot of open space where he could work undisturbed. Parking Lady Day and commanding her to make herself inconspicuous, Eric walked until he could put his back against a tree.

The weather was freezing, the wind promising more early snow. Eric saw very few people, and those he did see were bundled up and hurrying on their way to be elsewhere.

Fortunately, the campus was fairly deserted at this time of year. Thanksgiving break, everyone heading home to their families, all of the schools closed, only a few students left on campus.

He was starting here on the chance that Magnus was still somewhere in the Boston area. Eric couldn't afford to ignore any possibility. How far the boy had run depended on how much money he'd had, how lucky he'd been at hitching rides, and whether he had any friends in the area who would have taken him in and hidden him.

Eric reached into his wallet and took out the lock of hair, coiling it around his finger again. The old magics, the simple magics, were the strongest. According to the Doctrine of Contagion, objects that were once linked were linked forever, so a lock of hair, even though no longer physically attached to a person, was still a part of them.

Summoning up his flute of air, Eric closed his eyes and began to play, concentrating on the strands of hair wound around his finger. *Show me where you are. Alive or dead, show me where you are at this moment.*

Wistful songs, yearning songs—"She Moved Through The Fair," and "Greensleeves," and "Hame, Hame, Hame." On and on he played, searching outward, mile after mile.

At last, exhausted, he had to stop.

He'd found nothing.

Eric felt a combination of frustration and relief. Magnus wasn't here. Not in Boston, not anywhere near it. Neither alive nor dead.

That was something, anyway. He wasn't sure what, but something.

\* \* \*

By the time Eric got back to New York again, he'd had far too much time to do nothing but think, and he was furious all over again. It wasn't enough that his parents had ruined his life. No, they'd thrown him away like a used paper cup—without even a decent period of mourning—and gotten themselves another child to ruin. And that hurt, actually—

It hurt more than he had expected it to. He'd always known he was just a trophy, a possession to them, but he had never thought of himself as disposable.

He'd always assumed they'd searched for him when he disappeared. Now he wondered if they ever had. He'd been eighteen, after all. A legal adult. Pretty hard to drag back and make jump through hoops again.

Not like Magnus.

He was shaking so hard he could barely hold on to the handlebars of the bike. Fortunately Lady Day could do all the driving, but he could feel the elvensteed's worry. He tried to send her reassuring thoughts, but he was so angry he could hardly think straight.

*Get it together, Banyon. Before you do something really stupid.*

Lady Day pulled up in the little parking lot behind Guardian House and stopped. It was already dark. Eric got off stiffly and checked his watch. Six o'clock.

He needed to talk to someone about this before he blew a gasket. Hosea would be a good place to start.

But when he went inside and tapped on Hosea's door, there was no answer. *Must be out*, Eric thought, feeling oddly disappointed.

Kayla? He rejected the idea. What he was feeling right now would probably fry the young Healer in her tracks, and besides, she was too young for this.

Toni? Paul? José? Eric considered and rejected the idea. The other Guardians were friends, but, well, this was something too personal to discuss with them.

He went up to his own apartment and looked at the phone.

Was this something he needed to call Oriana about?

Eric thought the matter over carefully. Was his reluctance to call her reasonable, or was he hiding out because he'd done something really stupid and didn't want to get zinged for it? *Probably a little of both*, he decided. *I'll sleep on it, and I'll call her tomorrow during office hours and see if she thinks I need to come in before next Monday.*

Knowing she probably would.

How could something he hadn't known about this morning—that had been going along for years without him knowing about it—*hurt* so damned much? And he knew he had to get himself straightened out about it fast, because Magnus' problems wouldn't wait.

But there was someone here he could talk to now.

"Greystone?" he said aloud. "You want to come down?"

He went into the kitchen to put up the water for tea.

When he came back into the living room, Greystone had just finished climbing in through the window.

"Hola, boyo," the gargoyle said. "And how was Beantown?"

"I've got a baby brother," Eric said, torn between laughter and tears. He threw himself down on the couch. It all seemed utterly ridiculous when he said it aloud.

"It must have been some family reunion," Greystone said, easing himself into a chair. The leather creaked and groaned under the gargoyle's weight, but it held. It was Greystone's favorite chair. "Do you want to tell me all the gory details?"

"Not much of a family reunion," Eric said. "He's run away from home. A month ago. I guess it's a family tradition. His name's Magnus."

"'Magnus Banyon.' Now *there's* a name to resonate through the halls of history," Greystone commented dryly. "And where is the little lad now?"

"I don't know!" Eric shouted, lunging to his feet again. "I don't know if he's alive, or—I looked all over Boston for him. He's not there. He's seventeen. They must have . . . they had him studying music, too. At St. Augustine. Another little *prodigy*," he said in disgust.

He began to pace back and forth, too worked up to sit still. "I went to see my parents. They thought I was this private detective they've hired, so they told me all about it. They left me alone in his room long enough for me to pick up some things to set the spell to find him with, but . . . that really isn't my kind of magic. I could have made a mistake. He *could* be there, somewhere. I might have missed him. He's been on the streets for a month. Anything could have happened to him. He's only seventeen—a baby!"

"Not so very much younger than you were when you hit the streets, laddybuck. You survived," Greystone reminded him quietly.

"Yes— And— But—" Eric sputtered. But when I think of all the things I did in order to survive, and how I almost didn't survive . . .

"And yon bairn has allies and friends, even if he doesn't know it yet," Greystone went on reasonably. "Powerful allies and powerful friends. So why don't you just go pick up that phone and call one of them? And by the by, your tea kettle's boiling."

\* \* \*

It was a little after seven p.m., but Ria Llewellyn had no plans to leave for hours yet. There was work to do. There was always work to do. Glancing up from the top of her antique rosewood desk, she could

look out through the glass walls of her office at the lights of the other buildings along the avenue where other New Yorkers were staying equally late. New York, as the saying went, is the City that Works.

And that suited Ria just fine.

The construction on the five floors of LlewelCo offices had finally been finished late last fall, including installing the new carpet for her penthouse suite—cream, with the red dragon of her corporate logo woven into the center. This spring, she'd finally finished the paperwork involved in shifting her power base to the East Coast, and turned LlewelCo West over to Jonathan as his own private sub-fief, a reward for many years of good and faithful service.

She'd gotten tired of fighting with the co-op board of her Park Avenue apartment and bought another one on Central Park South, buying the building first to make sure she wouldn't have any further trouble with the tenants' committee. The view of the Park was breathtaking; well worth the trouble of moving and redecorating, in Ria's opinion.

She guessed it was time to give up and admit she was just a New York City kind of girl. She'd been all over the world, spent a lot of time in most of the "great" cities, and never found one that fit her so well emotionally. And if that meant, as Eric often teased, that she was a clothes-obsessed workaholic, so be it. Somebody had to see that the work got done.

And there was always more work.

If—finally, slowly—LlewelCo was starting to take on the shape she envisioned for it, and not the shape that Perenor had given it, then that hardly meant her work was finished. Each problem solved only seemed to mean that two or three more sprang up. Dragon's teeth.

The Threshold disaster, for example. They were most of the way out from under the immediate consequences—though they'd still be battling cleanup on that one for years to come—but there was still the question of *who* all of Robert Lintel's clients had been. They had to be tracked down, each and every one of them, and nailed to the nearest barn door—if she had to build the barn herself.

And she couldn't think about Threshold without thinking about Aerune mac Audelaine. Aerune himself was dealt with, trapped in a magical labyrinth that Eric had gotten from a dragon named Chinthliss, so he was no longer a threat. But Aerune had been partners with a man named Parker Wheatley, who had ties to the government, and Wheatley remained a threat. Because Wheatley not only believed in elves, but thought (thanks to Aerune's manipulations) that they were out to destroy the human race. Wheatley had a little black budget operation called the Paranormal Defense Initiative that was out to get its hands on elves by any means possible, and—also thanks to Aerune—had its hands on a selection of techno toys that made that frighteningly possible.

They all—she, Eric, his Guardian friends—had been pretty sure that without Aerune's backing, Wheatley would just dry up and wither away, but that had been before the government had started making a major antiterrorism push. Now getting rid of Wheatley's *Elvenpadron* might not be enough to get rid of the PDI.

And getting rid of a Washington insider wasn't something Eric could do, nor his little friends with their swords and spells, as much fun as they might be to spend a weekend Underhill with. This was something only Ria could do, and it was something that required delicate manipulation, and more than a little string-pulling in the political arena.

But thinking about that "weekend Underhill"—though it hadn't exactly been a weekend—turned her thoughts, as they so often turned when she was tired, to the peculiar ordeal the seven of them had shared when they had entered Aerune's mind: of actually experiencing what it had been like to live in a world millennia dead, when Sidhe had lived openly among humans as their guardians and caretakers.

Ria frowned. Fascinating and uncomfortable as it had been, it had raised more questions than it had answered.

Just what exactly *was* the relationship between Sidhe and humanity? Where and when did it start, and what was it *for*? Was it a good thing, or a bad thing, and should it be allowed to continue?

The phone rang.

Ria glanced at her phone. Anita was gone for the evening, and the switchboard routed everything to voicemail after 5:00, but the light that was flashing was for her private line. Very few people had that number.

She picked up the phone.

"Llewellyn."

"It's Eric."

He didn't sound as if he'd had a good day at all, and Eric's bad days tended to be bad for more people than just Eric. "What's wrong?" she asked sharply.

"Can I come over?" he asked, and that wasn't like Eric either. He teased, he fenced, he played with words; she shouldn't have gotten off without at least *one* gibe about him finding her here so late.

"Yes. I'll be here. I'll call down and make sure Security is expecting you."

The phone went dead in her ear. He'd hung up.

This must be something *truly* bad. And she couldn't think of anything that he wouldn't at least *try* to prepare her for over the phone. *Not Hosea. I don't think I could stand it if anybody else died right now. Or Kayla—*

No. If something was wrong with Kayla, he'd have told her immediately. Or if Kayla was dead, and there was nothing to be done, he'd have come immediately and called her from downstairs.

But he'd sounded so rattled, so lost. . . .

At least she knew it wasn't family problems. Eric didn't *have* any family, if you didn't count the Misthold elves and Kentraine, and all of them were locked up safe Underhill. Baby Maeve even had her own personal bodyguard. If there was one set of people Eric didn't have to worry about, it was his family.

Ria stood it as long as she could, then gave up and began to pace. She had a fine large executive office—about the size of Eric's entire apartment—with plenty of room for pacing.

If she was worried about Eric, it was only because he was a friend.

She *was not* in love with Eric Banyon, she told herself firmly and not for the first time. Love was a very bad idea for their kind. It always ended badly. It made you want more than it was good for you to have. Loved him, *that* she'd admit to freely. Eric was a loveable man, and there'd been a bond between them from the first moment they'd met as adversaries, she as Perenor's pawn and he as the Sun-Descending Sidhe's last hope. That tie, strange and ill-starred as it was, had only strengthened through the years. She knew he felt it as much as she did.

Lovers, yes. Friends, always, or so she hoped.

But *in* love with him? No. Never. That would be madness.

Eric wouldn't know what to do with a real love affair—and, Ria suspected, neither would she.

*Eric, what's wrong? If the world's hurt you, I—I'll tear it down around us both, I swear!*

\* \* \*

About twenty minutes after the call, there was a knock on the door. Ria opened it. Eric was standing there, next to one of the LlewellynCo security guards.

"Thanks, George," he said, with the ghost of a grin. "I think I can find my way from here."

"You have a good evening, Mr. Banyon. Be sure to call when you're ready to come down."

"I'll remind him," Ria said. The guard touched his cap, and walked off.

Eric looked at her questioningly.

"New security measures," Ria said.

"You should just buy the building," Eric said. "Then you wouldn't be bothered."

"As a matter of fact, *Ido* own the building; real estate is always a good investment. These *are* my security measures," Ria said with a little smile. "If you don't work here—and can't show an ID even if you do work here—you don't get above the lobby without an escort, no matter what time of day it is."

"Welcome to New York," Eric said with a sigh. He looked around the office as if he'd forgotten why he'd come.

There were deep shadows under his eyes, and an unfamiliar set to his mouth. No, Ria decided with an odd pang of recognition. A familiar one, but one she hadn't seen in years: it was that look of sullen anger the *old* Eric had worn, that look of always being on the verge of lashing out at something.

Eric walked over to the window and stood looking out, staring down into the city streets below. Chains of head- and taillights moved through the streets below like rivers of sluggish jewels.

"Tea? Coffee? Well, actually, I can't offer you either one now that Anita's gone home, but I'm sure there's something around here. But you didn't come over for a drink," Ria said.

Eric leaned against the glass, his back to her. She watched him force himself to relax, saw the effort it took.

"You know I've been seeing Dr. Dunaway for almost a year now, getting some stuff straightened out. It's been pretty useful. You know, you might think about trying it," he said, as if the thought had just occurred to him.

Ria laughed. She couldn't help it. "Eric, my dear, any daughter of Perenor's got over the need to talk to strangers a long time ago. And I'm sure that inviting me to seek psychiatric help *is not* what this is about."

"No." She watched as he took a deep breath, forcing himself to come to the point. "I came because I need help . . . to keep from killing somebody."

His voice was as tight as Hosea's banjo strings, and the over- and under-tones so complicated that even she couldn't make head or tail of them, other than for the fury in it. Anger was too tame a word, and fury, too, wasn't the right word for what she heard in him tonight. Call it rage. Carefully controlled rage, that was on the edge of slipping that careful control.

"Well," Ria walked over to her desk and sat on the edge, watching his back intently, "most people would say the opposite sort of help was more in my line."

"I don't . . . I can't keep from hating them. I'm trying, but . . . I can't," Eric said raggedly.

Ria walked over to him and put an arm around him, feeling the tension of the muscles beneath the jacket, and led him firmly over to the couch, forcing him to sit down. His face looked white and strained. "Make sense," she commanded. "Now. Or I am going to phone your very competent headshrinker and sit on you myself until she gets here." She sat down beside him and took both his hands. They were colder than the November weather outside could account for.

"I've got a little brother." Eric's voice was forlorn.

She'd been prepared to hear horrors—tales of death, dismemberment, terminal illness, coming apocalypse. Eric's simple statement caught Ria completely off-balance. She whooped with startled laughter.

"It isn't funny!" Eric snarled, but then the sense of his own words seemed to penetrate, and his mouth quirked up in a rueful grin, setting Ria off again.

She did her best to stop laughing, but it was hard.

"Yes," she said, as gravely as she could manage, "I can certainly see that a baby brother is a *great* catastrophe." She took a deep breath, sobering further. "Are you sure? How do you know?"

"I'm sure. I went to see my parents today."

That drove the last of the laughter from Ria's emotions. Of all of Eric's close circle of friends, she was the one who knew the most about his childhood, and that only because she'd stolen the memories from his mind years before while she'd had him trapped and besotted in one of Perenor's pocket domains.

"Why?" she asked bluntly.

"I realized they still had too much power in my life. I'd never let go of the past, not really, just walled it up and pretended it wasn't there. I thought confronting them might help. It was probably a stupid idea."

"Reckless at least," Ria said calmly. "Did they recognize you?"

"They thought I was the private detective they'd hired to find their son. Their *other* son. Their seventeen-year-old piano prodigy son Magnus, who ran away from home last month."

Ria could do the math as well as Eric could. Her eyelids flickered. Aloud she said only, "They took their sweet time hiring a specialist. Who?"

"Someone named Dorland." Eric's voice was flat, colorless beneath his iron control.

"I'll get on it, find out what I can about him. And do they remember you were there?"

"No," Eric said, his voice even. "I took care of it."

"That's my Bard," Ria said, kissing him gently on the forehead. "Now, where's Magnus?"

"I looked in Boston," Eric answered. "He wasn't there. Ria, how could they—"

"Because they're morons," Ria said matter-of-factly, cutting through Eric's rekindling anger with simple pragmatism. "Blind, stupid, selfish, ignorant *morons*, who have never taken a moment in their entire lives to think about anything but themselves and what they want. They aren't worth another minute of your time, now or ever. Eric, my—" she stopped herself before she could say the forbidden word, "—my friend, if they considered you disposable, how much more right have you got to think the same of them? Dispose of them; wad them up and throw them away. They're trash; they aren't worth a moment of heartache. But Magnus *is*. A runaway teenager—especially one as stubborn as a brother of yours is likely to be—oh yes, and don't forget one who's also likely to have the Bardic Gift, or at least leanings in that direction, since it runs in bloodlines—could be getting into all kinds of trouble out there, wherever he is. We should find him. Now."

Eric took a deep breath, accepting the truth of her words. "Okay. We find him."

"What have you tried so far?" Ria asked.

"A Finding spell, up in Boston." Eric dug around in his pockets. "Here's a picture of him. And here's a lock of his hair. He wasn't there, either dead or alive. But I was only able to search the immediate area."

Ria took the small card Eric handed her and studied the picture, then examined the lock of hair. "Cute kid. Plenty to go on here. Let me get what I need, and we'll try another kind of spell."

Ria walked out of the office, leaving Eric sitting on the couch, and went looking for what she needed. She came back a few minutes later with a shallow metal dish full of water, which she placed carefully on the large round glass-topped table in front of the couch.

"I *am not* getting water spots all over my leather-topped desk," she said firmly, noting Eric's quizzical glance.

"What are you doing?" Eric asked curiously. Bardic magic was one thing, and Elven magic tended to be constructs of pure energy, but Ria, being half-human, tended to rely sometimes on things that owed nothing to the Elven magic that Eric was familiar with. In fact, Ria had told him once that she was a sorceress, not any kind of a Sidhe Magus at all. . . .



"Screaming. Your brother's image should appear in this bowl of water, no matter where on Earth he is—and if he's been taken Underhill, we should at least get a hint of that from whatever images appear. The hard part will be seeing enough of the background to be able to pinpoint his location, but once I've got him, I should be able to move the image and look around a little. . . ."

She selected a single strand of hair out of the coil and floated it on top of the water, then breathed across the surface.

The water in the bowl went milky, then faded until it was as if they were staring down into a pool of mercury, though, oddly, the silvery surface reflected neither of their faces.

"What's it doing?" Eric whispered, unconsciously keeping his voice low.

"It's working," Ria said shortly. "Quiet."

Shapes appeared in the mirrored surface, familiar yet distorted, breaking apart and reforming almost too fast to be recognized. Eric caught the Port Authority Bus Terminal, Grand Central Station, the New York Public Library, the lobby of the Empire State Building. . . .

"New York," he said.

"He's here—and alive," Ria said. "Where is he? Show me!" she demanded of the magic.

The mercury darkened now to true black, with moving flecks of light that Eric guessed must be the lights of passing cars, or maybe streetlights. But it still kept up its frantic dance of images, moving from scene to scene too fast for either of the watchers to quite identify any of them.

Finally Ria gave up, passing her hand across the surface of the bowl. The liquid within faded to water once more.

"He's in Manhattan," Ria said.

"He's alive," Eric said, with relief. This morning, he hadn't known he had a brother. Tonight, he was weak with thankfulness that his brother was still alive. And he hadn't even had a chance to meet the boy yet!

Ria frowned down at the screaming bowl as though it were a personal enemy. "It should have worked better than that," she said.

"Bardic blood?" Eric suggested. It was the only thing he could think of.

"Shall we test the theory?" Ria said. "Give me a strand of your hair."

Eric wore his hair short these days, but he managed to yank a few strands loose. Ria coiled up the strand of Magnus' hair and returned it to Eric, then floated the short strands of Eric's hair on the surface of the bowl and repeated the spell. The water quickly darkened to silver and showed them Ria's office, with Eric sitting on the couch beside Ria.

"Not that, then," Eric said, puzzled.

"But something's interfering with the magic," Ria said. "Now what?"

"I guess I go after him the good old-fashioned way," Eric said. "He's a runaway, and I know he's in Manhattan. There aren't *that* many places he can be."

Ria made a face eloquent in its disbelief. "Why don't you ask Hosea about that sometime?" was all she said. "Eric, do you want some help? There are people who specialize in this sort of thing, you know. I can hire the best. They'll have contacts, experience. . . ."

Eric hesitated. Was he being stupid, wanting to do this by himself? But all his instincts said no.

"Just give me a few days. I'm not going to turn this into any kind of crusade. If I do need help, I'll ask for it. I'm not going to play games, Ria. Not with my . . . brother's . . . life. But . . . I feel almost like I already know him. And *Ido* know his parents. He'll be expecting detectives. I did. And if he does have a trace of Bardic Gift—which might still be why your scrying spell didn't work—he'll recognize them through any disguise. If he gets frightened and runs again, to somewhere else, he could end up in even worse trouble than he's in now. I don't want to scare him, I just want to find him. But . . . what do I do then?" Eric smiled at her crookedly, and Ria reached out to ruffle his hair gently.

"Find him first. Keep him safe when you *do* find him. Sort out everything else after you've done those two things."

"I . . . thanks. You're a good friend."

"Well, don't let anyone hear you say that. You'll ruin my corporate shark image," Ria said lightly.

Eric got to his feet. "I guess I'd better be going. You're probably going to want to stay here and work all night."

"Somebody's got to," Ria said. She went over to the phone and punched a two-digit number. "George? Mr. Banyon's ready to come down now."

She set down the phone, and turned to give him a good once-over with her eyes. Maybe with more than her eyes. "Are you going to be all right tonight? Really all right?"

Eric smiled tiredly, not pretending to misunderstand what she meant. "Greystone's just waiting for me to get back. We're going to order in Thai and have a Bogart film festival. And I'll call Dr. Dunaway in the morning."

"That's my nice well-grounded Bard." She hesitated again. "Eric . . . just remember . . . if you *should* happen to see your parents again . . . or think about them . . . that you are what you are. So don't make any decisions that you'll regret, before you've made up your mind what you really want to do."

*Because the anger of a Bard can kill.* Eric heard the words that Ria left unsaid. "I'll be good, Ria," he promised, kissing her lightly on the cheek.

There was a quiet tap on the door, and Eric opened it.

\* \* \*

Walking out with George across the penthouse floor of the LlewellynCo building—only one bank of

elevators ran after five, and it was a long walk to get to them—Eric wondered whether all this could possibly be what Ria really wanted out of life.

And more to the point, could she afford to be such a public figure when she was going to live such an embarrassingly long time? True, she was only half-Elven, and would hardly have the millennium-and-more long lifespan of a full-blooded Sidhe, but even a couple of centuries would be awfully hard to explain. And as Chairman and CEO of LlewelCo, especially after the whole Threshold thing, she was incredibly well-known: on the cover of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *Fortune* in the last year and a half just for starters. It would be hard for someone like that to just disappear from the public eye, even if she were willing to give up LlewelCo.

Money that does nothing but make more money. Call me an old hippie, but it just all seems . . . pointless, somehow, Eric thought, riding down in the high-speed elevator. Nice, but pointless.

"Have a good evening, Mr. Banyon," George said, as they reached the front door. Eric stepped out onto the street.

"You do the same, George," he said. The night air was raw and cold—unseasonably so—and he turned up the collar of his jacket.

He wondered where Magnus was, and what he was doing.

## Chapter Five: Chase Around The Windmill

Hosea had stopped by Eric's apartment when he'd gotten home from work at five, but Eric still wasn't back from his trip to Boston—or if he was, he wasn't home. Hosea sighed. He hoped it had gone well—or at least not too badly. Being on the outs with your kinfolk was a sorrowful thing, no matter what sort of people they were.

Not finding Eric in, he went on down to his own place.

He'd taken over Jimmie Youngblood's apartment after her death, inheriting not only her position as Guardian and her apartment in Guardian House, but everything she owned, for Jimmie'd had no living relatives by the time she died to pass her possessions to. Over the next several months, he'd helped Toni with the painful task of going through Jimmie's things, destroying personal papers, giving mementos to those who would value them, donating her clothing to charity. When they were done, the apartment was considerably emptier, but it still didn't feel like *his*.

Repainting helped. Jimmie'd favored cool blues and greens, colors that weren't to Hosea's taste. He'd felt a little guilty, repainting the place in warm creams and yellows—it had been Eric, surprisingly, who'd told him it was for the best.

"It's not a shrine. She's gone. It's your apartment now."

With the apartment repainted in more congenial colors, it had been easier to see what else should go.

The large framed photos of wilderness scenes that Jimmie had decorated the living room with: beautiful, but not his style. He'd taken them along to one of the Basement Parties and given them away, along with a couple of the smaller pieces of furniture that just didn't seem to suit now.

And slowly, he'd begun to accumulate his own things to fill in the gaps. The long bookshelves that filled the front hall—emptied now of Jimmie's books on police procedure, forensic science, and criminal law—were beginning to fill with his own books, plus those of hers, mostly fiction and poetry, that he'd kept. The day after the Basement Party where he'd given away all the photographs, Tatiana had showed up at his door with a pair of Thomas Canty prints that she said needed a new home. He'd hung them over the couch, and they looked mighty fine there. Funny, that. When he'd come to New York, he hadn't known who Thomas Canty was, and though he'd admired the covers the man had done for science fiction and fantasy books, most of the books themselves hadn't been to his taste, so he'd never bothered with finding out who the artist was. Now, divorced from those books, he could admire the covers as artworks in their own right.

There had been other gifts along the way. Eric had given him a story-quilt—he used it to cover the couch, which had looked proper in a blue room but not in a yellow one—and Ria had presented him with a fine hard-rock maple rocking chair, just right for a man his size.

"It stands to reason that a man with a banjo needs a rocking chair," she'd said with a smile on the day she'd brought it. "Please accept it as a housewarming gift. In New York, everyone's your neighbor."

And he did have to admit that a rocking chair made any place seem a bit more like home.

\* \* \*

After he'd showered and changed, Hosea thought about calling Eric again, and decided against it. Eric would call if he needed him, and more than likely he'd just want to be left alone. And to be perfectly fair about things, Hosea had his own plans for the evening.

For the past several months, Hosea had been seeing Caity Tambling, a children's book illustrator who lived on the floor below. He'd met her at one of the informal Basement Parties the inhabitants of the House threw every few weeks, and they'd taken to one another pretty quickly. Caity was a shy, soft-spoken young woman from the mountains of West Virginia, born and raised not too far from where Hosea had grown up, in fact. She had a mop of white-blonde hair that was constantly falling in her eyes, and was plump in a way that Hosea liked to see in a lady, though Caity had been doubtful, at first, in accepting his compliments.

He checked his watch, frowning at the time. She'd said she'd meet him here, but it was already a quarter of six, and she'd been going to meet him at five-thirty. She'd probably sat down at her drawing board to do just one little thing and fallen in. Hosea grinned to himself. He'd better go down to her place and roust her out, or they'd never have time for dinner before the movie.

\* \* \*

"Hosea!" Caity said, opening the door. She looked wide-eyed and jittery, and for a moment Hosea was sure she'd forgotten all about their date.

Her hair was scraped severely back from her head and pulled into a tight ponytail—not a particularly flattering style, as it made her face look very round. She was dressed in clothes he'd never seen her wear before: a stark black velour tunic top and pants that looked oddly like a uniform.

"If something's come up . . ." he said gently.

"No, no, no . . . come in. I was just—with a client. Last-minute thing. It ran later than I expected. Come on in. I need to change, then we'll go. Is that okay?"

"Of course it's okay," Hosea said reassuringly. "Take your time."

Caity skittered off toward the bedroom, and Hosea followed her in, locking the front door behind him. In a moment he heard the sound of running water.

Caity's apartment was a mirror image of his, but the living room had been set up entirely as a studio and workroom. The walls were covered with art in all stages of execution from concept sketches to proof pages and a few finished book covers. Most artists these days worked on computer, but Caity still worked on paper and canvas, converting her work to IRIS files only at the last step before she turned them in. She said the paper and pigments talked to her, and the computer didn't.

Her work was lovely—if her drawings were anything like what Underhill looked like, Hosea was surprised that Eric had ever wanted to leave. Plump graceful unicorns with iridescent coats; small winged fairies that still managed to be cheerful and dignified, not sappy; forest brownies with all the happy innocence of puppies . . . this was the Enchanted Forest without its darkness, as was suitable for the young readers who would see her works. She was known for her whimsical animals as well. He looked at the titles of some of the finished books on the shelf: *Strawberry Tea*, *Earl Ferret Goes To Town*, *The Cat Who Sang Opera*, *Tea With Mice*. . . .

Caity was a special lady, which was hardly surprising. Guardian House chose all its tenants. Not all of them were magicians like Eric and the Guardians, but all of them were special in some way. All of them had what Hosea's grandmother would have called "a touch of the 'shine.'" Most of them were artists in one way or another—either actual artists, like Caity, or writers, dancers, musicians, poets and the like, even if they had to work other jobs to support their art. He wandered around the room for a few minutes, revisiting favorite pieces. Most of Caity's professional work was in colored inks and ink wash, with a lot of fine linework, but occasionally she would do a piece "just for me" and then she would paint with brush and pigments. Some of these were wildly abstract—Caity sometimes claimed that nobody who couldn't draw a cow that looked like a cow had any business doing nonrepresentational work, but that sometimes it was fun to let go of pure shape—some were representational, but almost Expressionistic. None were framed.

The lights were on over her drawing table. He wondered what she was working on now. He went over and looked down. Pen and ink, a blur of colored lines, but so many lines, so much dense cross-hatching, that it almost looked like an engraving. He took a closer look, and frowned. If this was for a children's book, he'd hate to meet the children it was for.

At first he'd thought it was an abstract piece, a "just for me" piece, despite the medium. But her other abstracts were light and playful, in love with color and light, not this dark muddy thing. And the longer he stared at it, the more he seemed to see figures appearing out of the squalid blur of cross-hatching. Red-eyed, angry figures, with long wicked claws . . .

He looked away with a faint shudder of distaste. There was a sketchbook laying on top of the taboret beside the drawing table. With a faint sense of guilt—this was snooping, and he knew it—he picked it up and paged through it quickly.

More sketches, some obviously studies for the work on the table, others different, but with the same feel to them.

If this was a new direction for her art, he really didn't care for it.

And he wondered why she'd fibbed to him about where she'd been this afternoon, because unless she'd been meeting her client down at the local Catholic church—or some other place where they burned a lot of frankincense—she hadn't just come in from any business meeting. Her clothes and hair had reeked of the stuff. He knew the smell perfectly well from Toni's apartment. And he also knew that Caity wasn't herself any kind of a Catholic—most folk from her neck of the woods were some flavor of Baptist or Pentecostal, and he knew Caity well enough by now to know that she wasn't especially churchly.

*Not my business*, Hosea told himself firmly. *Less'n she makes it my business*. Guardians didn't interfere in the affairs of ordinary folk unless asked for help. Paul and Toni had dinned that into his head thoroughly. Guardians didn't meddle unasked, hard as it might be to stand back and watch somebody head down the greased road to Perdition while you did nothing. The most a Guardian might do was offer help—but if that help was rejected, there was an end to it.

*"Always remember this, Hosea," Toni had told him. "You can't save the whole world. You'll find you have enough to do just trying to save the people who ask you for help. And you won't always be able to save even them."*

"All ready?" Caity asked brightly, coming out of the back. She'd taken the time for a quick shower, and to put on the blue dress he'd told her he especially liked.

She saw him looking at the picture on the drawing table, and the bright smile dimmed, just a little. "Oh, that," she said, switching off the Tensor lamps over the table. "I should have put that away. It's nothing, really. Come on, we'll be late."

But Hosea, holding her coat for her as they prepared to leave, could not rid himself of the notion that the painting on the table was just a little bit more than "nothing."

\* \* \*

The apartment was not what he intended to become used to, the man known to his followers as Fafnir, Master of Treasure, told himself. It was certainly not as much as he deserved. But at least it was free, courtesy of one of his so-called Inner Circle. They fell all over themselves to give him things—money, electronics, living space. It was funny; the more things people handed over to you unasked, the smarter they thought they were. And if they weren't yet . . . sufficiently appreciative . . . well, he had plans to take care of that.

It wasn't much of an apartment—a small one-bedroom in an area that had been known in less-gentrified days as Hell's Kitchen—but at least he hadn't had to ask for it. To ask was an admission of weakness, and Fafnir had no intention of ever appearing weak. He'd dropped a few well-placed and properly subtle hints around the time that Andrew had gotten so pissy about him being behind on the rent, and Juliana had just offered it to him. That was the beauty of this whole deal. He never had to demean himself by asking for anything. That would ruin the whole aura of mastery.

The room was lit solely by dozens of white candles in glass jars that stood clustered on tables and along the walls, and the air was heavy with incense smoke from the three tall antique censers that burned in three corners of the room, constantly replenished by one of the Faithful. In fact, one of his minions was

going around tending to the censers and candles at the moment. By now the ceiling had been tinted a shiny dark umber by the pounds of frankincense that they'd burned since they'd begun meeting here. The scent permeated the rugs, the drapes, the walls, everything in the room. His supervisor at work had complained about it once or twice, until he'd started keeping his work clothes in double layers of plastic bags in the back of the closet, and showering just before he left for work. That cut the smell, and he'd gotten no more complaints.

It was nice to be able to bank most of his salary. Nice to be able to afford to buy anything he wanted, and to make an occasional show of wealth to impress the sheep (of course they had no idea about the job. That wouldn't go at all well with his aura of mystery). Nicer still to be able to get his Faithful to buy everything he needed or wanted, and have them urge him to accept these gifts to aid him in his Work.

The best sort of cons were the ones in which the mark fleeced himself.

It was Andrew who'd given him the first hint, back when they'd still been friends, back when he'd still just been plain Freddie Warwick. One night a few years ago Andrew had gotten spectacularly drunk on a bottle of Scotch a grateful client had given him for getting him out of a tax mess—Andrew wasn't much of a drinker—and had told Freddie about something that had happened to him when he'd first come to New York, when he'd sublet an apartment for a rent that had seemed too good to be true.

It turned out—so Andrew had said—that it was. The apartment was haunted by a succubus—a spirit that drained the life-force of whoever slept there. Andrew couldn't figure out what was wrong. Neither could his doctors.

Fortunately, the computer consultant at Andrew's office could. Paul Kern, Andrew had said his name was. He'd figured out Andrew's problem, and gotten rid of the succubus. Andrew had gone on to enjoy one of the cheapest apartments in New York for years, until the leaseholder finally figured out that if he wasn't dead, it must be safe to evict him.

And while solving Andrew's problem, Paul had told him a little about himself. Paul was a Guardian, someone who protected people like Andrew from things like that succubus. While he hadn't said much, Andrew had been pretty impressed. Apparently this Paul Kern could do some pretty amazing things, things just like Dr. Strange in the comic books Andrew had read as a kid.

Andrew wasn't really forthcoming the next day once he sobered up. He tried to pretend he'd just been goofing, pulling his roommate's leg, and refused to talk about it any more. But Freddie had known better than to believe that. Andrew had about as much imagination as the average accountant. So Freddie had gone to a comic book store and bought a bunch of old Dr. Strange comic books.

If Paul Kern could do even half of what Dr. Stephen Strange, Master of the Mystic Arts, could do . . .

At first, it had all seemed completely unbelievable, but he applied Occam's Razor to the situation and finally decided to suspend his disbelief and assume that all of this psychic magic crap was real and investigate it as such.

He'd cruised the 'net, now that he knew there was something to look for, and found a few more references to Guardians. From that he picked up a few facts that Andrew had missed, or maybe hadn't known.

There was more than one, for example.

And when one died, another was created.

But most important, the more he found, the more certain he became that all this *was* real. There *were* Guardians, they had amazing abilities, and for that reason, they were working very hard to keep their existence a secret.

Now he had a new ambition. He wanted to become a Guardian. But he wouldn't waste his Guardian power going around saving losers like Andrew from demons. No. He'd do really cool things with it. And he would certainly not squander his time and effort on anyone but himself.

And he bet there were a lot of other people who felt the same way he did.

That was how he got his second idea.

His very own cult. But not a bunch of bottom-feeder losers, whose day jobs consisted of asking "Would you like fries with that?" No, *his* cult would be for the elite, or at least those with ambition and aspirations in that direction.

His Faithful gathered at his feet now, looking up at him expectantly: Juliana, and Neil, and Gregory; Luke, Vanessa, Quinn and Faith and Sarah. The flower of his searching, the cream of the crop. Well-to-do, well-educated, well-bred. Young, competitive, fast-tracked New Yorkers, looking for a little something more in their lives to help them make sense of it all, and just maybe, help them along to the fast track. And, down where it really mattered, not smart enough, not educated enough, and just a little too trusting to save themselves from people like him.

"Now, my Inner Circle, we have dismissed the Outer Circle to the mundane world. It is time to unveil the Eye of the Inner Planes," Fafnir said.

A sigh of expectation traveled around the circle of eight men and women who sat at his feet.

"Neil, it is your turn to fetch the Eye," he said.

Neil got to his feet and crossed the room, coming back with a large wooden box. He set it at Fafnir's feet. Fafnir opened it reverently.

Inside, on a bed of black velvet, lay a perfectly clear sphere of quartz crystal the size of a softball. It had cost over \$7,000. Fafnir hadn't paid for it, of course. He had merely remarked idly that such an object would be the perfect vehicle to focus Inner Plane Energies for the Work of the group. And it had appeared, presented to him as a gift.

He lifted both the sphere and the tray out and set them on the floor. "See how it glows?" he said, knowing that everyone in the room would be willing to believe that they saw it glowing, though it was nothing more than the natural property of crystal and reflected candlelight, plus a little hypnotic suggestion.

"It feeds on your energy, storing it for its work. In the presence of the False Guardians it would turn black and shatter. Once they are destroyed, you will see it glow so brightly you will be able to read print by it." The power of suggestion was a wonderful thing.

"And your powers will be restored to you," Gregory said, in a combination of reverence and awe, with just a hint, just a touch, of resentment—but not resentment aimed at Fafnir.



Fafnir smiled faintly and said nothing. He never claimed powers for himself, not explicitly. He let others do that for him. It was much more effective that way, he'd found.

"The False Guardians are very powerful," he said in warning tones. His voice became deeper, his words slower, as he retold the old story—the central myth of the Inner Circle—once again. "Their first act, upon seizing power, was to shackle the True Guardian, and render him powerless on this plane. They felt that humanity, deprived of its only remaining defender, would be easy prey."

At the familiar words, the eight sighed deeply, gazing raptly at Fafnir's face. Though he told this story openly and completely now, it had been months before he'd allowed them to know it, forcing them to piece it together out of hints and unfinished sentences, and even now he told it only in the third person. It made him sound so much more humble and self-effacing that way, so much more the innocent and noble victim.

"It did not occur to them that the True Guardian, even though mortally wounded, would seek out others with a spark of the latent Guardian power, would gather those potential defenders about him, would painstakingly impart what knowledge he still could to them, so that—when the time was right—he and his Inner Circle could rise up—together—and overthrow, not only the False Guardians, but the shackles that bound him. When the False Guardians are destroyed, and their power restored to its rightful possessor, the True Guardian shall be the founder of a new order of Guardians, imparting his power to all his loyal followers, so that all of them can take up the task of protecting humanity from supernatural evil. . . ."

The storytelling ritual came to a close, and the sheep sighed contentedly, not one of them seeing that there were holes in his story that you could drive a truck through. If the False Guardians were as evil as all that, why wouldn't they simply *kill* the True Guardian? Wouldn't that make a lot more sense than leaving him around to cause the same kind of trouble that Fafnir was causing now?

But they *wanted* to believe in his fairy tale, and they weren't going to ask any questions that might make it go away.

And when the False Guardians—oh, well, why not be honest, if only in his own mind—when the *Guardians*, or at least one of them, was destroyed, wouldn't the closest suitable person become the next Guardian? That was the way it went, according to the Internet. The power passed from one Guardian to the next. And he'd be the closest suitable person, right? Because he'd be right there. And then *he'd* have the Guardian power. And the rest of the Guardians just better watch out then.

Along with the rest of New York.

"Now, friends, it is time to work. Let us gaze into the Eye of the Inner Planes, and see what it tells us about what we must do next. Breathe with me. . . ."

After a few moments of deep breathing and staring into the stone, they were in a light trance, ready for his suggestions of what *he* saw in the crystal. Not that he ever actually saw anything, of course. Fafnir was interested in molding his followers into a weapon for his wielding, not having actual visions.

He'd told them the truth, too, more or less. He had every intention of overthrowing the Guardians, and taking their power for his own. With the backing of both his Inner and Outer Circles—and what he was planning should be enough to arrange the wholehearted cooperation of both—he should be strong enough for that. He wasn't entirely a charlatan. He had some power of his own—as much as anybody could gain through rudimentary hypnosis. It wasn't much, but it gave him enough for him to know that he

wanted more.

But as for the rest of it . . . there'd be no sharing, no founding a new order of Guardians. He called these witless dupes gathered at his feet his Inner Circle, and they certainly thought they were, but there was room for only one person in *his* Inner Circle, and that was Fafnir, Master of Treasure.

"Here, my faithful, do you see what I see? The image is becoming clear now. . . ."

\* \* \*

Eric and Greystone had stayed up late, watching all the old Bogart movies in Eric's library, while Eric planned what to do next. He felt a great deal better about things after his visit to Ria, knowing that Magnus was not only alive, but on Eric's home turf. New York was a rough town to survive, but all of Eric's resources, both magical and mundane, were right here. If Magnus was in trouble, this was the best place on Earth for him to be in trouble in. And the Everforest Gate and Node was less than an hour away by elvensteed—much less, in fact—if they had to get him Underhill in a hurry.

And Ria had been right about the other thing as well. He supposed it was what Oriana would call a "breakthrough." His parents were jerks. They'd always been jerks. They'd proved themselves jerks—twice over. He supposed he should be just as glad they couldn't have *a third* child. . . .

In the morning he'd hit the street and start looking—but *not*, he thought, as Eric Banyon, suave young Bard-about-Town. *That* would be a good way to get himself mugged, and scare off the very people he needed to get close to as well. No, he needed to fit in, and that meant looking homeless and down-at-heel himself.

\* \* \*

In the morning he was up early, too keyed up to sleep. A quick cup of tea—skip the shave; he needed the unshaven look for his plans—and he was on his way.

His first stop was a secondhand clothing store down on Canal Street. Not one of the trendy "vintage" places, but an actual secondhand store. There he picked up a pair of frayed khakis, an old Air Force sweater, a trench coat, and a watch cap, all items absent from the current fashionable Eric Banyon wardrobe. Paying for his purchases, he wandered about looking for the other item on his shopping list. There ought to be one in this area. . . .

Aha. There it was.

He walked in through the door of the pawnshop, blinking at the sudden transition from light to darkness.

All around him were the leftovers of other people's lives: everything that somebody might be induced to loan money on, or buy outright. Some of them were pretty strange—cuckoo clocks and mangy animal heads, for example. Others were the usual stock-in-trade of places like this: rings, watches, jewelry. Musical instruments.

"Can I help you?" the proprietor asked.

"I'm looking for a flute," Eric said.

He'd been a homeless street musician before. He figured it made pretty good sense to go back to being

one now. But he'd need a flute for that, and it would be way out of character to go around with the \$8,000 Miyazawa Boston Classic that he'd bought to replace the flute that Aerune had melted. It didn't raise an eyebrow at Juilliard, where parents routinely took out a second mortgage to give their kids the most expensive instruments money could buy—not that money was a problem for Eric, with Underhill bankrolling him—but out on the street his regular flute would look far too new and expensive to go with his cover story.

"We have several to choose from. Over there." The proprietor pointed casually and returned to his reading.

Eric walked over and regarded the selection. There were six of them, all displayed in open cases, all looking rather battered and certainly well-used. All of about the caliber you'd expect to find being used by a high-school marching band, really. Any of them would be suitable. It hardly mattered which he chose, but Eric still hesitated, gazing at the array of tarnished silver as though sight alone could tell him something of their history and quality.

Was it his imagination, or did one of them look just a little more wistful than the others, just a little more ashamed to be here . . . ? Like the dog in the back of the cage at the pound, knowing that no one would ever take him home, but longing just as fervently for a home as the pup that was performing a complete gymnastic routine at the front of the cage.

"That one," he said, pointing at the flute nestled against the rusty-brown velvet. "I'll take that one."

\* \* \*

Returning home with his bundles, he dutifully left a message on Oriana's answering machine, letting her know that he needed to talk to her, and went to inspect his new purchase. He'd probably been a fool to buy a pawnshop flute at random, but after all, it was really little more than a prop, and he had a kit here to make minor repairs. Only minor repairs; anything else would need an expert—but he could change broken springs and replace worn-out pads.

Though he was anxious to start looking for his brother, common sense told him it was still too early to begin. Though he and Ria hadn't been able to find Magnus last night by scrying, Eric still thought he stood a good chance of locating his brother—his*brother!*—by magic, if he could only get close enough. The question was, *wherewas* he? Manhattan was a big place. He'd been shielded last night. Those shields were probably around wherever he slept, and Eric knew from Hosea that street children were mostly creatures of the night. Wherever Magnus was, he was probably still asleep. Eric would have the best chance of finding him once he was up and on the move, and that wouldn't be for a couple of hours yet at the earliest.

That left Eric plenty of time to get ready for his masquerade. He turned his attention to the flute, not expecting very much.

But when he assembled it and blew into it experimentally, the tone was surprisingly good. The silver warmed beneath his hands, as if grateful for the attention, and Eric tried a practice run. That showed him a few stuck keys, and he got out his tool kit.

He'd just gotten everything working properly when the phone rang.

"Eric?"

"Dr. Dunaway." He hadn't expected a call-back this quickly.

"So formal," she said chidingly. "Now." Giving him no more leeway.

"Oriana, I did something really stupid," Eric said, and launched into an explanation of Tuesday. By now, after having explained it already to both Greystone and Ria, he was able to get through it fairly quickly and lucidly.

"I see," she said when he'd finished. "I think you already know that we should talk about this. Unfortunately, my schedule is very full today. Can you possibly come in tomorrow morning, before my regular hours? Or would you rather wait for our regular session?"

Eric sighed. Before regular hours meant eight a.m., and he'd never been a morning person at the best of times. On the other hand, he really thought he needed to talk this out with somebody who knew the whole story. "I'll be there," he said, with resignation.

"Good," Oriana said warmly. "I'll see you then."

Eric hung up the phone, feeling as if he'd attached another lifeline, somehow. He looked down at the flute, and then at the bundle of shabby clothes—his new uniform.

He carefully disassembled the flute again, and took the coil of Magnus' hair out of his wallet. Pulling a single strand free, he coiled it carefully around the mouthpiece of the flute where the join to the body was and fitted the pieces back together. Now the flute was bound to Magnus. As he played, it would search for him, and find him.

And then. . . .

What then?

*Worry about that when you get there,* he told himself, pulling off his shirt.

\* \* \*

With his new flute, his busker's license (no sense being a damned fool about things), and a few dollars in his pocket, unshaven, disheveled, and dressed in somebody else's discards, Eric Banyon reentered the world he'd left (though he hadn't quite realized it at the time) the moment he'd met an elf named Korendil at a RenFaire a few years before.

It was a place where you begged for money while trying not to attract attention. A place where you weren't sure where your next meal was coming from. A place where you weren't sure where you were going to sleep that night—or any night. All right; granted that he had been good enough and personable enough even when he'd been a lush, that he'd usually had an apartment of his own and was able to keep the lights on and food in the fridge—but he acknowledged now what he had resolutely ignored then, that he had been hovering on the edge of that other world, and it would have taken just a little more booze and grass to push him into it. He wandered slowly downtown and eastward, knowing, both from personal experience and from hearing Hosea's tales of his work in the shelters, that he was heading for the part of town where runaways often gathered.

He did not move purposefully, but drifted, stopping every once in a while to play, leaving the flute case open at his feet. The day was bright and cold, and he realized that he'd forgotten gloves—well, he

wouldn't tomorrow. And a little warmth was easy enough to summon, even if he did feel a pang of guilt while doing it.

No one stopped to reward his playing with money, but that was hardly the point. He was hunting, not busking.

He found a few hints of his brother's presence, but the magic told him they were old, many days old. And the harder he tried to trace them, to get a sense of Magnus' movements, the fainter they became, though Eric tried every hunter's trick he knew. It was as if there was a veil over his magic, and the harder he pushed, the thicker the veil got.

And slowly, a new fear was added to all the others.

If he's got this much grasp of magic . . . to be able to cover his trail this well . . . toknow to cover his trail this well . . . who taught him?

If Magnus had allies, who were they? And more to the point, what did they want with him?

\* \* \*

In a small office in a nondescript building in Washington, a man regarded a desk full of reports. They were unsatisfying.

Parker Wheatley was not a happy man.

Everything should have been going his way—this was the perfect time to alert those in power to the existence of a heretofore-unsuspected menace right within their own borders. But at the time he most needed his Otherworld ally, Aerune mac Audelaine wasn't returning his calls.

Served him right for trusting an elf in the first place.

Fortunately Wheatley'd had the great good sense to stockpile a number of Aerune's little toys when Aerune had still been willing to dispense them—the green fabric that rendered humans invisible to Spookies and impervious to their powers; the parasympathetic energy detectors that looked like wristwatches and could detect "magical" energy at a distance; the sheets of transparent material that screened out Spookie illusions. Other items, like the zip guns that threw the slugs of Cold Iron so distasteful to elves, were easy enough to build here.

But he did mourn the loss of the larger items, like the flying car. That had disappeared in Las Vegas, along with a number of fine field operatives, just after they'd lost contact with Aerune. They'd never been able to duplicate it. It was irreplaceable. As were the agents, of course, but the agents hadn't cost several million black-project dollars squirreled away from the Department of Defense to create.

Well, there was no use crying over spilled Spookies, Wheatley told himself with a flash of cynical humor. They could make do with what they had for quite some time, even without Aerune's help. And if they could actually manage the Holy Grail of the Paranormal Defense Initiative, a live capture . . .

Then they could either parlay that into a truly satisfactory budget—for a change—

Or perhaps their new elf would be more cooperative and forthcoming than Aerune had been. He wasn't averse to another interspecies partnership, Parker Wheatley told himself. Only this time he'd be sure to

make sure that everyone involved was straight on where *thereal* power in the arrangement lay.

He was actually more inclined toward seeking out a new Elven partner at the moment than toward pinning his hopes on displaying a live capture. Despite the early reports last year from Vegas that there seemed to be a whole nest of Spookies running around loose out there, subsequent searches had uncovered nothing, Vegas elves had proved as elusive as Vegas Mafia, and time was running out. The climate on the Hill these days was conservative. Everybody was pulling in his horns, pushing for interagency cooperation and the elimination of deadwood and redundancy . . . and without results, the PDI was headed for the chopping block.

Wheatley was an experienced game player. He could read the writing on the wall as well as anyone. And he knew that Aerune had seduced him into overcommitting himself to the PDI over the last several years. It would be very hard to back out now, to distance himself from the program and try to blend in elsewhere.

No. He needed *results*. And if Aerune wasn't going to answer whatever Spookies used for phones, that meant Parker Wheatley had to find someone who would.

His intercom buzzed.

"Yes, Gail?"

"Mr. Nichol just called. Your appointment is here."

"Good. Let him know I'll be down in just a minute."

"Very good, sir."

Wheatley smiled. Gail was a good girl. A fast hand with a burn bag, and absolutely loyal. He got to his feet, reaching for his suit jacket.

\* \* \*

Marley Bell was scared. Not just getting-your-tax-return-audited scared. Nobody who ran a small business was a stranger to audits. But might-be-going-to-die scared.

Everything had been fine this morning. He'd gone down to Bell Books to open up, thinking this was just another ordinary day in his life. Bell Books was an occult book store—not a fluffy New Age shop selling candles, glitter, and unicorns, but a real bookstore, selling new and used occult books, some of them extremely rare. Most of his business was mail order, and many years he was lucky to break even; without the trust fund, he'd have had to pack it in years ago. But he was a member of a fine old Baltimore family, with fine old Baltimore money to match. The bookstore had been in the family for three generations, though it had been Marley who had changed the focus to match his own interests and studies. Scholars flew in from Europe just to *consult* the books on his shelves!

He wondered if he'd ever see any of his beloved books again.

He'd just gotten the shutters up and the front door open—thinking about a nice mug of coffee from the French press he kept in the back of the store—when this big government car had pulled up in front of the shop. The store wouldn't be open till ten, and it was only a little after eight, but he always came in early to check his e-mail and fill orders.

There'd been three of them, all dressed alike. One stayed behind the wheel, while the other two got out of the car: one out of the front seat, one out of the back. They'd been wearing green trench coats, the color so offbeat, bordering on bizarre, that he hadn't taken them seriously for a moment.

That had quickly changed.

"I'm sorry, we're still closed," he'd said, turning in the doorway to face them.

"Yes, you are," one of them said.

They'd walked right up to him, crowding him. One of them had taken the key ring right out of his hand, while the other one had taken his arm and started pulling him toward the car. He'd been too shocked to protest for a moment, until he'd heard the sound of the first one behind him, relocking the door of his shop.

He'd tried to struggle then, but it was too late. He wasn't quite sure what the two of them did—everything got a little hazy—but when he could think clearly again, he had a ferocious headache, and he was sitting in the back seat of the car between the two men in the green coats, and the car was heading in the direction of D.C. Neither of them had spoken to him again.

And now he was alone in here.

"Here" was a small room with a table—bolted to the floor—one chair, and no windows. It looked like the holding cells you saw on television in police shows. He'd been brought in through an underground garage, up an elevator, along a deserted corridor. He'd seen no one.

*Why?* He'd done nothing wrong, broken no laws. He didn't use drugs, didn't cheat on his taxes . . . he didn't even jaywalk, in the name of all that was holy. He was an only child, never married, his parents were dead, he had no close relatives, he didn't date anyone of any sex. All of his close personal relationships—such as they were—were conducted by mail and over the Internet, and all of them referred exclusively to either the Art or rare books.

Why was he here?

After a while, nervous tension gave way to a kind of numb despair, a growing horrified realization that, no matter how innocent he was, no matter that the men who had kidnapped him seemed to belong to his own government, anything at all might happen to him. And no one would know.

Finally there were sounds of a key in the lock, and the door swung inward. Marley sprang to his feet with a cry, knocking the chair in which he'd been sitting over backward with a crash.

Two men entered.

One was one of the men who'd kidnapped him, wearing a business suit the exact same color of lurid green as his trench coat. The other, Marley was relieved to see, looked normal. He was wearing a plain, charcoal-grey three-piece suit with a burgundy tie, and his thick silver hair was swept straight back from a widow's peak. He looked like an expensively groomed Washington insider and, paradoxically, that reassured Marley. Career politicians had plenty to lose. They would not throw it away on foolish mistakes.

*Mistakes. That's what this is, a mistake. They'll tell me this is a mistake, and I can go home . . . .*

"Good afternoon. My name is Wheatley. Mr. Nichol you already know. And you are Marley Tucker Bell. Bell . . . Bell . . . you wouldn't happen to be a relation to Miller Stevenson Bell, by any chance?"

Marley felt a disappointment too deep for words as his last hope of this being a mistake was crushed. They—whoever they were—had picked him, chosen him by name. But the dictates of good manners were strong. "He was my great-uncle, sir."

"Ah." Wheatley smiled. "I thought you had the look of the family. He was a fine politician, still fondly remembered, and by all accounts, an excellent preacher. How sad he'd be to discover that his great-nephew had grown up to be a black magician."

*Shockdoesmake you light-headed*, Marley decided with a faint sense of discovery. He reached down, picked up the chair, righted it, and sat down on it. His hands trembled, and he knew he looked as frightened as he felt.

"Perhaps you would be so good as to allow me to call my lawyer," he said, summoning up the last of his defiance.

*And a psychiatrist for yourself*, he thought, but did not say. He'd long since grown beyond responding to such petty schoolyard taunts. So Wheatley knew he was a student of the Art Magical. That was disturbing—hell, it was terrifying. But studying magic wasn't illegal. And he was no Black Magician. He harmed no one and nothing in his practice of the Art.

"Oh, come now, Mr. Bell," Wheatley said. "You've done nothing wrong. Why would you need a lawyer? We simply require your help. And you're going to provide it."

Marley stared at him in baffled horror, unable for a moment to think coherently. This was the stuff of nightmares, of bad movies. All it lacked was the Nazi uniforms to make it complete.

"What do you want?" he said at last.

He drew the tiniest of comforts from knowing that his paper files were sanitized, his computer was secure . . . they'd get his mailing list, but very little more than that; and if he didn't log in to his system within 72 hours, it would format itself and that would be lost as well. And his important files and correspondence were triply password-protected *and* encrypted, on a system designed by a Brother of the Art. Bless Ray for that; there was no one better, and even Ray didn't know the passwords and encryption he'd chosen.

The only weak link in the system was him. He had no illusions about his ability to stand up under duress.

Wheatley smiled benignly down at him.

"You're a magician. I don't really care if you're black, white, or purple. You're a good one. The best. I checked. You can conjure up all sorts of things, I'm sure. So conjure me up an elf."

Marley blinked; at first he was certain he must have misheard, then he wondered just what sort of insane thoughts were going on in this man's head. *You've got to be kidding!*

But the man was deadly serious, Marley knew. To laugh would be fatal, though the tension in his soul screamed for release. Irrationally, he felt relief—he had not been brought here to inform on his



colleagues. Fleetingly, he wondered who had given Wheatley his name, and dismissed the speculation. It wasn't important now.

He took a deep breath, thinking hard. What the hell was it that this mundane actually wanted? And what were the penalties for guessing wrong?

"Many grimoires concern themselves with the formulae for conjuration and evocation," he began, speaking slowly and watching the madman's face for any clue. "The entities which can be summoned are various, from the embodiments of the Elemental Powers of Earth, Air, Fire and Water, to lesser Elemental Beings—woodland spirits, *genus locii*, aspects of the *anima mundi*, to Greater Powers such as demonic or angelic forces—"

"I'm not interested in any of that," Wheatley snapped, glowering. "You heard me, Bell: I want an elf."

*Helpful. But he's not going to like what he hears next.*

"—but if what you wish to summon is one of the Princes of Faerie, the Lords of the Hollow Hills, then the matter becomes more difficult." Talking actually made him feel better. This was what he knew best; his life's work. But if they'd just wanted information, why hadn't they come and *asked*? "There's only one book that deals with that sort of conjuration in any detail at all: *De Rebus Nefandis*—'Concerning Forbidden Things.' It was set down around the year 900 by an Icelandic monk who was deploring certain shamanistic practices among his new converts, who had apparently used to have a rather extensive magical system related to the conjuration of *svartálfar* and *ljósálfar*, or what we'd call Dark and Bright elves."

"Well get it, and get to work," Wheatley said irritably.

Marley allowed himself a small smile of triumph. "Unfortunately, there's only one copy, and the Vatican has it. I don't think they'll sell."

Wheatley leaned over the table, bringing his face very close to Marley's. "I don't think you understand your situation here, Mr. Bell. I want results. I want them *fast*. You can bring one of your fairy princes here, or you can send him a message that I want to see him. I do not care which. But I do know that nobody is going to miss you. And I know that pain makes a man very eager to please."

Marley tried to push his chair back, to get away from Wheatley, but the other man had moved around behind him while Wheatley had been speaking, and was pushing the chair forward, until the edge of the table pressed painfully against Marley's stomach.

And that was the least of what they were going to do to him. He was, alas, entirely familiar with the psyches of the ruthless, ambitious, and mad. There were certain Nazi occultists who had fit that profile—and he had read their diaries. The look he saw in Wheatley's eyes matched the picture he had built up in his mind.

"Please—don't—oh, God—please—"

He couldn't do it. No one could. But he knew he'd try, because if he didn't, they were going to kill him slowly and horribly.

"That's what I like to see," Wheatley said, patting him stingingly on the cheek. "Now, you just let Mr. Nichol here know everything you need. I'll be along to check on you in a day or so."

Wheatley straightened up and left.

"Well, now, Marley, what shall we do first?" Nichol said brightly from behind him. "How about some lunch?"

\* \* \*

By the time it was dark—and much colder—Eric was frustrated and fed up. The trail was worse than cold; it was as if every time he got the ghost of a lead, there was a sudden psychic brick wall in his way.

Could Magnus really be doing that all by himself? Or could he have found help already? If he had, Eric hoped it was the right kind of help, and not some modern-day Fagin, protecting kids only in order to exploit them himself. . . .

Not that *that* would be anything new.

But right now he was tired, and hungry, and cold. He'd covered a lot of miles today, and all on foot, and he had to get up early tomorrow to keep his appointment with Oriana. But after that, he'd have the whole day free to search. Reluctantly, he had to admit there was nothing more he could do right now.

He needed to check in with Hosea, tell him about yesterday, and get some ideas about how—and where—to look for Magnus. From his work in the shelters, Hosea was a lot more plugged in to the city's runaway population than Eric was these days. He'd have a better idea of where the kids hung out. Maybe Eric would be able to strike a fresh trail that way. And most of all, if he happened to run into Hosea while he was out wandering around, he didn't want Hosea recognizing him and blowing his "cover."

Besides, he knew that he couldn't spend more than another day, two at most, playing the Lone Ranger. After that, he'd have to call Ria and let her put her specialists on the case, much as his instincts cried out against it. At the very least, he should give her a call later and find out what she'd learned about that Dorland his parents had hired.

As if to underscore the rightness of his decision to go home, when he got out of the subway at his stop, he saw it had started to rain. Only a little rain—more a heavy mist than a real rain, but it made the street slippery and the air even colder. Another few weeks, and this would be snow that stuck; even now, there were a few white flakes mixed with the silvery drizzle, though they melted before they reached the street. Last winter had been unseasonably mild; this one obviously planned to make up for it.

By the time he'd walked the three long blocks to the apartment, Eric was thoroughly damp; whatever waterproofing his trench coat might once have possessed had long departed.

"Nice threads, Banyon."

The familiar voice came just as he reached the stairs. He turned at the sound. He'd been so focused on getting inside, warm, and dry, that he hadn't seen Kayla come up the steps from her basement apartment.

Kayla was just finishing her first year at Columbia, majoring in web design. She was a Healer and an Empath, but neither skill paid the rent, and for someone whose Gift could make close proximity to other people actively painful, it was good to develop money-making skills that would let them spend a lot of time *away* from people. Especially now. She'd spent the months of September and October of 2001

practically in a cocoon.

Kayla walked across the foyer and inspected him critically. "This a new look for you?"

"Um, look, Kayla, I—"

"No," Kayla said flatly. She stood regarding him pugnaciously, hands on hips.

Eric blinked at her in surprise.

"*Donot* come up with some fool dog-and-pony story about leaving your other clothes in a taxi while you were kidnapped by space aliens. Jesus, Eric, this is *me*. You've got two choices here, the way I see it: you can tell me the whole truth straight up or I resort to blackmail, and that takes longer."

Eric smiled in spite of his tiredness. "What kind of blackmail could you possibly use?" he found himself asking, out of a detached professional interest.

Kayla grinned impishly up at him. "Well, either everybody else already knows what you're up to, or they don't. If they do, I bet I could get the truth out of Too-Tall Songmaker in a New York minute . . . or I could just follow you the next time you go out. But why not cut to the chase and level with me? You look like you're trying to pass for street—so why not consult an expert? Which would be me, of course."

Eric had to admit that she looked street—upscale street, but still street. Kayla's look tended to change with the seasons; at the moment it was less Goth than paramilitary, with laced jump boots, the same leather jacket she always wore (all the glitter of its previous incarnation had been sanded off), baggy parachute pants, and a skintight camo-print camisole.

"C'mon," she said, sensing his hesitation. "Let's get you upstairs and out of those wet clothes before I catch cold."

\* \* \*

Taking over his kitchen Kayla made cocoa—grumbling over the lack of coffee as usual, but Eric had given her his espresso machine as an apartment-warming present, so she had no real cause for complaints—as Eric changed into dry clothes. When he came out, she was waiting implacably.

"Spill it," she said, handing him his mug. Eric was careful not to touch her fingers when he took it from her, or she might have gotten the whole story at once—and not in a terribly pleasant way, either. There were certain rules of etiquette in dealing with Empaths.

He sighed. "There's no way to explain this that doesn't sound really stupid," he said, and launched, once more, into the explanation about how he'd come to find out about Magnus. He was starting to wish he'd gathered everyone together and told all of them the story all at once; he still had Hosea to tell, and it was starting to feel as if he'd told this tale a thousand times already. At least it seemed to hurt a little less each time he told it.

It was new to Kayla, though. She stared out the window for a long moment after he'd finished, her face very still.

"You know, Banyon, even having no parents—or parents that dump you because you get weird, like mine did me—is better than having parents like yours. Some people shouldn't even be let to raise

houseplants!" she said at last.

"I know," Eric said gently. Somehow, having someone else upset about it made it easier for him to deal with. "But this isn't about them. Or me. It's about Magnus."

Kayla sighed, and seemed to shake herself all over.

"Right. We've got to get him off the street and under cover before they find him. And that means the next time you go looking, I'm going with you."

"But—" Ria would kill him and hang his scalp in the LlewellynCo boardroom, no arguments, if he put Kayla in a dangerous situation. When she'd come East to go to school, Elizabeth had made Ria Kayla's unofficial guardian.

Kayla had been supposed to live with Ria, actually. It was Kayla who'd decided that her talents were better utilized at Guardian House, and she'd been proved right a couple of times already. Since the House itself had no objections to her staying—and there was a studio apartment available in the basement—Kayla had moved in, decorating it to suit her own Gothgrrl tastes. And, Eric had to admit, she was a lot more thoroughly watched over by Greystone and the House than she would have been staying with Ria.

"See here, Banyon. Bringing me into this only makes sense. One—" Kayla held up a finger. "I'm a lot closer to Magnus' age than you are. So I can get closer to him. Two—" Another finger. "I've lived on the street a lot more recently than you have—in fact, you *never* lived on the street the way I did. Three— If you go approaching a bunch'a street kids alone and try to get in with them, you'll read as a predator. You may not be as old as you ought to be, but you're too old. Trust me. So we go around together. You find him and point him out. I can get next to him alone and get you in, or he'll accept you 'cause you're with me. And hey, how much trouble can *possibly* get into with you right there to keep an eye on me?" she added, with a wicked grin.

*Plenty*, Eric thought, with the wisdom of long experience. But he had to admit that all of Kayla's points were good ones. He looked like he was in his twenties. That was too old to get in with the crowd he was trying to infiltrate, and if Magnus *was* using magic—or was being protected by someone who was—using *aglamour* to lower his apparent age enough to pass would be like posting a red warning flag above his head.

But Kayla was still in her teens, and looked younger than her age. She'd fit right in. And she was right about being more streetwise than he was.

Besides, trying to keep Kayla out of something once she'd made up her mind to "help" was a losing proposition, as he knew from long experience. . . .

"Okay. Fine. You've got a deal," he said with a sigh.

"Yo! Homes!" Kayla whooped exultantly. "Where do you want to start?"

"I'm going to go see Oriana tomorrow morning—early—and take my lumps. I should be done about nine. Why don't you meet me there? Then we can head downtown. I'll buy you breakfast, and we can figure out where to go from there."

"Sounds like a plan," Kayla said. "Well, better run. There's a Rutger Hauer retrospective over at the

Gaiety, and I promised some friends I'd check it out. See you tomorrow, Morning Man."

"Be good," Eric said, winning himself another smirk.

\* \* \*

After Kayla left, Eric made himself an unsatisfactory dinner—he'd been eating out far too much, and getting behind on his grocery shopping, and there really wasn't much in the refrigerator but leftover takeout that was way past its "sell-by" date and the usual assortment of designer water. He finally opened a can of soup, and settled down for some channel-surfing. With expanded cable, he had his pick of almost 500 channels, including several international ones, so he could shop for things he didn't need, watch soap operas or game shows in languages he didn't know, catch up on the latest in sports from sumo matches to Australian football, or learn how to renovate and rewire his nonexistent house.

None of it held his attention for very long.

He realized that he was putting off something he needed to do, and it wouldn't be fair to make this a late night for Hosea. Hosea's days tended to start early—and Eric's day tomorrow was going to start early as well. He stretched out his arm, and snagged the phone.

\* \* \*

A few moments later he presented himself at the door to Hosea's apartment. Hosea opened the door. The rich vanilla smell of baking wafted out into the hall.

"You knew I was coming so you baked a cake?" Eric asked, startled.

"Ah'm baking cookies for the shelter," Hosea said, in his slow mountain drawl. "You can have a few, if you're good. C'mon in."

Eric walked down the long hall, following Hosea. The bookshelves were filling up nicely, he saw, and he noticed a few new additions to the art gallery since the last time he'd visited, as well—a large framed poster of *Daybreak* by Maxfield Parrish, and a couple of small drawings of banjo-playing mice that managed to bear an odd resemblance to Hosea—he remembered that Hosea was dating the children's book artist who lived down on Four. What was her name? Kathy? No, Caity.

"Jest set for a spell, I've got to get this last batch out of the oven, and I'll be right out," Hosea said. He disappeared into the kitchen, while Eric wandered around the living room.

Jeanette was there, lying in her open case. Eric gazed at her, wondering, as he often did, just how *presents* she was when Hosea wasn't actually playing the instrument she inhabited. He knew that at those times she could see what Hosea saw and hear what he heard, and that she spoke to Hosea through the music, and that only Hosea could hear her. Those were the terms of the original spell that had bound her to "haunt" the banjo until she had expiated the evil she had done in her life. But he did wonder what it was like for her—was she "there" the rest of the time, or just asleep? He'd never asked, though—it seemed sort of intrusive, somehow—and Hosea hadn't said.

Hosea came in a few moments later with a colorful tin tray that bore an old Rockingham teapot and a plate of golden sugar cookies, still warm from the oven. The tray was one of Hosea's many "urban scavenger" finds: New Yorkers threw out the most amazing things, and many city dwellers had furnished entire apartments from curbside scavenging. Most of the items—from furniture to dishes—only needed

minor repairs, or a little elbow grease, to make them perfectly usable. You had to know the right neighborhoods, and get up early, to find the best items, but Hosea was a morning person anyway. Hosea kept some of his finds, and donated the rest, after repairing them, to others who could use them. Somehow, he always seemed to know someone who needed just that thing.

Hosea set the tray down on the coffee table and gestured for Eric to sit. "I was hopin' you'd drop by and tell me how yesterday went for you," he said mildly.

"Well, I made a real dog's breakfast of it—to borrow one of Greystone's favorite phrases—but nobody's dead, and my parents don't even know I was there. But wait. There's more," Eric said. He knew he sounded flip, trying to distance himself from the pain with sarcasm, but what else could he do?

"Have a cookie," Hosea suggested, pouring tea.

Between bites of cookie and sips of peppermint tea flavored with wild honey, Eric told the story: that his parents, having lost one trophy child, had decided to make another one. That this second son—far more rebellious, by all accounts, than Eric had ever been—had run away from home. And was now in New York. Somewhere.

"And I can't find him. Ria can't find him. It's like he's wrapped in some kind of magical cloak of invisibility. I spent all day trying to trace him, and I just kept getting more and more muddled. The harder I looked, the less there was to find. And . . . well, you see a lot of runaways," Eric added hopefully.

"That I do," Hosea agreed. "Do you have a picture?"

Eric pulled the bus pass out of his pocket. Hosea studied the picture for a moment, then shook his head. "He hasn't come around when Ah've been there, but most of those kids are wild as jackrabbits, specially if they think somebody might be out to drag them back home. And even the older ones are spooked by *La Llorona*. Some of 'em'll come around for a meal, sometimes, but only if they can be durned sure we won't turn 'em in. If you want to copy this, Ah could show it to Serafina and the others, so they could look out for him."

"Thanks," Eric said. "I'll do that."

\* \* \*

"Have you talked to Oriana about this?" Hosea asked, keeping his voice carefully neutral. The last thing Eric needed right now was pity; he'd rarely seen his friend and teacher so brittle, not even just after they'd returned from Chinthliss' domain, when he'd been trying to cope with Jimmie's death, and the battle with Aerune, and—in its own strange way, though she'd died thousands of years before—the death of Aere the Golden. Not even after the Towers fell, when everyone was in what his Grannie would have called "a State."

He'd found out more tonight about Eric's childhood than he'd ever known before, and none of it good. It was bad enough to have parents who'd bred and raised him with no more love—less, in fact—than a farmer would give to a pig he was fattening for slaughter, but then to find that they'd repeated the sin was a double blow. Because a brother—even a brother he hadn't known about until the day before—wasn't just some stranger. He was *family*, and Eric's responsibility. And then to find that he not only existed, but was lost somewhere in New York. . . .

Well, it was a heavy burden.

"I'm seeing her in the morning," Eric said, with a crooked smile. "And she'll probably read me the riot act, but hell—if *I hadn't* gone when I did . . . Magnus would still be out there, only I wouldn't know to look for him."

"There's truth to that," Hosea agreed. "You stop on by the shelter tomorrow morning. Ah'll have talked to Serafina by then. She knows a lot of the places those kids den up. If you check enough of them, you should find him. But when you do find him, Eric . . . ?"

"I'm not sending him back to Boston." Eric's voice was flat and uncompromising. "Maybe . . . Underhill? I don't know. I haven't thought that far ahead. Ria said the first thing was to find him."

"Well, Miz Llewellyn surely has the right of it. But it's a puzzling thing that yore shine ain't helping you any."

"Or not much," Eric said with a sigh. "He's in Manhattan, that's as much as I know for sure. If I could just get close enough, I'm sure I could break through whatever protective spells he's got wrapped around him. Ria's suggested hiring specialists—mundane ones—to look for him, and if I don't turn up anything in a day or so, I'll do that. But I'm afraid that if he does realize somebody's after him, he'll run again."

Hosea nodded. "There is that possibility. And he's just the least bit safer when he's not running than when he is, not that being a runaway is any kind of safe at all, bad as the homes some of them run from are. Ah'll do everything Ah can to help. We all will."

"Thanks," Eric said, meaning it. "And maybe I'll get lucky tomorrow. I'll be bringing in a sort of native guide of my own. And Ria would flay me alive if she knew."

"Uh-huh," Hosea said, decoding the sentence without effort. "Stands to reason that Little Trouble would figure a way to stick her nose in. Well, looks like you're going to have yourself a busy day tomorrow. You'd best get your rest."

\* \* \*

After Eric had left, Hosea picked up Jeanette and sat down in his rocking chair, plucking the banjo's strings idly.

"What're we going to do, Jeanette?" he said aloud.

:*Let 'em all fry*,:the banjo suggested.

"Now you know you don't mean that," Hosea said mildly.

There was a sulky listening silence from the banjo, and finally a defeated sigh.:Is he turning tricks? Running with a gang? Somebody knows where he is, and trust me, big fella, they'll be happy to give him up for a hundred bucks cash.:

"Well, now," Hosea said mildly, his fingers continuing to weave glittering patterns of sound in the silent apartment, "Ah don't doubt you, but the question is, who do we offer the money to?"

:Let me think about that,:Jeanette answered.:I never had any particular connections in New York, and what I did have are years out of date now. You go walking into a Saint clubhouse, and you'll be dead

before you can explain yourself.:Another brooding silence, while Jeanette thought about things.:Your problem is, you want him alive and in good condition.:

"That Ah do," Hosea admitted, with a heavy sigh. "Well, we'll both sleep on it. Might could be something will dawn on one or both of us. Good night, sweetheart."

## Chapter Six: Boil The Breakfast Early

Eric settled onto the "non-directive couch" with a large carton of upscale tea in his hand. Oriana usually didn't let patients bring food or drink into the sessions, but she took pity on those who were forced to disrupt their usual routines to come in for an early-morning session. She hadn't remarked on his peculiar outfit—Eric was wearing his "street person" costume—and she heard out the story of his spur-of-the-moment decision to go to Boston in silence, allowing him to tell the story in his own way, without interruption.

"And how did you feel when you saw your parents again?" she asked.

"Shocked, I guess," Eric said, thinking about it carefully. "I'd expected them to still be the same as they'd been when I was eighteen. But they weren't. And they were, in a way. You'd expect . . . losing a child that way . . . and never knowing what had happened to him . . . to change a person. People. But it obviously hadn't. Or hadn't seemed to. They'd just gone and had another one, like they'd replace a broken microwave."

"Do you feel that Magnus has replaced you in their lives?"

Eric stared at her in surprise. "Well, hasn't he? They obviously haven't told Magnus I ever existed. And they weren't going to tell Dorland—well, me as Dorland—that I'd ever existed. They just had another kid, and tried to duplicate my life, whether that's what he wanted or not." *Or had any talent for. Although obviously he did.*

"And how do you feel about that?"

"Angry," Eric growled. "Very angry."

"At whom?"

Eric looked at her, puzzled, not seeing where this was going.

"Whose fault is it that this has happened? Yours? Magnus? Your parents?" Oriana prompted.

"Not Magnus," Eric said positively. "He didn't ask to be born. My parents, yes. They're the ones who wanted a trophy object instead of a son."

Oriana waited. Eric shook his head.

"And yes . . . me. I guess. A little. I should have . . . no." He shook his head, trying to sort his way through what had seemed simple, and now had revealed more layers than he'd thought existed. "That isn't



right, is it? Their actions are *not* my fault."

Oriana still waited.

"But . . . he's my brother. I'm responsible for him. Yeah, I know, I didn't even know he existed before I went out there, and it isn't like I ordered them to brew up another tame prodigy, but he's still my flesh and blood—and that counts for a lot, in magic." That much he was certain of, and he thought he saw a faint expression of approval flit across his counselor's face. "What's more, I think the Bardic Gift bred true in him, too, and that makes another level of kinship. So, this isn't my fault. But it is my responsibility. I have a responsibility to take care of my brother because, hell, nobody else is going to, are they? Not just because he's my brother—although that's enough—but because he's a potential Bard. I have to find him, and keep him from getting into trouble with his magic." *Assuming he hasn't done that already.*

"And your parents?" Oriana asked.

"They just aren't very important," Eric said, with a sense of discovery. It was true. *Magnus* was what was important. As long as Eric could find him, and keep him out of the hands of his parents forever, they weren't really that important, were they?

"You know, they don't matter. They gave over their right to matter to me a long, long time ago." He had a sense, right that moment, of *letting go* of something that had been weighing him down.

"Well," Oriana said, closing her notebook and getting to her feet. "I think we've made progress here, and our time is just about up. I'll look forward to seeing you at our regular time on Monday. And Eric, I think it would be best if you let me know before you decide to get in touch with your parents again, don't you?"

"If ever," Eric said feelingly.

\* \* \*

Kayla was waiting for him, appropriately enough, in the waiting room when he came out. Her own appearance had undergone a marked transformation from the day before. Only the leather jacket remained from the previous day's costume. The boots had been replaced by worn sneakers, the parachute pants by stained and scruffy jeans, and the camo-top by a faded T-shirt advertising a band Eric had never heard of. She'd washed all the gel out of her hair, and done something else to it as well, and it hung lankly down around her face, looking greasy and dull.

"Wesson Oil," she said cheerfully, seeing his baffled expression. "The grunge-Goths use it all the time."

"And you had this stuff in your closet?" Eric said doubtfully.

"What, you think I help Too-Tall refinish furniture in my best vintage? Get outta town!" Kayla scoffed. "I figure this is the right look—I just about had to mug the door guy to get up here."

"Good thing I left your name downstairs, or you'd probably be sitting on the curb right now," Eric said. "C'mon. Let's go have breakfast. Then we're going to go see Hosea."

Kayla made a rude noise.

\* \* \*m m m

Eric wasn't unreasonable enough to try to walk into a restaurant where the way they were dressed would get them immediately thrown out—or raise a lot of eyebrows at the very least, which wouldn't be comfortable for anyone. He took them into a part of town where their clothes wouldn't attract any particular notice—and the food was just fine. Cholesterol heaven, in fact.

Kayla ate like a starving teenager—all of her omelet, home fries, and toast, and most of Eric's breakfast as well. He didn't really have much of an appetite, picking at his eggs and toast.

"You're gonna be starving by lunch," she predicted, piling grape jelly on her toast.

Eric shuddered, pouring more sugar and milk into his coffee. Had coffee always tasted this bad? Or had he just lost the taste for it over the years? It really didn't matter. He needed the caffeine to jump-start himself this morning. Tea just wasn't going to cut it. "I'm not really hungry," he said.

"Eat anyway," Kayla commanded, shoving half of his eggs back at him. She cocked her head, gazing at a point a few inches above Eric's head. "You'll do," she said. "But you need to feed the beast. The only reason—other than worry about Magnus—that you aren't hungry is because you aren't used to being up this early."

Reluctantly, Eric shoveled down eggs and cold toast, though the food seemed to have little taste. He did feel better once he'd managed it, though. Kayla was usually right about physical things—not surprising for a Healer.

"I guess I'm just as worried about finding him, as not finding him," he admitted. "I'm not sure what I'm going to do once I do."

"Hell, that's a no-brainer," Kayla said, looking surprised. "You don't think he *wants* to go back to Hell House, do you?"

"Of course not!" Eric said. If there was one thing he was sure of, it was that.

She shrugged, as if the answer was obvious. "Well, then. Ria gets her voodoo lawyers to paper-trip him. He gets a brand-new secret identity, you do a couple of mystic passes, and he gets to be somebody else."

"But . . ." Eric said. He hadn't even *met* Magnus yet! He had no idea of what his brother's situation might be, or what he'd need to do to set things right. Or what Magnus wanted out of life, for that matter.

"Details," Kayla said, waving Eric's protests away. "We can work them all out when the time comes. Trust me. Ria loves to fix things, the more complicated, the better. C'mon. We're outta here."

\* \* \*

Hosea arrived at Jacob Riis early that morning. He actually spent quite a few more hours there than he was paid for, but he didn't mind. There was always plenty of work to do, and not enough hands to do it, and Hosea liked to feel needed.

Breakfast was served early. The temporary cots put down for the overnights were taken up at five and stored away, and the tables unfolded in their place. Everyone helped. If you helped, you got fed.

Once everyone in the shelter had eaten, the transients were turned out for the day and the doors were opened to feed the street population. There were already lines outside the door—always.

Sometimes there were eggs for the first through the door. Usually the staff was able to provide at least outdated cold cereal and muffins or bagels and coffee for everyone who came, or coffee at the very least. When donations were especially good, there was hot cereal and juice, but that wasn't often. The street people were philosophical, taking whatever came in enduring silence. The food service closed down by nine, or whenever supplies ran out, and then the kitchen staff got to work preparing lunch, and the rest of the shelter workers turned to their other jobs.

In the little lull, Hosea managed to catch Serafina's eye.

"Ah need a favor," he said.

"You can have anything I have to give—not that that's much," she said. "Come into my office."

Serafina's office had probably once been a linen closet, back when this had been a house. A desk piled high with neglected paperwork, an ailing copier, and two ancient overstuffed file cabinets crowded the small room to the state of the legendary "Fibber McGee's Closet." There was barely room for her to edge around between the wall and her desk and get into her chair, and just enough room for him to stand in front of the desk.

"Ah need to find a boy," he said. "Came to the city about a month ago. Seventeen, but looks younger."

"Ay!" Serafina threw up her hands. "Only one?"

Hosea smiled ruefully. "It's a favor for a friend."

She sighed explosively. "Picture?"

"I'll have one tomorrow," he promised. "He's white. Upper-class family. Auburn hair, shoulder length when he left home. About five-seven, maybe 130 pounds. Green eyes. Very . . . pretty," he added reluctantly, knowing she'd need to hear it.

She was shaking her head tiredly. "Hosea, you know what happened to him. He didn't get in touch with his family, didn't get picked up by the police . . . he's gone, *querido*."

Hosea sighed. There was no way to explain that they *knew* Magnus was still alive, still here. "Ah know, 'fina. But it's only been a month. Maybe he's still here, somewhere. Or maybe somebody remembers him. You know where the kids go to den up. Give me some hints."

"You're not going to go down where they go," she said, alarmed.

"Ah promise. And Ah'm not going to send his parents there, either—" that was a promise easy enough to make. "Ah don't want the blood of innocents on my conscience. His parents have hired a professional to look for him." And that was the honest truth as well. "Like Ah said, Ah'm just trying to help."

"You promise you won't go looking for him yourself?" she insisted.

"If Ah hear he's at one of the other shelters, Ah might go there—Ah won't lie to you, 'fina. But to follow on any of the hints you'd be so kind as to provide, that Ah won't do. That Ah do promise."

She sighed again. "*Pobrecito*. Well, your friend might start by talking to some of the other boys down under the highway, though I'm sure they'll tell him anything he wants to hear for twenty bucks. He might have gotten lucky—though I'm not sure that's the right word—and gotten taken up by one of the white gangs, like the Dead Rabbits or the Future; I haven't seen Prester in a few weeks, but I'll try to catch him if he comes in. He still seems to know most of the gang gossip. Of course, he's crazy as a fruit bat, which is why they leave him alone, but he might know something useful.

"Another possibility you might want to have your friend check out is abandoned buildings—if he can find one that isn't being used as a gang clubhouse or a crack den. Sometimes the kids move in and take them over for a few weeks or months until the police drive them out—or one of them manages to start a fire and bring in the Fire Department. Most of them are down here, but I've been hearing rumors that there's a big one somewhere Uptown—which would have to be somewhere in Harlem, I guess. I'll try to get you some addresses."

"Preciate it," Hosea said. "And now Ah guess Ah'd better get out there and make some music."

\* \* \*

After the music session—Angelica was gone, and Hosea tried not to think too much what would happen to her—he wandered outside for a breath of air, wondering when Eric would be showing up.

He heard a skirl of flute music from down the street and smiled to himself, following the sound.

He recognized Kayla by her jacket—and the fact that she was wearing the clothes she'd been wearing when she'd helped him paint his apartment—but if Eric hadn't been holding the flute in his hands, Hosea wouldn't have recognized Eric at all, and he could tell that Eric wasn't using a trace of *glamour* to fool him.

Well, the old story-songs did say that the Bards were masters of disguise, and Hosea was coming to realize more and more every day how much truth there was in the old songs.

It wasn't just the old clothes he'd dug up from Lord knew where; even Eric's closest friends might not have recognized him, walking past him on the street. He looked small and frail, hunched over his flute as though it were his last friend in all the world, playing the mournful notes of his calling-on song.

Hosea walked up to him, digging in his pocket for a handful of change, and tossed it into the open flute case at his feet. If Eric was serious about going undercover, he'd better make this look good.

Kayla looked up. She was sitting at Eric's feet, huddled on a piece of cardboard scavenged from a dumpster. Her face was blank, her eyes wary. She reached out and scooped up the coins as though he might take them back. Eric continued playing, not seeming to notice, and for a moment, Hosea felt a pang of genuine alarm.

"There's hot coffee around the corner at the shelter," he said. "You could come in, get out of the cold for a while."

"C'mon, Boss," Kayla said, tugging at Eric's leg and getting to her feet. "Coffee."

Eric brought the tune to a close and lowered the flute. "Yeah. That'd be nice. I'd forgotten how cold it got out here on the streets," he said softly.

\* \* \*

"You scared me there for a minute," Hosea said, as they walked back toward the shelter.

"It just sort of gets to me," Eric admitted. "I start out by acting like a street person and then after a while I kind of become one. I guess it's effective, but . . ." He let the sentence trail off, then laughed shakily. "If that's how much I get sucked into a part, I guess that job on Broadway is right out. Did you get a chance to talk to Serafina?"

Hosea gave a rueful shrug. "She'll ask around. She gave me a bit to go on with. Made me promise Ah wouldn't go pokin' mah nose in mah own self. Says the places the kids go are pretty rough."

Even as he warned Eric, he knew it wouldn't do any good. He could tell Eric that the trail led to the gates of Hell itself, and Eric would still follow it. He glanced at Kayla.

She gave him a glare laden with defiance. "Don't look at me, Too-Tall. Somebody's got to keep him out of trouble, and Banyon doesn't have the sense God gave a goldfish."

Hosea sighed, accepting what he couldn't change. "Come in and warm up. The first thing you'd better do is check the other shelters in the city and see if you pick up his trail near any of them. Ah've got a list of them."

Over coffee, he told Eric what little he'd learned. It wasn't much to go on, but it was all they had. Eric promised to get him a picture of Magnus as soon as possible—but Hosea knew that, rightly or wrongly, Eric would drag his heels there, not wanting to involve any more people in the search for his brother than absolutely needful. If they didn't find him soon, it would have to be done, though. The boy couldn't survive alone on the streets, especially with hard winter coming on.

Predictably, Eric recoiled from the suggestion that they check with the young rentboys who plied their trade under the West Side Highway.

"They might know him," Hosea said gently.

"Face facts," Kayla said bluntly. "If he isn't doing that, everybody he knows is trying to get him to, believe it. If he's a holdout, he's a legend. He'll be *easy* to find."

"Hard to get them to tell you the truth, though," Hosea said.

"They'll tell me the truth," Eric said grimly.

Show them a face like that, and they'll run like rabbits, Hosea thought, but didn't say so.

"Well, we'd better go," Eric said. "Looks like we've got a lot of ground to cover." He slipped Hosea a folded bill. "Thanks for the help. Go pay for our coffee, would you?"

Hosea smiled. "Find him soon."

\* \* \*

After Eric and Kayla left, Hosea stayed. He could have gone busking in the subways—there wasn't

much point to aboveground busking at this time of year; your audience wasn't much inclined to linger in the cold—but he didn't have any place he really had to be until this afternoon, when he was scheduled to play at an assisted living facility uptown. He enjoyed that—his audiences remembered and asked for many of the old songs, the ones his grandparents had taught him.

But some instinct encouraged him to linger where he was.

There was a steady stream of people coming through—except when they'd locked up for the night, the Jacob Riis was never really quiet—some seeking help to fill out the endless forms required by the city's Social Services, some seeking information about various programs, some looking for food, a bed for the coming night, something to steal, news of a friend. The staff dealt with them all as gently as possible.

"Excuse me."

Hosea turned around. The young woman who had spoken regarded him warily, glancing over her shoulder to make sure the way to the door was clear. That gesture alone was enough to tell him she was one of the street population, and not one of the staff. She was young, though it was hard to tell her age, bundled up as she was in layers of clothing against the cold.

"Can I help you?" he said.

He saw her hesitate, on the verge of leaving, and wished with all his heart that Eric were still here—Eric could charm the birds down out of the trees with nothing more than a smile, but *he* was only a half-trained Bard, unable to use his Gift without his instrument in his hands, and Jeanette was locked in her case in Serafina's office. He had no Talent to use to convince her that all he wanted to do was help.

"Nobody's going to trouble you," Hosea said very gently. "That isn't our way."

She smiled, just a little. Blue eyes, blonde hair—he could see a wisp of it curling against her cheek, below the edge of the knit cap pulled low over her skull, but her face was innocent of makeup, and now that he could study her, Hosea revised his estimate downward by several years, into the mid-teens. But not one of the young prostitutes who frequently came to the shelter—she didn't have that brittle hardness to her—though her wariness bespoke a goodly length of time on the street.

She took a hesitant step toward him.

"I was wondering . . . this is the place where you can take a shower?" Her voice was soft, with the faint flavor of the mountains in it, its timbre clear and unslurred by drugs.

"It's only a few days a month," Hosea said apologetically. "From three to seven, first come, first served. Men and women come on different days. The doors open at three, and usually only the first thirty or forty people get showers. We post the schedule outside, but Serafina has some flyers printed up. Would you like me to get you one?"

The girl hesitated again, wary as a wild thing. "And nobody will bother you? Or . . . steal your things?"

"You'll get a bag for your things, with your name on it. We won't let anybody take them, or bother you."

Trust was an important component of the work they did here. If the homeless population didn't trust them, Serafina had told him when he'd first started working at Jacob Riis, they'd rather die on the street than come in out of the cold. Unless someone's belongings were actively dangerous to the welfare of the

other residents, they were left strictly alone and even protected, no matter how much they resembled garbage to the shelter employees.

"Would you like some coffee? It isn't good, but it's hot."

He saw a look of longing cross the girl's face. "I shouldn't. . . ." she said wistfully.

"Why don't you just take a seat—anywhere you like. Ah'll get you that coffee, and a copy of the shower schedule."

He waited until he was sure she was going to sit, and then went back into the kitchen, where he filled a Styrofoam cup with coffee, then grabbed a handful of sugar packets and one of the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches left over from lunch. It was a little stale by now, but he knew she wouldn't mind. He wrapped it in a napkin and came back, setting the items in front of her, then went off to Serafina's cubbyhole.

He picked up the schedule he'd promised, along with another one listing the addresses of several soup kitchens and free food programs in this part of town—though he was pretty sure she knew about all of them by now—hesitated, and added a handful of pamphlets: the Runaway Help Line, Project Reunion, and a few others. He picked up Jeanette and went back to the table.

\* \* \*

Ace kept a wary eye on the door as she tore the tops off half-a-dozen packets of sugar and stirred them into her coffee. And *food*, too. She bit into the sandwich hungrily and wolfed it down in a few bites.

It wasn't that she'd had to go hungry, or not very—not with Jaycie's money to draw on—but meals hadn't been what you could call regular by any stretch of the imagination, and she was getting awfully tired of junk food. It had taken her just about two days to work her courage up to the point of coming in here, but there just wasn't any other way she could think of to keep clean, with the cold weather coming on. One more sponge bath, and she was going to catch pneumonia.

And the *mansounded* nice. She knew you couldn't count on that. Some people were awfully good at lying. And some people could do you a terrible bad turn with the very best intentions. But he sounded nice. She missed that.

He came back and sat down opposite her—carrying a banjo case in his other hand, for a mystery—pushing several sheets of paper across the table. The top one was the shower schedule, and under that was a list of places that gave away food. And under that . . .

Ace started to get to her feet.

"Ah haven't called anybody. And Ah haven't told anybody," the man said quietly. "Ah'd jest like you to think about it."

"Going 'home'?" Ace said bitterly, sitting down again slowly.

"Or jest tellin' somebody about it, if that's all you care to do," the stranger said. "My name's Hosea Songmaker, by the way."

"I'm never going home, Mr. Songmaker. And I'm never telling anyone who I am or where I came from.

If I told you—if I told anyone—they'd send me back. Anyone'd send me back. Why not? I come from such a good home. A good*God-fearing*Christian home."

\* \* \*

There was a world of anger and bitterness in her voice—and more, an aching need to trust someone, a cry for help that she was too afraid to voice. With Jeanette leaning against his knee he could see it clearly now: she had the*shine*about her, a faint aura that made her seem just a little more*there*than someone who didn't possess it.

"Even the Devil can quote Scripture," Hosea said mildly, "and Ah dare to swear that not every man who says he's a Christian does right by the Book. There are ways to get off the street that don't mean you have to go back to a bad family." Once again he mourned the stroke of bad timing—if only she'd come while Eric was here! Eric would have seen what she was at once, gotten her to trust him . . .

"Not this family," the girl said with weary certainty. "They'd never let me go." She shook her head, looking older than her years, and got to her feet. "Thanks for the coffee."

"Wait," Hosea said. "Won't you . . . at least give me a name to call you by?" he said, willing every ounce of harmless friendliness toward her that he possessed. "So Ah'll know who's askin' after me . . . if you ever come askin' after me."

She took a step backward toward the door, and he watched her turning the question over in her mind for traps.

"Is that a banjo in that case?" she asked.

"Sure is. Would you like to hear me play it?"

"No," she said quickly. "I hate music. But . . . I guess . . . you can call me Ace."

She turned and walked quickly out the door.

\* \* \*

That evening, after his other duties were discharged, Hosea discussed the matter with Jeanette.

"What do you think, sweetheart?"

:DON'T call me that!:the banjo snarled waspishly, between the silvery cascades of notes. There was a brooding silence.:There seems to be an epidemic of upper-class white kids going slumming these days. Miss Ace-who-hates-music—and I'm sure there's a story there—probably comes from lovely people who were eating her alive. And she probably thinks that the street is better than one more minute of that. And she's wrong. The street is either*worse, or exactly as bad, as what she's got at home—whatever it is.*:

"Welladay," Hosea sighed. Jeanette would know if anyone did. Before she'd gone to work for Threshold, she'd cooked meth for a biker gang. She knew the uncertainty of the outlaw life, as well as all the degrees of self-degradation it took a nice girl from a suburban family to reach it. The rocker creaked beneath him. "At least it's different."



:Oh, yes,:the banjo snarled. Hosea smiled, recognizing all the signs of Jeanette in a temper.:Strangers can never hurt you quite as much as your own family can, no matter what they do to you. And of course you saw the power coming off her. No wonder she ran away!:

It was true that young Talents often did not have the happiest of childhoods, particularly if the Gift did not run in their family or—as was often the case—had skipped a generation or more, leaving them the proverbial cygnet in a nest of ducklings.

"I suppose I ought to tell Eric about her," Hosea said reluctantly.

:As if he doesn't have enough to do right now. By all means. Instead of looking for one apprentice wizard in New York—that he has no idea of how to find—he can look for two. Then he'll have a breeding pair, at least. Who knows what might happen then? And—:Jeanette broke off, as if she'd just thought of something she didn't like.

"And?" Hosea prompted.

*:If someone—or something—is collecting Talents—and remember, I was—they'll be together.:*

"Now there's a happy thought," Hosea said unhappily.

There was a scratching at the window, and Hosea stopped playing, laying Jeanette gently in her case.

Greystone eased open the window and poked his large craggy head inside. "Mrs. Peel, we're needed," he said, giving Hosea a broad conspiratorial wink.

"Wouldn't a phone call have been a mite more sensible?" Hosea said, getting to his feet.

"Ah, laddybuck, have ye no sense o' the fitness o' things?" Greystone said reproachfully.

\* \* \*

Less than an hour later, Hosea was in the sort of neighborhood that he had specifically promised Serafina he would *not* visit. He soothed his conscience by telling himself that he wasn't in Manhattan—he was just across the river, in Brooklyn—and he wasn't looking for Magnus.

He was on Guardian business.

The tenement apartment had been a rat-infested firetrap for a century and more. The wood beneath his feet was spongy, like something out of H. P. Lovecraft, and Paul had warned him not to touch the walls, not if he didn't want to bring roaches and worse home with him.

His three counterparts had preceded him, and were gathered in a room that had held a body earlier this evening. Now the body and the police were gone, and the room was empty. The floor was covered with blood and broken glass, as if a hundred mirrors had shattered here at once, though looking around the room, Hosea could see no sign that there had *ever* been a mirror here.

Puzzled, he regarded the others.

"I thought we should all see this," Paul said, gesturing with his sword-cane to encompass the entire room. Paul Kern was a tall elegant black man who carried himself with the grace of a dancer. His voice held a

faint trace of a British/Islands accent, and he was wearing his favorite tweed jacket, as if he might at any moment be called away to a country houseparty.

"How many does this make?" Toni asked. She was a Latina with skin the color of buckwheat honey; in daily life the superintendent of Guardian House and single mother of two young sons, an older woman who wore a harried lifestyle and a score of varied responsibilities like an invisible cloak. She was dressed as usual in jeans and a sweatshirt under a down parka, and her blue-black hair was pulled back in a long wavy tail.

"Seven, I think," José Ramirez said. "If our tally is correct." He shrugged, his strong, square, bronzed features settling into a mask of disappointment. "All the same—or close enough."

"Seven?" Hosea said in shock. "But Ah only know of one—and that secondhand, to boot."

The other three turned and looked at him, making him feel very much like the new kid in school. Paul leaned on his cane.

"Maybe you'd better tell us about it, young Songmaker. The three of us just got around to comparing notes on our own cases a few days ago, only to find this broken-mirror motif—and the murders—running through all of them. There doesn't seem to be any other connection—José's dealing with a gang of demon worshippers, and Toni's involved with a—well, I suppose you'd call it a child-abuse case, although there isn't a child involved. I was chasing ghosts."

"Well . . ." Hosea said dubiously, "Ah'm not sure there's a connection, but the fella Ah know of that got murdered, everybody said *he* was killed by Bloody Mary."

If he'd hoped to stump Paul, he was disappointed; Paul Kern was an expert in the occult in all its guises, from urban folklore to the dustiest grimoire. "Children's folklore. The first cases anyone's collected seem to date from the 1950s, though of course they probably go back farther. Supposedly, if you say her name three times by candlelight while looking into a mirror, she'll come out of the mirror and attack you. Nobody's quite sure where it started."

"It's gotten a little more elaborate than that around here," Hosea said, and gave the other three a condensed version of the Bloody Mary portion of the Secret Stories.

"Ghost? Demon? *Mythago*?" Paul shrugged. "It doesn't seem to fit, somehow. Bloody Mary—both your version and the original—only appears to children. And besides, none of the victims seem to have had any connection with the occult—even José's 'demon worshippers' are strictly amateur night."

"But dangerous none the less," José put in softly. "And I will soon put an end to them."

Paul nodded. "Sometimes the only thing more dangerous than a trained professional is a bungling amateur. But the victims . . . none of them seem to have any connection with each other, so far as Toni's P.D. contacts have been able to determine. All of them were fairly marginal members of society, engaged in rather nefarious—but strictly small-time—activities. All men, all ranging in age from their early twenties to their late thirties. All found lying dead on a bed of shattered mirror glass, covered with cuts on their exposed skin."

"But the cuts weren't what killed them," Toni said grimly. "They all died of heart attacks—in other words, they were scared to death."

Hosea looked around the squalid room. It was hard to believe anyone lived here—or had.

The four of them exchanged wordless glances—Hosea, stubborn, the other three with the dawning realization that maybe they were making a mistake in dismissing Hosea's Secret Stories out of hand. Paul sighed, looking frustrated. "Well, Hosea, perhaps we had better take a closer look at the evidence, and the information *you* have. It looks like your Secret Stories are the first real lead we've got, though it's hard to say how we can follow it up. None of the murder sites were any kind of paranormal locus at all . . . and every spell every one of us has tried here hasn't been able to raise a thing."

"Not even the ghost of the victim," José added, "and that is very odd. This man died this very night, and by violence. His ghost should linger."

"Would you try, Hosea?" Toni said. "I see you've got Jeanette with you. She's a ghost herself. Maybe she'll see something we've missed."

"Worth a try," Hosea said. He unslung the banjo from the soft canvas gig bag in which he'd brought her, and slung the strap over his shoulder. He spent a moment tuning her, then launched into the strains of "Unquiet Grave." It seemed appropriate, somehow.

At times like this—when he was actively working magic through Jeanette—it seemed as if he could see the world through her eyes. It was a world without color, one almost without shape. He could see the other three Guardians, but more as symbols of themselves than in their real forms.

Toni was a quick brightness, sharp and glistening and hard. José was a steady anchor, one that could not be swept away by any tempest. Paul was an infinity of doors, with something behind every one.

He reached beyond them.

There were ghosts here—death was no stranger to these streets—but none, he knew, was the one he sought. Some were faint memories, held by walls and stones, as insensible as a recording. Others—though nothing near—were true spirits that would wander confused for a few days or hours before passing on to the place they belonged. He felt Jeanette yearn toward them, sadly, but she had been bound by her own will and the Guardians' magic into his banjo, and she could not pass on until her work here was complete. Gently, he drew her back, as his fingers wove the song to a close.

"No," he said, opening his eyes. "Nothing more than what you all found."

"Well, it was worth a try," Toni said with a sigh. "Let's go back to my place. We can compare notes, and you can give us the rest of the details about this war in Heaven, Hosea. Though, frankly, if we're going to have to referee something like *that*, I'm not really sure where to begin."

## Chapter Seven: Chase Around The Windmill

The report on Mr. Dorland was waiting on Ria's desk Thursday afternoon. She had Anita fax it over to Eric's computer, with a note that she'd be out of town over the weekend if he were trying to reach her. She hadn't heard from him since his visit Tuesday night, but she wasn't surprised; Eric would certainly be single-minded in his pursuit of his brother. She made a note in her PDA to call him Monday.

Philip Dorland wasn't the best in his field—which was nice; that meant the best was still available for her to hire—but he was very good, with a sixty percent success rate: astronomically high in the world of missing and runaway children. Of course, Dorland didn't have the advantages of magic to help him hunt, and he was working a month-cold trail. He was probably still checking the Boston area, trying to trace Magnus' movements there.

She'd put an operative on Dorland just as a matter of course; Eric couldn't object to that, and she had no immediate plans to tell him anyway. But it was always best to know what your enemy was doing, and if Eric didn't know that Dorland was the enemy, Ria did.

But for now it was time to turn her attention to other things, and other inquiries.

\* \* \*

Early Friday morning, Ria went down to the garage beneath her new apartment, an overnight bag slung over her shoulder, a set of car keys jingling in her hand. She greeted the garage attendant by name, and walked back to her car.

She'd called down earlier, so they'd already taken the cover off the Jag and made sure it was gassed up and ready to go. A 1964 Jaguar E-Type, British Racing Green, and as temperamental as a skittish elvensteed. But the mechanic had given it a complete check-over just last week, and this would be one of the last times she'd be able to drive it this year. Alas, that was the problem with one of these temperamental mechanical beasties; your mechanic saw it more than you did.

She backed out of her slot—the powerful engine purring like a very large kitten—and nosed out into the street. Threading the car expertly into the morning traffic, she headed north.

Once she was on the Saw Mill, Ria was able to open it up a little—nowhere near the Jag's top speed, which was somewhere around 180, but if she decided to come back to the city tonight there might be a stretch of the Taconic where she could give the old lady her head a bit.

Her destination was Amsterdam County, several hours north of Manhattan, along the eastern bank of the Hudson. Taghkanic College and the Margaret Beresford Bidney Memorial Psychic Science Research Laboratory—to give the Bidney Institute its full unwieldy name—were there, and both worth a look, but neither was her destination today.

Once she'd found out about Parker Wheatley, Ria had started doing her homework, but there'd been no sense limiting her inquiries to this side of the Veil. With Aerune out of commission, Wheatley would obviously be trolling for a new *Sidhepadrone*, and Ria didn't move in the right Underhill circles to find out whether he had a chance of finding one.

She could, however, locate and hire someone who could.

Inigo Moonlight billed himself as a Confidential Inquiry Agent and Researcher of the Arcane. Ria suspected he'd been doing pretty much the same thing at least since Queen Victoria had ruled the waves—and why not? The man was—or at least seemed to be—a full-blooded Sidhe (not that she'd ever met him in person). If anyone could tell her whether Parker Wheatley was—still—trafficking with the Unseleighe Sidhe, it was Mr. Moonlight.

So she'd hired him, which presented difficulties of its own.

Inigo Moonlight was . . . eccentric. Brilliant—Ria never wasted her time hiring less than the best—but eccentric. He had a phone but didn't, so far as she'd ever been able to determine, answer it, so there was no use in calling him, and he conducted all his business by letter. And why not? *He* had plenty of time.

Ria did not. If she wanted to know what Mr. Moonlight had unearthed without waiting out an interminable exchange of letters, she'd better go and see him.

Inigo Moonlight lived in an artists' colony named Carbonek just outside of Glastonbury, New York—another oddity. The colony had been there since the turn of the century—the nineteenth century—and unlike most artists' colonies, it valued anonymity and isolation for its inhabitants above all things.

She supposed there was a certain symmetry to the idea of one of the Sidhe—member of a race with no creativity of its own—living in an enclave devoted entirely to creativity. She wondered how he managed it.

Several hours later she'd reached Amsterdam County Road 4, which wound down into the town of Glastonbury. Glastonbury—most of the towns in this area had fanciful names out of myth and literature; there was a Tamerlane on the other side of the river—was a small Hudson River town, too far off the beaten track to be really touristy—and no passenger trains ran on the west side of the Hudson—but thanks to the nearby college, it had a good selection of shops and services. She drove around a bit until she found a cafe-bakery (named, misleadingly, Bread Alone), and treated herself to an early lunch before driving on.

Taghkanic College had been founded in 1714 on the site of an old cider mill, but everything around it had remained farmland for quite some time thereafter. Even now, the pernicious urban sprawl that was eating the Hudson Valley alive had not reached this far north; once Ria was out of Glastonbury and back on the road again, all she saw was trees, apple orchards, and occasional glimpses of the river. Finally, about ten miles outside of town, there was a small sign off to her left, easy to miss: Carbonek.

"I suppose it goes along with Glastonbury," Ria muttered to herself, turning onto the narrow, one-lane road.

The road was barely wide enough for one car, and without shoulders or turnoffs. Though the road was surprisingly good, Ria drove very slowly, mindful of the possibility of other vehicles and of pedestrians—and, for that matter, deer, which were becoming increasingly a problem on the roads. Dense hedges grew right up to the sides of the road, so tall she could see nothing beyond them. If she met anybody coming the other way, one or the other of them had better be prepared to back up for quite a distance.

To her relief, a couple of miles along, the road widened out into a lane and a half, and the high hedges diminished and finally disappeared, to be replaced by a low drystone wall. She could see trees in the field beyond, towering venerable evergreens.

A little farther, and she came to a set of gates.

Two massive fieldstone pillars supported a wrought-metal arch—not iron, Ria noted, but bronze, long weathered to green by time and the elements. The metalwork was in the style of the followers of William Morris, and spelled out one word: "Carbonek."

*The Castle of the Grail, which none but the pure in heart and soul might enter. Well, let's give it a shot, shall we?*

A brass plaque on one of the pillars announced that this was Private Property. The other said that TRESPASSERS were FORBIDDEN. But the gates—massive things of oak, that looked as if they'd just come from Morris's own workrooms—were standing open, so Ria drove through.

Just inside the gates there was a blacktopped parking area—necessary in a region that required plowing and shoveling several times a winter—and the road did not extend any farther. Ria pulled in and parked. There were a number of vehicles already there, from battered vintage VW bugs, to no-nonsense pickup trucks, to a few nondescript vans and sport utilities.

She got out of the car and stretched, looking around. The air was sharply cold, and she could smell the river, though she could not see it. Ria inhaled deeply, relishing the fresh air. City girl she might be, but it was nice to get out into the countryside every once in a while.

There was a large building on her right, as anonymous as a barn, and thoroughly locked. No help there, unless she wanted to break in. She turned to the path leading away from the parking lot. It bisected another drystone wall, and beyond that she could see rows of cottages on either side of the path.

They looked anachronistically English, from their slate roofs and whitewashed exteriors, to the white picket fences outside. She walked toward them. She knew from his mailing address that Inigo Moonlight lived in something called Avalon Cottage, which would be right in line with the Arthurian motif of this place.

The cottages were constructed in blocks of four with cross-streets intersecting. Peering between them as she passed, Ria could see that there were large back gardens, and other cottages beyond. And probably, elsewhere in the colony, there were large communal studios for those whose art required large spaces and specialized equipment. And surely—somewhere—perhaps in the barn she'd passed on her way in, there was a place for the residents to receive their mail, because nowhere did she see a mailbox on any of the cottages, nor did she think a postman would relish tramping all over the quaintly retro Carbonek on foot, especially in the winter.

To her relief, each cottage was clearly labeled on an enameled plaque beside the door, its name easy to read from the gate. All of the cottages seemed to have placenames out of the Arthurian mythos—there was a Tintagel, a Camelot (of course), a Badon, a Lyonesse, a Winchester, a Camlann . . .

But no Avalon. Perhaps it came and went, like its namesake.

All the garden plots were neatly kept, though their makeup varied wildly, from a full English "cottage garden" (now bedded down for the winter, of course), to one empty of growing things entirely, where grass had been replaced by colored gravel laid in pleasing patterns, with a boulder or two for decoration.

What they lacked was any rhyme or reason to the naming. She didn't even know how many cottages there were. The residents might value their privacy, but surely this was taking matters to extremes?

"Excuse me, are you looking for someone?"

*Busted.*

Ria turned at the sound of the voice. A woman had leaned out of the window of Sshalott Cottage. Her

long white hair was pinned up in an untidy bun on top of her head, and there was a ferret draped around her neck.

"I'm looking for Avalon Cottage," Ria said, mentally crossing her fingers. Might as well be hung for a sheep as a goat.

But the woman did not seem to be inclined to have Ria flung out as a trespasser. Instead she smiled, looking pleased.

"Ah, you're looking for Mr. Moonlight." The woman reached down out of sight and scooped up another ferret, absently adding it to her living necklace. "Avalon Cottage is all the way down at the end of the lane, past Broceliande and Logres. You'll know it by the roses. He does grow the loveliest roses," she added with a happy sigh. "Good luck!"

Reaching for yet a third ferret—apparently she had an infinite supply of them—the woman turned, her arms full of squirming mustelids, pushing the window closed with an elbow.

*Roses? At this time of year?* Ria set the question aside for later. She continued down the path, wondering why luck would be called for.

She soon discovered the answer, as the path grew steep, narrow, and twisting. The block of cottages ended, and the trees thinned out as well. The cottages the ferret woman had named were larger than the ones in the cottage-blocks, and each stood alone, surrounded by the ubiquitous white picket fences.

Broceliande's tenant was a sculptor. Ria heard the ring of steel on stone as she approached. He was out in the garden, muffled to the eyes against the cold, hammering away at an enormous block of granite. He did not look up as she walked by. Other sculptures stood about the garden. Ria stopped, and looked, and made a note to find out who he was—and more to the point, who his agent was.

Logres' tenant apparently did not care for plants overmuch. The grass within the yard was neat and very short, and there was nothing else at all within the fence. All the windows were heavily curtained with dark fabric. She had the oddest desire to walk up to the door and demand to know what it was the inhabitant *did*, and strictly controlled herself. *You're far too grown-up to indulge yourself in idle fancies, Ria my girl.*

All the same, the desire to know was very strong. Perhaps he—somehow she didn't doubt it was a "he"—was a reclusive writer, working on some odd literary masterpiece. Or perhaps a jeweler, creating small splendid treasures in secret. This place had a peculiar Brigadoonish aura to it, as if it existed outside of time—partly, she was sure, because the cold raw November weather ensured that she saw so few of the colony's inhabitants. She was sure the place would seem very different in summer.

But even in the cold, she smelled Avalon before she saw it.

She made her way carefully down the last of the path—a path by courtesy, now. The Hudson stretched out before her, and the gentle slope of the eastern bank. Here on the western bank, they were hundreds of feet above the surface of the river, and the cottage was perched on the very edge of a sheer drop to the water below. A racket like roaring surf momentarily assailed her ears, accompanied by the lonely wail of a train whistle; a southbound freight train was running on the tracks far below.

*The loveliest roses. Indeed.*

The fence, and the cottage itself, were covered in roses—red, white, yellow, pink—and every single one of them was in full bloom.

Roses, Ria told the roses firmly, bloom in June, not November.

The roses were unimpressed.

She made her way to the gate. This close, the scent of roses was intoxicating, and Ria could feel the tingle of Elven magic that had coaxed them to bloom out of season. She lifted the latch of the gate and walked inside.

The whole of the garden had been devoted to roses. She was no expert, but it seemed to her that everything here was the older varieties—nothing from later than a century or so ago, at least. These were roses from a time when roses had been prized for their fragrance above all things. The scent was intense enough to drink in like wine.

She walked through the roses and up to the front door. Through the overgrowth of roses, she could barely make out the enamel plaque beside the door: AVALON COTTAGE.

*Looks like you've come to the right place.*

There was an antique bellpull beside the door, and a brass knocker in the shape of a grinning woodland imp holding a ring in its jaws. She was hesitating between the two when the door swung open.

"Come in, Miss Llewellyn," Inigo Moonlight said. "I have been expecting you."

\* \* \*

"I do hope you didn't have any difficulty finding me?" Mr. Moonlight said, pouring tea.

"None to speak of," Ria said politely, accepting the delicate porcelain cup. She sniffed the sweet scent of oranges and cloves appreciatively. It was herb tea, of course. Inigo Moonlight would as soon drink rat poison as caffeine—sooner, in fact. The rat poison probably wouldn't hurt him.

He had not bothered to cast *aglamourie* about himself, and appeared before her in his true form, though dressed in mundane, if rather old-fashioned, clothing. He was quite the oldest Sidhe she had ever imagined seeing. All the elves were fair-skinned, but Moonlight's skin was nearly translucent with age. His hair was white in a way that suggested that all color had been bleached from it by time. How old could he be? A thousand? More?

But his eyes were still the intense green of cedars in twilight, and age, whatever cosmetic changes it had wrought, had not enfeebled him.

She was resigned to a certain amount of pleasantries and commonplaces, but Moonlight surprised her by coming quickly to the point, once he had settled her with tea and cookies in the parlor overlooking the garden with its splendid view of roses and the river.

"You will be eager to hear my report. And I confess I was preparing to contact you, as there has been an alarming new development in the past week. I shall, of course, at your pleasure, continue to pursue it as well as the other matters you have asked me to consider, but it had occurred to me that it might possibly be a problem in a sphere in which you yourself might be better equipped to, shall we say,



confront the considerations of the world?"

"Something new?" Ria asked, leaning forward. "With Wheatley?"

"Indeed." Inigo leaned back, setting down his own cup of tea untasted and steeping his fingers. "The complete details are in my report, but—to summarize—Parker Wheatley has *not* succeeded either in forging a new Underhill alliance or in successfully making an overture to any member of either Court. Nor have he and his Paranormal Defense Initiative captured any member of any Court, Bright or Dark, High or Low."

"That's good news," Ria said.

"What I am about to tell you is not. I have discovered that Wheatley is making ever-so-discreet inquiries about *De Rebus Nefandis*, a ninth-century grimoire—or, more properly, a book which could be used to construct one. Why this is a matter of particular concern is that *De Rebus Nefandus*—'Concerning Forbidden Things,' as the title might be rendered in English—describes the ancient spells once known to humans, that could compel the Sidhe. Though he did not write them down in his book, the ancient monk who is the author of this tome described them well enough that a superior magician might—would!—be able to either reconstruct them or create something similar, if he could study the only extant text describing them."

"'Only'?" Ria asked. "There's only one copy of the book?"

"The only copy that survives is in the Vatican Library," Moonlight said. "Unfortunately, Mr. Wheatley now knows it is there."

"And," Ria said, "if he gets it . . . ?"

"If he has it, and a Mage to do his bidding, that Mage may call us and force us to appear, bind us, compel us, force us to do his bidding and work no harm against him." Moonlight sighed, shaking his head. "From what you have told me, and what I have since learned from my own young operatives, it would be unfortunate in the extreme were Mr. Wheatley to discover some way to acquire *De Rebus*, or to gain sufficient access to it for his fell purposes."

It would be like Wheatley having Aerune back—on a leash. Ria didn't care for the idea. But something else interested her as well. Normally the Sidhe were impervious to the usual run of sorcery and human magic. The only way to take them out was Elven magic or sheer superior firepower, mundane or magical. Imagine having a set of spells custom-tailored to tie them up in knots . . .

"I'm not suggesting that we let Wheatley get his hands on this book," Ria said slowly, "but I've seen the damage the Dark Court can do to people's lives. Do you really think that humans having a magical defense against the Sidhe is such a bad thing? Maybe everyone needs a few spells like that."

Moonlight picked up his teacup and sipped from it. He did not answer her directly.

"Perhaps you will forgive me for speaking so plainly, but I fear it is the privilege of the old to lecture, and the burden of the young to listen. I have seen much in my life, both good and bad. . . . Magic is for the elves, Dreams for the humans, Miss Llewellyn," he said gently. "Give either race what is the other's birthright, and it does not go well for them, in the end. Oh, the magic of a few does not hurt us—but magic in the hands of the many would be devastating. But without humans, we elves cannot survive, nor would humans long survive without us, I think. You know it to be true of your own knowledge, for did

not your young Bard once see a vision of what the world would be like, did the portals no longer connect our two worlds? For each race, a living death, followed by death in truth, so much is the fate of each race intertwined."

Ria thought back to what Eric had told her of his vision of an L. A. in which Perenor had harnessed the Sun-Descending Nexus for his own personal use. A grey, bleak Orwellian place, where no one laughed, no one dreamed . . .

Was that what the elves—who did not dream themselves—gave humans? Dreams?

"So what you're saying is that elves and humans *need* each other?" Ria asked dubiously.

"Danu created us both," Moonlight answered ambiguously. "And humans and elves both are Her children. Each supplies what the other lacks. Though woe betide he, Sidhe or human, who tries to take it for himself."

It wasn't exactly a straight answer, but Ria supposed she was used to that. She already knew that a Sidhe who tried to dream was risking—and often finding—death. And as for humans who practiced magic, well, the burn rate there was just as high, if not higher.

"But Eric is a magician, and he's human," Ria said, puzzled.

"Your young friend Eric is a *Bard*," Moonlight said, correcting her gently. "There have always been Bards among the Earthborn; it is a power they are born with, not something culled from ancient books and pacts with powers best left unroused by humans. A Bard is not a Magus."

Moonlight might see a distinction there, but it was a bit subtle for her. Eric quacked like a duck, after all. He cast spells—didn't that make him a magician?

She shrugged. Arguing with the elves was like riddling with Dragons. Nothing good ever came of it. They returned to the topic of Wheatley.

"We know he doesn't have that book. But he might have a magician. If he does, I need to know," Ria said. "And—obviously—to make arrangements to remove the magician from the PDI before either one can do any harm. Meanwhile, I'll keep working on getting the PDI shut down. If they don't have any real results to show, it shouldn't be too difficult."

"If Parker Wheatley does have a compliant magician, *De Rebus Nefandis* may not be as safe as we hope," Moonlight said solemnly. "The days when the Vatican Library was properly sealed and warded are long past, I fear, and any competent Earthborn Mage may summon one of the Lesser Host to do his bidding. It would be a simple matter to send such a creature to steal the volume—and what I can imagine, Wheatley and his Mage will stumble onto, eventually," Moonlight said unhappily.

"Which means I'd better not waste any time," Ria said briskly. "Looks like I won't be spending the weekend leaf-peeping after all. It's a bit late for it, anyway."

"I shall telephone you if I learn anything of urgency," Moonlight said, surprising her. "Come into the garden. I shall cut some roses for you to take with you."

\* \* \*

Heading back toward the city—the cockpit of the Jaguar fragrant with both the scent of roses and the scent of the small parcel of orange-vanilla cookies that Mr. Moonlight had urged upon her at the last moment—Ria's mind roved over all the things Inigo Moonlight had told her, not the least of them the strange interdependency between elves and humans.

He'd spoken as if humans and magic should be completely separate—as if no human should have sorcerous powers, only Gifts and Talents like Eric's or Kayla's. But that only made Ria wonder even more furiously: What about the Guardians?

*They* had magic.

Where did *they* fit into Inigo Moonlight's cosmology?

\* \* \*

It was evening by the time she reached her apartment. Ria took the time to arrange the flowers in a bowl on her coffee table—the huge creamy-pink blossoms made an odd counterpoint to the starkly functional slab of black granite—then phoned Eric.

He wasn't home, and his cell wasn't answering. Neither was Kayla's. She sighed, and called his apartment back to leave a longer message on his home phone, sent one to Kayla as well, then settled down to read Moonlight's report.

It was handwritten, of course, and even though the pages of Spenserian script were as flawlessly clear as any professional calligrapher's, she still found it rather heavy going. But it was all there—plenty of nothing, in exhaustive detail. Wheatley had no Otherworld contacts—and apparently, until very recently, hadn't even had any particular idea of how to go about looking for them properly.

She muttered to herself, setting the report aside. She wondered if Wheatley *had* actually managed to get his hands on a magician—and if he had, if it was one of the rare competent ones who actually knew what he was doing and had the power to do it. Then she dismissed that aspect of the problem from her mind entirely. Let Moonlight follow it up. That was what she was paying him for. She'd attack the problem of Wheatley from another angle entirely.

Pulling out her PDA, Ria opened it to her address book, picked up her phone again, and began making calls.

\* \* \*

In the last two days, the two of them had hit up every shelter and flop in Lower Manhattan, and come up dry. And they still had a lot of places to check. On the other hand, Kayla had to admit, Eric was really getting into the role of obsessive weirdo.

He'd probably have still been at it tonight if she hadn't dragged him home with a combination of pleading and threats, pointing out that he wasn't going to do anybody any good—particularly Magnus—if he collapsed himself.

There was no magical trace of Magnus anywhere around the shelters, but they still had the list of addresses that Serafina had given Hosea. If Kayla could get Hosea to sit on Eric long enough, maybe she could convince him to let her check out some of those on her own. It wasn't like it would be all that dangerous, particularly in daylight or early evening when the inhabitants would all be sound asleep—or

out.

Or maybe early morning. Yeah, that'd work. Not only would Eric still be asleep, so would everybody at her destination. Runaways, like any other small scavenger, were creatures of twilight and the night, sleeping as far into the day as they could manage. Besides, that way they slept through the heat of the day in summer, and were awake for the worst of the cold in winter. So that was how she'd handle it. And that way she wouldn't have to talk Hosea into going along with her plan.

She finally got Eric herded back into Guardian House, and down to her basement apartment.

"Have food," Kayla said firmly. "And you need to eat."

\* \* \*

The basement apartment was tiny—one room, with a cubbyhole kitchen and a small bathroom with a stall shower. There was only one tiny window—at ground level, which meant it was high up in the wall.

When she'd moved in, Kayla had painted: the walls were black, stenciled with Celtic borders halfway up their height in a glittery dark purple. The ceiling was the same deep purple as the Celtic border, painted with swirling clouds and a yellow crescent moon by one of the House's more artistic tenants. A bead curtain of iridescent dark purple moons and stars had been set up to screen the studio's kitchen from the rest of the space, and a long mirror wreathed in black silk vines and roses had been hung on the bathroom door. The battered linoleum floor had disappeared under several moth-eaten but still serviceable Oriental rugs, and the small window was garlanded in a black lace curtain. Fortunately the furniture—a futon, several bookcases, a table, and some chairs, were spatter-painted in lurid shades of pink, green, and purple, or she'd never have been able to find them.

Eric found the effect claustrophobic—the dark colors made the small space smaller—but he didn't have to live here, and Kayla seemed to like it.

"I'm thinking of repainting," Kayla said, as she vanished into the kitchen. The bead curtain swished and jingled around her, glittering in the light of several floor lamps.

"Too cheerful for you?" Eric gibed, sitting down on the futon.

"Everybody likes a change," Kayla called back. He heard the whoosh as the old gas stove lit and the clatter of pots and kettle. She came out with a plate of sliced bread and butter.

"Tea in a minute, chili to follow. I was thinking maybe purple—you know, bring the ceiling color down? And pale toward the floor, almost lilac. And then stencil silver stars all over everything. Doesn't take much talent for that. And Ria called. She wants you to call her back, but it can wait until after you eat. Won't take that long for the three-alarm to heat up."

Eric picked up a slice of bread—thick bakery slices, with a quarter-inch of butter on top—and bit into it, only then realizing how hungry he was.

"You keep your phone in the refrigerator?"

"Wireless e-mail. And on the refrigerator, thank you very much. You may have noticed this is not exactly the New York Hilton."

"*Have*seen bigger closets," Eric admitted. Kayla's laptop was crammed into one corner on a triangular desk Hosea had built for her, surrounded by stacks of textbooks and a growing collection of electronic peripherals.

"But it's mine-all-mine," Kayla said with satisfaction. She walked back into the kitchen. "Besides, the rent's good."

\* \* \*

After dinner, Eric went up to his own apartment. He thought of going out again—it wasn't that late yet—but he supposed he should at least call Ria back first, and maybe see if Hosea was around. He shouldn't be sluffing off his work with Hosea, and he ought to see how Hosea was coming with that task he'd set him.

But Ria first.

She answered on the first ring.

"Hello, Eric. I was wondering when you'd surface."

Caller ID was a wonderful thing, Eric reflected. It was one of the many shocks, large and small, that had awaited him when he'd first returned to the World Above from his long sojourn in Underhill. Being able to tell who was calling before you picked up the phone had been the stuff of science fiction when he'd been a kid. Now it was the stuff of everyday life.

"I got your e-mail. I thought you were supposed to be away all weekend."

"Plans changed. I don't suppose I need to ask if you've had any luck?" Ria responded.

Eric sighed, a wordless answer. "Kayla and I have had an extensive tour of all the places tourists don't visit, but no luck. A few more places to try . . . Give me until Monday evening, okay? If I can't find him then by magic, we'll try professional help. And how was *your* day?"

Ria chuckled ruefully. "I found a place where roses bloom in December, even in the World Above. I met a woman who juggles ferrets. And I learned a couple of things I didn't want to know. The usual sort of day."

"Sounds fairly typical," Eric agreed blandly—and maybe it was, for people like them. "Roses in December?"

"I admit it's only November, but I'm sure they'll still be in bloom next month," Ria said, sounding faintly puzzled by the notion. "Listen, I— Oh, damn, there's my other line. I have to go."

"Talk to you soon," Eric agreed.

He closed the phone—another item out of a *Star Trek* future—and regarded it unhappily. He knew that calling in help was the right thing to do, but the self-imposed deadline didn't make him any happier. A little more than 48 hours, and some faceless professionals—albeit ones he'd brought in himself—would be out on the streets looking for Magnus.

And if Eric's brother realized they were looking for him . . .

*He'll do what I would have done. Run like hell.*

Eric sighed, and got to his feet. He'd go out again after all. He reached for his tattered trench coat, and stopped. For where he was going now, he needed a different look entirely.

\* \* \*

She did not know how long she had been seeking the boy, but Rionne ferch Rianten was beginning to despair of finding him.

Bad enough that she had lost him. That was shame enough for a thousand lifetimes.

But not to find him again . . .

The horror of it was nearly enough to drive her mad.

Her hound was dead, and her elvensteed left behind to heal, on the long road that had brought her here, and Rionne missed them desperately, for they would have been aid and companions in her search of this mortal hellpit.

She had followed Jachiel through Gate after Gate, ignoring all treaties sworn by her masters, passing through lands where worse than the Great Death would await her were she discovered therein. And no matter how hard she rode, no matter what spells she summoned to her aid, Jachiel had evaded her.

Until she had followed him here.

Here to where the air stank of deathmetal and of death itself, and her powers failed her in mad prankish ways. But the bond between Protector and Charge endured where nothing else could, and so she knew that Jachiel was here. . . .

Somewhere.

Should one hair upon his head have been harmed by those who had brought him here, her vengeance would be terrible, worthy of the songs of a thousand Bards, but she must find him first. And the task of finding him, that should have been so simple, had become unbearably hard, and Rionne feared that she would die without completing it.

She knew she was dying now—that something beyond her understanding was happening to her in this place. Did she not find herself wandering the streets through the dark hours like one bespelled, with no notion of how she had come to be where she was? Sometimes she thought she almost slipped into Dreaming, thinking she had found him again, but it was never so. She was always alone, wandering strange human streets, her very bones aching with the pain of the lost children that she felt all around her, for a Protector's heart was bound to the care of children.

It was as much as she could do to survive on these streets at all, but the closest Gate—the one she had come through to reach this place—lay firmly in the control of Gabrevys's enemies, and she dared not use it to slip back Underhill to rest herself. With Jachiel to accompany her, she might beg truce and safe passage through that Gate, for no one—no sane creature, which these mortals were not—would harm a child. Without him, she dared not, lest knights of the Seleighe Court set upon her and slay her for trespass and truce-breaking, leaving her dead with her task undone.

It was not death Rionne feared—for she had sworn an Oath at Jachiel's Naming to give up her life for his should that be needed—but to fail with Jachiel unsafe was an unendurable thought. How could the child, how could any child be safe here?

She could not save them all. That was the bitterest pain. She roamed the streets at night—for the glare of the sun sapped her strength even further, and she had none to spare—seeking the one to whom she was bound, and heard them, all of them, calling out for someone to help them, to save them from the horrors their mortal kindred inflicted upon them.

She could not save them. She could not save them all, she could not even save the ones she heard. . . .

"Please don't! Please make it stop!"

The cry cut through her like a knife of ice against her bones. Rionne dropped her sword, clutching her head with both gauntleted hands. *No*, she begged desperately. *You are not my Jachiel! I cannot help you!*

But the call, the pain, was too strong for her weakness. Somewhere a child was in danger. A child needed her. They called to her in their dreams, in their waking, with their desperate hearts, willing her to serve their need. . . .

Her form began to shimmer, to change. Elven armor shimmered and flowed like water, becoming long pale draperies. Rionne forgot herself, forgot her name, forgot her purpose. Borne upon a tide of magic, weeping bloody tears of sorrow, she drifted toward the call. . . .

\* \* \*

Several hours later Eric was back at Guardian House again. He was considerably lighter in the pocket, as the old saying went, though he'd handed over the money more out of pity than out of any need to use bribes to solicit or compel the truth—a Bard, after all, was a master of Truth in all its guises.

He'd stopped first at Kinko's, where a little work had enabled him to copy and enlarge the photo of Magnus from the bus pass. Some Bardic magic had sharpened and enhanced the image, disguising its origins. Thus armed, he'd gone down to the West Side Highway, to talk to those who gathered there by night.

Yes, they'd seen him. Some of the ones who said that were even telling the truth. But those who were didn't know how to find him. Someone suggested asking Cleto, but when the name was mentioned, Eric knew that Cleto, whoever he was, was dead. There was no help to be had there.

They were young, terrifyingly so. Youth was their stock in trade, and they bartered it ruthlessly. They didn't know what to make of Eric, and though he ached for them, their hopelessness and their danger, he didn't know how to help them.

It was not that they were beyond help. It was that they needed more help than one man could give. And there were so very many of them.

In the end he left again, sick at heart, casting *aglamourie* over them so that they would forget he'd ever been there asking questions. Even if these children did not know Magnus, their friends might. A careless word, and Magnus would know that the hunt was near. Eric couldn't afford that.

When he got back to Guardian House, he saw that Hosea's lights were still on. He might as well stop in there to see if he could salvage something from the night.

\* \* \*

"Ah was hopin' you'd come around," Hosea said a few minutes later, when they were both seated in the Ozark Bard's warm and comfortable living room. "It's lookin' kinda like Ah've got a conflict o' interest, and Ah'm not sure what to do about it."

Hosea explained about having been called out Thursday night to the scene of a murder—which seemed to dovetail with a series of similar murders that the other three Guardians were investigating. And though there had been no trace of occult energy—not even the ghost of the murder victim—at the site, each of the deaths bore a similarity to the one Bloody Mary murder that Hosea *did* know of.

"So," Hosea shrugged, "is this Guardian business—or Bard business?"

Eric frowned, puzzled as well. He had to admit that he'd never encountered a situation quite like this before. He thought hard. "I'd have to say . . . if there's something unnatural out there killing people, that's probably Guardian business. But if it's somehow drawing its power from the shelter kids, then shutting that power off at the source is our business. So maybe it's both." And he felt his stomach twist when he said that, because the *last* time it had been both Bardic and Guardian business, it had ended with the death of one of the Guardians. "And in that case, how are you coming with the tunes, Hosea?"

For the next half hour, Eric listened to the pieces Hosea had composed: short simple songs, easy for a young child to sing and remember. None of them promising more than they could deliver. All offering messages of hope, and encouraging endurance.

Eric offered some advice, suggested a few changes here and there. But overall, the direction in which Hosea was going was good, and he found no fault with it.

Talk then turned to Eric's own quest, and there Eric had little either new or good to report.

"Starting Tuesday, I guess we're going to be doing it Ria's way. And I guess that's for the best," he said reluctantly.

"What's for the best is findin' the little'un," Hosea said firmly, "whatever that takes."

"I just keep feeling like I'm missing something," Eric said. "Something really obvious." He shook his head, unable to follow the vagrant thought to its source. He shrugged, letting it go. "And so to bed."

\* \* \*

The Place sort of quieted down after midnight. Everybody was usually out by then, doing whatever they thought they had to do to survive.

Magnus grimaced. They called it "going on dates," but their "dates" had precious little in common with the kind he'd heard about back home. Heard about, but never gone on himself, even though St. Augustine had been co-ed, because Mommy Dearest had been certain that nothing should stand in the way of his glorious future as the next Van Cliburn.



Next David Helfgott, more likely. He'd never bought into all that child prodigy crap his parents had been so obsessed with. There'd been a few authentic ones at Auggie-Dog, and Magnus knew he wasn't anything like that. Real kid geniuses tended to flare up early and crack up early, too, becoming pretty average adults if they stayed in the music field at all. Or else they went totally bonkers.

But after the last few days, he was starting to wonder. Maybe he really had been a musical genius. Because he *was* going crazy.

Magnus sat leaning against the wall, drumming gently on his sleeping bag with his sticks. The sound wasn't enough to wake Jaycie—nothing would wake Jaycie—and Ace was still up, reading by the light of a battery lamp. She was studying for her GEDs, though her chances of taking them, Magnus sometimes thought, were about as good as him getting into a band.

But he had to believe. He had to believe the three of them could get off the street. Somehow. Only he was starting to think it was going to be just the two of them . . . Ace and Jaycie. Because Magnus was starting to think he was losing it.

He'd managed to convince himself that *La Llorona* wasn't coming after him. Maybe the kids had it wrong. Maybe he was too old to bother with. Something. He'd started sticking close to The Place after dark, and had totally given up his late-night roaming, but lately, even during the day, he'd gotten the feeling he was being watched—that something was calling his name, just below the threshold of audibility.

But no matter how hard he tried, he could never see the watcher.

When that happened, he'd stopped going out at all, day or night, and that seemed to help, as if whatever was watching him couldn't see him here. But it hadn't done a thing about his dreams.

In them he was always running. Running from, running to—he was never sure. But running, and there was a voice calling him to come to it, calling urgently, desperately, longingly. And the voice was . . . himself?

He was definitely going over the edge.

"Do you ever stop doing that?" Ace said, without looking up from her book. She didn't sound angry, only curious.

"Nope," Magnus answered, without missing a beat. "You ever stop studying?"

"Try not to," Ace answered, still not looking up. "Never got much chance to, back . . . where I used to be."

"Well," Magnus said, pretending he hadn't heard the almost slip. "I never got much chance to do this, back where I used to be, either."

Ace closed her book with a sigh, marking her place carefully. "Well, that's enough of that for one night. Algebra—geometry—calculus! Lord have mercy!"

"They're not that hard," Magnus said, surprised.

Ace gave him a dour look.

"Well, they aren't," Magnus said defensively. "At least it isn't a bunch of dull novels or poems or something with a bunch of names and dates."

"Like English and history?" Ace said with a crooked smile. "Look here—and I don't mean to pry—but I'm guessing you'll need your certificate same as I will. If you're willing to help me with my hard parts, I can work with you on yours."

"Like I'm going to have to go to college to be a musician," Magnus scoffed.

Ace shrugged, turning away. "Just an idea."

"No—hey—wait—" For some reason, the idea of disappointing her made him feel bad. "It's a good idea. Not that I'm going to need it. But you will. And it'll pass the time."

"Well, I don't want to take you away from beating that sleeping bag to death. There might still be some life in it."

"No, really. When do we start?"

"Tomorrow," Ace said, smiling. "If I have to look at this fool book one more minute tonight I'll tear it up. Well, hello, Jaycie. Decided to join the world?"

Jaycie climbed out of his sleeping bag and wandered over to them, yawning. "I wanted to see what you were doing," he said, sitting down companionably halfway between them.

Without waiting to be asked, Ace passed him a Coke. It wasn't cold by any stretch of the imagination, but it was fairly cool, just from sitting out in here. The Place was warmer than being outside on the street, but that didn't mean it was *warm*.

"Sometimes I do wonder if you're part hummingbird," Ace said teasingly. "Live on sugar syrup and never gain an ounce."

"Perhaps I am," Jaycie said seriously.

He reached out and picked up Ace's book and paged through it curiously, but Magnus could tell he was only looking *at* it, not reading it. He'd never seen Jaycie actually read anything, and he was pretty sure by now that Jaycie couldn't. Maybe he was—what was that word? Dyslexic? Where you couldn't read or anything? It didn't really seem fair.

So when was it you started expecting life to be fair? Magnus thought sourly.

Jaycie closed the book carefully, and handed it back to Ace with a curiously formal gesture. "This is a work of great knowledge."

"Yeah. I just hope I can get all the 'great knowledge' out of it and into me," Ace said with a sigh.

"It will take time," Jaycie said.

"You got that right," Ace said. She came over and hugged him. "But don't you worry about it. I'll manage. And Magnus is going to help me."

"That's right," Magnus said impulsively, and was rewarded with one of Jaycie's most dazzling smiles.

"Then all is well, with friends to help," Jaycie said. He settled down next to Ace with a sigh of contentment. "Read to me?"

"Okay. Which one do you want?" Ace said. In addition to her textbooks, she had a small library of fantasy novels—scavenged, mostly, out of the dumpsters behind bookstores. Jaycie never tired of hearing the same stories over and over.

That was something Magnus had never been able to figure out. Fantasy. Trying to escape from the real world by reading about a bunch of things that weren't real, that you knew *couldn't* be real . . . he couldn't see the point. It was like trying to lie to yourself. It was more important to know about the way the world *really* worked, so you could do your best to avoid the next horrible surprise it set up for you.

But Ace liked them. And Jaycie liked them. So he kept his mouth shut.

"Read me the one about the elf who gets mugged," Jaycie said placidly. "I like that one."

"Just a couple of chapters, okay? It's long. Let me see if I can find it." Ace rummaged around for a few moments and came up with it—coverless, of course, and rain-spotted, its pages fanned out by many readings.

She sat down on her sleeping bag, next to her light, and patted the space beside her encouragingly. Jaycie came over and sat beside her, and after a moment, Magnus joined him, first tucking his drumsticks carefully away in his bag. The three of them settled down close together—it was warmer that way—and Ace opened the book, holding it so that the light from the lantern fell directly on the page, and started to read.

"Chapter One: Never Trust Anyone Over Thirty: It was April 30th and it was raining. . . ."

\* \* \*

Hell, Marley Bell had decided, was being willing to sell out your principles and not being able to find a buyer.

"Look," he said wearily to the man named Nichol. "If you don't understand what I'm telling you, at least write it down so that someone, sometime, will. Before you kill somebody else. There is a principle in the Art known as shielding. I suppose the mundane equivalent would be a force field. The idea is that nothing goes in, and nothing gets out. The magician controls his own shields. He opens them to admit those entities whom he summons, and to allow his evocations to go forth. There's more, but this is the bottom line, and this is where your problem is."

"And why is that?" Nichol said, as blandly as if they were discussing the weather.

Marley had decided some time before that he hated Nichol. It was the first of the many small defeats that had followed the first and largest, for he had set aside both love and hate years before. But he hated Nichol.

They were back in the interrogation chamber to which Marley had been brought on the first day he'd come here. The only other places he'd seen had been the small windowless cell where he slept and ate, and the workroom that had been set aside for his use. He wasn't sure how long he'd been here. It no

longer mattered. He was quite certain he was going to die here.

"Because this place is completely shielded and magic-dead," Marley said in a dull exasperated voice. "It is cut off from the Higher Planes. That means/am cut off from the Higher Planes."

At first he'd plotted rebellion—to send a cry for help, or at least a warning—out along the Astral Plane. His kidnappers had found and ransacked his sanctum, and brought everything here—his sword, his knives, all his magical tools and equipment. He'd had—so he thought—the means, even though they'd destroyed half his components with their ignorant meddling and the rest were woefully distempered and out of alignment, nearly useless to him.

At first they had intended to watch him work. He had pointed out that an observer would sabotage his attempt, not daring to object further. They had seemed to accept that, to his trembling relief.

But when he had stepped into the hexagram, even the simplest conjurations had been beyond him. Fire had not come to his summons, nor his familiar to his call, nor would an image form in the speculum-stone. All he had gotten for his efforts had been a crushing headache and a sense of emptiness, but he had continued trying until he was too exhausted to try any longer.

At least he was no longer afraid, at least not the way he had been. He'd despaired too far for that.

"Is all this mumbo-jumbo supposed to mean something to me?" Nichol said pleasantly, jarring Marley back to the unwelcome present.

"Surely you have a specialist to check my work and prove the truth of what I'm telling you," Marley said blankly. It was beyond belief that they didn't. Even a non-Operant . . . but if they didn't, he could be doing anything, committing any fraud—

"We trust you," Nichol said, and hit him.

The beating was dispassionate, delivered in a thoroughly professional manner, but after the first few blows, Marley was in no position to appreciate its finer points, even if he had possessed the particular esoteric skills to assess it. He screamed and cowered, desperately trying to escape that which could not be escaped.

"But maybe you'd better try harder next time," Nichol said, and left him.

\* \* \*

When he left Bell's cell, Nichol went up several floors, to the Director's office, and waited to be admitted. He didn't have to wait long.

"How is our project coming?" Wheatley asked genially. He did not invite Nichol to sit down.

"The subject's complaining that the building's shielded," Nichol said laconically. He smiled slightly. "I encouraged him to think outside the box."

Wheatley grimaced. "Well, of course it's shielded! We'd have Spookies all over us otherwise; if we're looking for them, naturally they're looking for us. They're clever, dangerous, and completely without mercy, Mr. Nichol. Always remember that. In the meantime, I trust you didn't damage our little lab rat?"

"He'll be ready to go again in a couple of hours. I didn't even break the skin," Nichol said, with the assurance of long experience.

"Interesting that he should mention it, though," Wheatley said musingly. "There's no way he could have known unless he'd been told. But the Spookies are known to have human agents . . . it's possible this Bell might be one of them. In which case, he might be useful to us in another way, assuming the creatures feel any loyalty at all to their assets. After we've exhausted every other possibility of course. And thoroughly debriefed him."

"I'll make a note in his file, sir," Nichol said.

## Chapter Eight: Carolan's Welcome

On Monday, when they weren't even looking, they found him.

Kayla and Eric had spent the morning checking abandoned buildings on the Lower East Side—dangerous in itself, as condemned buildings were condemned for a very good reason, and most of them were falling to pieces. Eric was feeling cross and absent-minded—and trying hard not to share either emotion with Kayla. Not only was getting uptown to keep his appointment with Oriana going to take a big bite out of the afternoon, he'd promised to see Ria this evening to make arrangements to bring in the professionals.

When he came out of Oriana's—the session hadn't gone well, more indication of how foul his luck was running lately—Kayla had suggested cutting across town and seeing what they could turn up at this end of Manhattan.

"Hosea said that Serafina said there was supposed to be a couple of flops up here somewhere around St. John. With all the rebuilding going on, there's a lot of tenements waiting to be torn down," Kayla said encouragingly.

"Sure," Eric had answered. He didn't have any better ideas. Just a lot of dead ends. He'd barely managed to keep from snapping at Kayla when, after they'd crossed Lex, she'd spotted a grocery store and wanted to stop. Didn't she ever stop eating? Where was she putting it all?

"Chips, soda. Feed the beast. It won't take long."

He followed Kayla along the aisles—more from inertia than any interest in making his own purchases—as she dawdled along. He forced himself to remain calm. It wasn't as though there was anywhere he actually needed to be, after all. All they had to look forward to was an afternoon of running down more dead ends. Even a false lead would be more action than they'd gotten so far.

He was watching his feet, rather than his partner, when Kayla suddenly stopped and he almost ran into her. He glared at her with irritation, but she wasn't paying attention to him.

He began to give her a little shove to get her moving again.

"*Eric!*" Kayla hissed, elbowing him savagely in the ribs. Eric looked where she was looking, just as she

kicked him painfully in the ankle as a further inducement to silence and attention.

Magnus was walking along at the other end of the aisle, pushing a cart.

Eric quickly looked away, feigning an intense interest in the row of bottles in front of him.

There was a girl with Magnus. The two of them were concentrating on the list the girl held in her hand. Eric moved casually around the end of the row, where he could watch them more easily. He didn't dare use the least hint of Bardic magic, not if Magnus' own magic had awakened. And it did seem to have—he could feel it from here. Talent, raw and untrained.

From behind an end-cap display of potato chips, Eric watched his brother. The teenager looked healthy—not thin, not drug-wasted. Was he in love with the girl beside him? They certainly seemed to be very close. . . .

"When they leave, I'm going to follow them. *Alone*," Kayla said firmly. "Don't argue. There isn't time. One can do it better'n two. I'll fit in, and they can't be going far. Look how much they're buying."

Eric stole another glance. It was true. The shopping cart was filling up with bags and boxes. Nothing that needed a refrigerator or a stove to cook it, he noticed. In fact, most of it was ready to eat.

"All right," he said reluctantly.

"Stay back here," Kayla said, kicking him again to underscore her point. "Learn to love frozen foods."

She drifted away, leaving Eric to watch Magnus and the unknown girl until they, too, passed out of sight. Kayla was right—wherever Magnus had found to live, it must be nearby.

He didn't want to leave following them to her, but he had to admit the young Healer was right. If he couldn't use his magic to disguise his presence, they might notice him far more readily than they'd notice someone close to their own age.

When he was sure the three of them had left, Eric picked up a bag of chips and a bottle of water to account for his presence in the store, and went up to the front.

Paying for his purchases, Eric went outside. The street was empty—at least of the three people who interested him. And he and Kayla hadn't had a chance to set up a rendezvous point afterward.

For a moment, he panicked, then he told himself not to act like an overprotective father. Kayla had more up-to-date street smarts than he did. To a Healer, his magical aura was unmistakable.

*Join the twenty-first century, bonehead. Remember your cell?* Besides, they both had their phones with them. All she had to do was call if she needed him or couldn't find him.

Eric went to find a reasonable place to set up his pitch.

Before he began to play, he took his flute apart and removed the strand of Magnus' hair from around the mouthpiece. It wouldn't do to call him back now, when Kayla was tracing him to where he slept. Then he reassembled his instrument again and began to play.

The flute's notes soared through the chill November air—songs now of hope and possibility, not longing

and loss. Passersby stopped—whether out of curiosity at seeing a street busker so far uptown, or drawn by the joyous optimism of the music—and the flute case slowly filled with coins. Small ones, but amazing that anyone up here felt moved to part with even a penny.

He'd been playing for almost an hour when his phone rang.

He paused, and fumbled it out of his pocket.

"Hiya. I'm over at the diner by the 6 at 103rd," Kayla said. "Wanna meet me?"

\* \* \*

"Well?" Eric demanded a few minutes later, sliding into the booth where Kayla sat hunched over a cup of coffee. He was so impatient to hear what she had to say that he was tempted to reach over and shake it out of her.

She gave him a smirk. "Chill, Lone Stranger. We can pick them up any time. It's a big place off 110th. I followed along from about six blocks back, but that's where they went, damn skippy. I figured we could go back and check it out together early tomorrow morning—safest time; they should all be asleep then. But I figure we need a plan, seeing as we've found them."

She made a rude noise at the look of bafflement that crossed Eric's face. "A plan?" she repeated. "Phase One is now complete, Earth Commander. We have tracked the tiger to its lair. Now what?"

\* \* \*

*Find him and make him safe*, Ria had said. Well, they'd found him. But as for making him safe . . . how was he going to do that?

Eric remembered his own days on the street, the early ones before he hooked up with the RenFaire crowd and got himself a seat in a van full of peregrinating buskers, on the run from he wasn't sure what. If someone had walked up to him offering to fix everything, he would have been sure it was some kind of a con. And *he* hadn't been a seventeen-year-old, justifiably paranoid runaway! Magnus would have every reason to be doubly certain that anybody offering him sanctuary was running some kind of a scam on behalf of his parents . . . particularly someone who said he was a brother he had no reason to believe existed. Why should Magnus trust him? Or believe a word he had to say, for that matter?

Of course, no matter how strong Magnus' innate Gift was, Eric had the advantage of training and experience. He could certainly overpower Magnus and whisk him Underhill before Magnus knew what was happening.

Sure. Treat him like an object, the way everyone else has his entire life. Force him to do what I want, just because I'm older and stronger than he is, and I think I know what he needs better than he does. There has to be a better way!

"If I could just get him to trust me," Eric said slowly. "Get to know him . . . try to explain . . ."

"Well, getting us in there where you can talk to him shouldn't be that hard," Kayla said. "They probably aren't the only two denning up there, especially considering all the stuff they were buying. I just need to get an invitation from one of the other kids living there to get us in."

"You think?" Eric asked doubtfully. Those kids—there wouldn't be one of them that was over eighteen, he was sure. He had never felt so old before. "I mean, you know what we used to say, 'never trust anyone over thirty.' You don't think they'd figure me for someone trying to hustle them?"

"Well—not if you make like Rainman," Kayla replied, with a sly grin. "Someone whose ducks aren't all in a row—harmless, but dippy. Then you use your winning ways to get next to him, scope out the situation, and figure out where to go from there," she added, as if it were the easiest thing in the world.

Eric thought about it. It seemed like an elegant solution, even if he *would* have to give an impression of a lunatic. If he could get the chance to talk to Magnus, get an idea of what his situation was—or what *Magnus* thought it was. The best thing would be to find some way to break through the spell barrier Magnus had surrounded himself with, so that Eric's own magic could work reliably, and so if Magnus ran again, Eric would have a tag on him.

And at least this way he'd have something to go to Ria with. If he'd already *found* Magnus, there was no reason to go searching for him, and no reason to hire more specialists.

For to see Mad Tom O'Bedlam, ten thousand miles I'd travel. The song rang through his head, unbidden. Mad Maudlin goes on dirty toes to save her shoes from gravel. . . .

So here they were, Mad Tom and Mad Maudlin.

"It sounds like the best idea . . . if we can pull it off," Eric said slowly. "But I can't use magic to get us in. He'll sense it."

Kayla made a face. "Every problem in the world doesn't have to be solved by magic, Ultra Bard," she said. "Now come on. There's an alleyway outside the building. Let's find some place where we can watch it . . . and be inconspicuous about it. It's going to be a long cold night, whether we pull this off or not."

"Just give me a minute to call Ria once we get outside," Eric said. "I've got to break a date."

Not that he thought Ria would be unhappy about that. At least, not this time.

\* \* \*

She was sure they'd been followed, but Ace hadn't seen anybody. She didn't say anything. It had been hard enough talking Magnus into coming out with her, but he'd been jumpy and cross all day (more than usual), and she'd thought a breath of air—even New York air—would do him some good. Besides, if he came with her on her shopping run, she could buy more stuff, and she wouldn't have to worry as much about being jumped on the street.

She wondered what was bothering him. In particular and lately, of course. Probably somebody was trying to rope him into something—everybody was always trying that. So far he'd had the sense to stay clear, just as she had, but the offers Magnus was probably getting were undoubtedly more tempting than hers. They wouldn't just be asking him to sell his body. No, they'd be asking him to run drugs, or numbers, or do any number of other things that *seemed* cleaner but were just as bad—and far more dangerous over time.

But lecturing him would do neither of them any good—and would probably drive him right into doing them.



When they got back and divvied up what she'd bought, she went to check on Jaycie, as usual. He was right where she'd left him, and Ace breathed a sigh of relief.

He'd given her an almighty fright this morning. She'd been having trouble sleeping because it was so cold. The other kids were still coming in and out, so she hadn't really been doing a good job of getting her head down, and the place was fairly well-lit besides, and one time, when she'd looked over to where Jaycie slept, he hadn't been there.

She'd been terrified. She'd never seen him leave The Place—never!

She'd sat bolt upright, trying to figure out what to do. Wake Magnus? Go out looking for him herself? She'd worked herself up into a fine tizzy and had just been about to shake Magnus awake when Jaycie had come strolling in, innocent as you please.

She'd realized then she was just being foolish. He'd just gone to the bathroom. He couldn't spend *every* minute in bed, after all.

But then he'd seen she was awake, and smiled—that heartbreakingly beautiful smile of his—and taken her hand. And before she'd realized quite what he was about, Jaycie was back in bed and she was holding a wad of money that would choke a Central Park carriage horse.

She hadn't told Magnus about that, either.

But now . . .

"He's getting sicker," she said harshly, looking down at the sleeping boy. He was thinner than before—she'd seen it clearly this morning when he'd been up and about. And paler than he had been, almost as if there were a light shining through him. And he slept even more than he had when she'd first come here. Now Jaycie slept almost all the time.

"He isn't," Magnus said stubbornly. "He isn't sick."

"He is," Ace said, not bothering to lower her voice. "He always wakes up when I come back—but he isn't waking up now."

Magnus dropped to his knees beside Jaycie and shook him roughly, which just went to prove that he was as scared as she was, for all his fine talk.

"Magnus, no—" Ace cried, but it was too late.

You did *not* startle Jaycie, or wake him up suddenly. Both of them knew that. But she'd frightened Magnus, and he'd forgotten.

She heard a cry—Jaycie's—and then *something* happened—she didn't know what. And then a yelp from Magnus as he went flying across the room, knocking bags and jar candles every whichway. And Jaycie was on his feet, staring around himself wildly, about to run.

"Jaycie?" Ace said softly, moving a little so he'd focus on her. She stepped back, not forward. "It's me—Ace. We didn't mean to wake you up."

Now *that* was a flat lie, but she didn't think he was quite awake yet. The important thing was to wake him up the rest of the way, so he'd know where he was before he went and did something almighty foolish. He looked terrified—his face was as white as scraped bone, and he was panting just as if he'd run a dozen blocks.

"Jaycie?" she said again, very softly. "It's okay. You're safe here."

Finally his eyes focused and he saw her. Some of the wild look left his eyes. "Ace?" he said. "I thought—I saw—I dreamed—"

He reached for her—a rare gesture—and she went to him, holding him tight. She could feel him tremble as she held him, and worse, she could feel how the layers of cloth collapsed inward at her touch. He was nothing but skin and bones underneath all those clothes.

"It's all right," she said again. "I'm sorry we scared you."

He leaned his head on her shoulder, sighing deeply.

"They won't find me here," he said, and there was a faint note of triumph in his voice. "They'll *never* find me here."

And if she could get her hands on the people he was running from, Ace thought grimly, she'd break every promise she'd ever made to herself and sing one more song, a song with every ounce of her Gift in it, a song that would let them feel one-tenth of the pain and fear they'd made Jaycie feel. She knew it was wrong, and she didn't care: wasn't it wrong to do something like this to someone as just plain *good* as Jaycie was? He deserved to be with people who could take care of him, not hiding out here.

"That's right, honey-lamb," she said, giving him one last hug. "Nobody's going to find any of us. Ever. Now—since you're up anyway, why don't you come and see what I've brought back from the store? I got some nice soup—if Magnus hasn't gone and spilled all of it," she added unfairly, "and it should still be hot. You need to get something into your stomach before you start in on that nasty chocolate of yours."

She stepped away from him and—finally—looked to see if Magnus was okay. He was: Jaycie hadn't *meant* to hurt him. He'd just been startled. And the bag with the cartons of soup and the coffee hadn't been among the ones he'd knocked over, so that was good.

"Must I?" Jaycie said plaintively.

"You must," Ace said firmly. She breathed an inward sigh of relief. At least he felt so guilty about hitting Magnus that she could get him to eat some real food for a change!

"See?" Magnus said smugly, getting to his feet and dusting himself off. "I told you he was fine." He went over to get the soup. "You want chicken noodle or vegetable beef?"

But Ace didn't think so. Magnus didn't want to believe it, but she had eyes in her head, and she knew what she knew. And she didn't think Jaycie was fine at all.

\* \* \*

Kayla had been right about "long" and "cold." She and Eric watched from various places along the street as evening faded into night. About half a dozen kids came slinking out of the alleyway at various

times—none of them either Magnus or the girl he'd been with—heading toward Broadway. When Kayla followed one of them, Eric followed her.

They passed along the northern boundary of Central Park, heading west, and for the next several hours drifted up and down Broadway, barely keeping each other in sight. Eric was careful to stay in character—not hard, for someone with his years of RenFaire experience, though this was a Faire of a different sort, one in which he didn't think it would be reasonable to try to set up a pitch. This was a rough, edgy crowd, with its mind on everything but music.

The weather was bad, cold and thinking about raining or worse, but never quite able to make up its mind. Despite the weather's nastiness, the streets were full, with people going home, people going out to eat, and people just eddying about.

As the night wore on, the people who had places to go to diminished, but the people whose world was the street remained. A couple of times Eric saw police cruisers make slow passes through the area, but they didn't stop. They were looking for bigger fish than were to be found around here.

He had an academic understanding of what had to be going on around him—drugs and prostitution—but it wasn't all that easy to spot at first. After a while, he was able to pick out the girls, and realize that the ones getting so cheerfully and quickly into the cars that pulled up to the curb didn't actually know the drivers. . . .

He kept an eye on the ones who'd come out of the building that Kayla had targeted, but none of them seemed to get into any of the cars. They hovered around the edges of things, looking nervous and hopeful.

Around midnight, Eric stopped at an open-air juice counter, feeling oddly like an extra in *Bladerunner*. It was on the corner, and the counter went around two sides. You could order greasy gyros, watered-down sugary juice, or toxic coffee, and a purchase bought you a chance to lean at the counter while you consumed it. Eric chose the juice. The awning kept off some of the not-quite rain. Despite the weather and the hour, there were a lot of people around, none of them the kind Eric would have freely chosen as companions.

There was a time, once, when you wouldn't even have noticed them, as long as you had a bottle or a nickel bag in your pocket. He thought back to those days and shuddered.

"Hey, Boss, buy me a coffee?" Kayla whined, in a voice completely unlike her own. "C'mon," she wheedled. "It's cold. I know you got money."

"Buy your own coffee," Eric grumbled, not looking at her.

"Mean," Kayla sulked, pushing in next to him. "Don't be mean to Kayla, Boss, I'll be so nice to you, I'll—"

"If Ria heard you talking like that, she'd boil me in oil first and ask questions later," Eric whispered, fishing a dollar out of his pocket.

"Girl's gotta have a hobby," Kayla retorted in the same low tones.

The counterman brought over a coffee, taking Eric's money. Kayla dumped several packets of sugar into it, sipped, and shuddered.

"We're doing good," Kayla said. "I got to strike up a conversation with Chinaka—she's the black girl we saw in the pink jacket, the one with the silver lipstick? All the pimps around here run strings, and all their strings have territories. You poach on somebody else's territory, you'll get cut up bad. So they're looking for someplace that nobody else is working. That's why they're just hanging around, not going on dates."

"Jesus," Eric said feelingly. Kayla shrugged, but Eric could see she was keeping her face studiously blank.

*What am I doing—dragging someone who's a Healer and an Empath out into this?*

"My shields are a lot better than the last time I lived on the street," Kayla said quietly. "I'm fine."

"Since when can you read minds?" Eric said, startled.

"Not hard to guess. You'd better do a better job of getting your game face on with them than with me," Kayla said simply. "Or they're going to think you're an undercover cop. Now, we'll just hang around for a couple of hours, and look pathetic and homeless. Maybe they'll take us home to Mama." She grinned wickedly. "That's your job. Remember, they won't expect us to tell them much. I'm Kayla. I don't have a place to stay. I steal things. You're . . . this guy. I feel sorry for you 'cause you're not all there, but you make pretty music, so I look out for you."

"Okay," *this guy* said. "And if it doesn't work?"

"We keep hanging around until it does—or until one of us thinks of something else," Kayla said simply. She finished her coffee and drifted off, the picture of a young grifter looking for wallets to lift. If he hadn't known her, Eric would have distrusted her on sight.

\* \* \*

The weather was in their favor. About two o'clock Chinaka and Dakota decided to wait at an all-night coffee shop for their friends to get back from someplace unspecified. Kayla got herself invited along, and Eric attached himself to the group.

They weren't certain about him at first, and Eric realized he was going to have to risk a little magic. Enough to convince these skittish runaways that he and Kayla were friendly and trustworthy enough to invite back to wherever they were staying, or the rest of this wasn't going to work. Magnus shouldn't pick up on that, at least—it wouldn't be directed at him, and as far as Eric could tell, he was nowhere in sight.

So he wove the finest and most subtle spell he could—Master Dharniel would have been proud of him!—around the two young runaways, to convince them that he and Kayla were harmless, friendly, and completely trustworthy.

As it touched them, he saw their faces relax. Chinaka smiled.

"Well, sure he can come with us, girl. But he gonna have to pay, right?" Both of the girls laughed.

Kayla laughed too. "Boss always pays."

"Thanks a lot," Eric muttered under his breath.

\* \* \*

The diner wasn't particularly clean, though very noisy. The counterman came out from behind the register when they came in.

"You! Get out of here before I call the police!"

"It wasn't us!" Dakota said quickly, backing up against Eric and looking as if she was about to cry. "It was Shimene and those other girls—we weren't even here—"

"You think I don't recognize that crap jacket of yours?" the man demanded. "Get out."

"Told you you shouldn'ta took it," Chinaka said in a low mutter.

"But it's *mine*," Dakota said, her eyes filling. "She *stole* it! That B. stole my jacket and I wanted it back—"

The counterman was heading back behind the counter, toward the phone on the wall. Kayla slithered out from behind Eric and the other two girls and went over to him. It was too noisy in the diner for Eric to hear what she was saying, but Eric saw money change hands.

"C'mon," Kayla said, coming back. "Let's go sit down."

Both girls stared at her.

"He gonna call the police," Chinaka said suspiciously.

"Somebody stiffed him for the bill," Kayla said, shrugging. "So I paid it. If the cops show up, everybody's going to bail an' he'll be out a lot more'n one check. Who cares? It's too damn cold to go lookin' for another place that's open. Besides, it's not my money." Kayla laughed heartlessly.

Dakota and Chinaka looked at each other for a long moment, then shrugged. They walked on in.

The four of them found a booth in the back. Kayla slid in beside Eric, and Dakota and Chinaka piled in beside each other.

"He paying, right?" Dakota said again.

"I already paid for that other thing," Kayla said, arguing to make it look good. The three teenagers engaged in a long, circular and—to Eric—nonsensical argument about whether Eric should still buy them dinner when Kayla had already paid for Shimene's previous meal, allowing Chinaka and Dakota to come in here at all, even though Dakota hadn't been the one to stiff the diner. Eventually it was agreed that the two of them would pay Kayla back the money she'd spent and Eric would pay for dinner.

It was all pointless. With Underhill backing, Eric had enough money to buy *the diner* if he happened to want to. But he was supposed to be a homeless busker, and Kayla was supposed to be these girls' new best friend.

When the waitress came, the girls didn't bother with menus, but ordered with the ease of long practice—an amount of food that made Eric blink to contemplate it. Kayla ordered a similar amount.

"Coffee. French fries," Eric said, when the waitress looked at him.

"You'd better be planning to pay this time," the waitress said, glaring at all of them.

"Why does everybody *pick* on me?" Dakota wailed.

"Man, that Shimene set you up," Chinaka said admiringly. "She prob'ly wore that nasty-ass jacket all over town, stealin' things."

"It's a nice jacket," Dakota said stubbornly.

It might be, Eric thought, but it was certainly conspicuous. A fashion from a few seasons back, it was quilted denim with studs, rhinestones, fringe, and inserts in several colors of fluorescent lace along the back and sleeves. It was the perfect thing to wear while robbing banks, because if you did, no one would ever remember your face.

"Well, you oughtta trade it, before word get out what Shimene done. Or you tell Ace about her. Maybe she throw her out, 'cause what she done, that almost like stealing."

It wasn't almost like stealing, Eric thought with a sense of unreality. *It was stealing*, though he supposed things might look different to a couple of street kids. Lord knew he'd done more than a few things he wasn't entirely proud of before he'd met Kory.

*But nothing like this . . .*

*Yeah, well, you weren't underage and completely without any way of earning money, were you? You weren't out for more than a couple of days before you were in that van, and you had money in your pocket when you ran out on Juilliard, too. That might have made a difference. . . .*

Their food came—the waitress stood right there until Eric paid the bill—and when he had, he realized what this must look like to her: either a pimp out with his string, or worse. He sighed inwardly. He'd never be able to show his face in *this* part of town again!

"Where you staying?" Dakota asked, after she'd finished the first part of her hamburger platter.

"Subway," Kayla said.

Chinaka shook her head in sympathy.

Eric said nothing, not sure how to play this.

"You got any stuff?" Dakota asked.

"Transit cops got it couple days ago," Kayla said matter-of-factly.

"You could—" Dakota began.

"We can't—" Chinaka hissed.

The two of them huddled together in the corner of the booth, arguing in whispers. Eric caught fragments of the conversation—Dakota thought they should bring them along with them when they went back, Chinaka didn't—and a name again: Ace, who seemed to be their leader.

He risked another thread of magic, encouraging them both to trust him and Kayla, to agree that it was a very good idea to bring them back with them.

"Well, okay," Chinaka said, sighing. "Hedid get us out of trouble. So I guess it okay. There a place you could maybe sleep. But you gotta promise not to tell anybody."

"We promise," Kayla said. "Right, Boss?"

"Right," Eric said.

\* \* \*

The two other girls were named Graciella—Graz for short—and Alice. They arrived just as the others were finishing dessert. Both of them looked surprised to find their friends in the diner, and it didn't take any leap of logic for Eric to realize that they'd been with Shimene on her last visit here.

Eric quickly wove his spell of trust and friendship around them as well. It wouldn't hurt to have as many allies as they could muster when Chinaka took them back to where they were going. From what little he'd been able to overhear of Chinaka's conversation with Dakota, that place was supposed to be a closely guarded secret, and bringing strangers in was expressly forbidden. He just hoped he'd be able to charm this Ace person—*without* magic—into letting him and Kayla stay.

\* \* \*

At least the candles made it a little warmer. She'd lit all of them, so that it was bright enough to read, hoping they'd drive out the dampness, at least. Even Jaycie was awake, watching them study and gnawing on his horrible chocolate.

She had to admit that it was a lot easier with Magnus helping. They'd started out with the math problems, and for the first time it seemed as if she'd be able to get through them eventually. They worked on that for a couple of hours, until Magnus got bored, and Ace was sure that if she closed her eyes, she'd see nothing but numbers.

The Place was noisier than usual. Some of the kids had just stayed inside because of the weather—or gone out and come back early. Shimene was prowling around, trying to look as if she wasn't poking into the other kids' things, looking for something to steal. Ace sighed inwardly. Shimene was a thief and a troublemaker—she'd "borrowed" Dakota's jacket and wouldn't give it back for weeks, but had been suspiciously meek when Dakota had walked out wearing it this evening, having finally gotten it back somehow.

Ace would have been happy to toss Shimene out onto the street weeks ago for the good of the others, harsh as it seemed, but she knew she really didn't have the power to do that. It was as much as she could do to keep the other kids from picking on Jaycie, and she knew she was buying them off with the money Jaycie brought in from . . . somewhere . . . to get that much of a concession.

*And when it doesn't work any more? What are you going to do then? Sometimes I feel like a lion tamer in a cage. And I'm just hoping they won't notice I don't really have a whip and a chair.*

She thought about the man she'd met down at Jacob Riis. Hosea. He'd seemed nice. She wondered if he'd help the three of them—if he *could* help them—*her* way, without any names or parents. She knew this

couldn't last much longer, and only a fool would think it could.

Maybe she'd ask. What he didn't know he couldn't tell.

"Let's work on your stuff now," she said to Magnus.

She could see Magnus was reluctant, but Jaycie turned the tide.

"Stories?" he asked sleepily.

"Stories," Ace agreed. "We could read them aloud. No elves, though."

"I don't care," Jaycie said, settling down expectantly.

Even Shimene settled down after a while and stopped prowling around, though Ace couldn't shake the feeling there was going to be trouble soon.

A couple of hours later—Jaycie had fallen asleep on her shoulder, and Magnus had gone back to drumming—some of the others came in.

And to Ace's utter and complete horror, they had strangers with them.

"No strangers" was the first rule of The Place. The more kids who lived here, the greater the chance it would be discovered by the authorities and they'd all be thrown out—or turned over to Social Services.

And that meant Daddy Fairchild would have her back, sure as taxes, even if she refused to tell them who she was. There must be all kinds of wanted posters of her around, even all this way back East. And her fingerprints. He'd find her.

Ace shuddered.

The trouble was, none of these kids, wily and feral as they were, had the sense God gave a goose. Anyone they brought in might be just the bully or predator she and Magnus couldn't outface, and then the three of them would have to leave.

She glanced at Magnus, and saw he'd realized the danger as soon as she had.

"Back me up," she whispered, getting to her feet and easing Jaycie gently down onto her sleeping bag. He didn't stir.

She walked over to where the newcomers were standing. They were with Chinaka and Dakota—and Alice and Graz, two of Shimene's posse. Shimene wandered over, moving as if she were underwater. High again, Ace realized, groaning silently. This just kept getting better.

"Kota," Ace said.

At least the girl had the grace to look guilty, if just for a moment.

"This's Eric and Kayla," Dakota said brightly.

Ace took a good look at them, and her heart sank. Eric was *old*—he must be somewhere in his twenties.



No way he wasn't going to try to take over and run everything.

"We can bring people here if we want," Chinaka said aggressively, seeing Ace's expression. "This isn't your place! We were here first!"

"Yeah," Graz said. "What if we're tired of your stupid rules?"

"What if we're tired of your stupid face?" Magnus said, stepping up beside Ace. "So we leave—and take Jaycie with us." He grinned coldly at the girls. "Then you can do whatever you want. How's that?"

The other four looked at each other. They obviously hadn't expected the threat.

"Hey," Kayla began. "We don't—"

"Hey-y-y . . . 'Kota. Nice jacket," Shimene said, her words slurred. She giggled. "You go over to the All-Nite?"

Dakota shrieked and lunged for Shimene.

Ace had known there was going to be some kind of trouble between the two of them, but she hadn't been expecting this. Apparently this guy Eric had. He moved really fast, and got an arm around Dakota before she reached Shimene. Shimene backed up unsteadily and sat down hard on the floor, still giggling. Alice and Graz knelt beside her.

Dakota turned around, sobbing against Eric's shoulder.

"He okay, really," Chinaka said to Ace. "Shim beat the tab over at the All-Nite only the guy thought it was 'Kota on account of her jacket so we couldn't go in there but Kayla made it okay an' Eric bought us waffles an' everything. So it okay they stay, right?"

"No place else to go," Kayla said apologetically, shrugging, looking at Ace. She sidled over to Ace and spoke low. "He's okay, really. I kinda take care of him, y'know. He's got this flute, and he plays music on the street, but he's really hopeless. He's like, twelve or something in his head half the time." She shrugged again wordlessly.

Ace looked at Magnus. He shrugged in turn. She couldn't throw the two newcomers out, and they both knew it. They'd come close to getting thrown out themselves: threatening to take Jaycie—and the money he brought in—away with them was a trump card they couldn't afford to play very often.

"I guess you can stay," she said grudgingly, putting as good a face on things as she could.

"Cops took all their stuff," Dakota volunteered. "But maybe there's a extra blanket around or something."

"I'll make them up a place over by me," Magnus said firmly. "There's room."

*Good move,* Ace thought. At least that way, if the strangers tried something funny, there was a chance the two of them would spot it.

\* \* \*

So here they were, Mad Tom and Mad Maudlin; and they fit right in with the rest of this place and its inhabitants, if Eric was any judge.

The place stank. And it was nearly as cold as outside. And with all those candles, it was a miracle it hadn't already burned down. Eric concentrated on looking vague and harmless. He hadn't expected things to turn so ugly so fast.

He'd barely moved fast enough to grab Dakota when she'd gone after the other girl, and he'd been afraid he'd blown it then, but Magnus and Ace—she was the girl he'd seen Magnus with at the supermarket—had been too worried about other things to pay much attention to him. They were obviously running a delicate balancing act here, trying to boss a bunch of runaways around without any real authority to back it up. But oddly enough, the threat to leave and take someone named Jaycie with them had made the others back down.

And it seemed the two of them were going to be allowed to stay.

With the four girls to vouch for them, they were accepted by everyone else. Everyone was curious about them, and Eric turned down several offers—he supposed they were well-meant—of drugs, cigarettes, and liquor—while meeting most of the rest of the inhabitants of The Place.

There was Tommie, who was from Kansas, and gay. He'd left home when his parents had decided he was possessed by the Devil, and decided to have the Devil beaten out of him by a local faith healer.

Ruthaileen was from Kentucky. She'd left home "after Momma died," and that was as much of her story as she'd tell.

Shimene said that her father was a famous rapper, and she'd run away from home to be with him. And as soon as she could get in touch with him, they'd be together.

Alice intended to become a famous actress as soon as she could get a screen test or an audition.

Johnnie said that here was better than home, and everyone had to be somewhere.

Chinaka said her mama wouldn't miss her anyway, with eight more kids at home, and why bother to go back? Her mama got the check from the Welfare whether Chinaka was there or not, after all.

Graz said it didn't matter, because New York was better than any other place she'd ever been, even if her no-account boyfriend had dumped her when they'd gotten here. Eric wondered how old she was, and where she'd come from; it was hard to tell beneath the heavy mask of makeup she wore.

They were all curious about the flute.

"Can you really play that?" Ruthaileen asked.

Eric nodded.

"Play something, then," Shimene said disbelievingly.

Eric hesitated, but what could it hurt? There wouldn't be any magic in it, other than the magic that was in all music. He got his flute out of his shoulder bag as the kids began to gather around.

He considered what would interest them, then dismissed the thought. A half-crazy street musician wouldn't think of such things. He decided to give them one he'd always liked instead: Vaughn Williams' *Fantasy on a Theme of Thomas Tallis*, which itself was a variation on "Star of the County Down." He put the flute to his lips and began to play.

The silvery notes skirled up through the shabby empty space, transforming it, in imagination, to a vast cathedral. It wasn't the best venue, and the acoustics really sucked, but he'd played worse. Eric closed his eyes and gave himself up to the music, and his flute—gallant, played-out old warhorse that she was—did her best for him.

He stopped, and opened his eyes.

"Stupid," Shimene said dismissively, turning away. The other kids mostly looked confused—obviously this was a new experience for them—though a couple of them looked pleased.

"No," a new voice said. "The music is very fine."

Eric turned toward him. It was a dark-haired boy he hadn't met yet. The boy stood unsteadily, clutching a can of Coke in his hand and regarding Eric.

There was *aglamourie* around him. It blurred and shimmered in the air to Eric's trained mage-sight. He didn't need to pierce it to know what it concealed. He stared in horror as the Sidhe boy raised the can of Coke to his lips and drank.

Caffeine in every form was toxic to elves. It worked on them like the worst combination of alcohol and heroin, sending them first into a drunken stupor; then, after long and intense exposure, into the Dreaming—a kind of coma—and in the end, the Dreaming killed them.

With a great effort, Eric restrained himself from knocking the can out of the boy's hand. That wouldn't accomplish anything. He'd just *ken* another one. And if he couldn't *ken* it, he'd get one from one of the other kids.

But what was he *doing* here? Elves avoided New York for a very good reason. It was full of iron, and iron burned them, as well as making their magic go crazy. The very air here was toxic to them. Even Kory, who was obsessed with all things human, couldn't stay here for more than a day or two, and that only with the help of stronger spells than Eric could see surrounding the boy.

And Eric was very much afraid he *was* a boy. Kory was two centuries old and looked about Eric's age, but Eric had the awful feeling this kid might be about the same age he looked—early teens—in which case he was *way* too young to be out of Underhill alone.

Where was his Protector? Every Sidhe child received one at his or her Naming ceremony. Even little Maeve, who was human, had one, and Lady Montraille was sworn to put Maeve's safety before the defense of her home and her own honor—and certainly before her personal safety. This boy's Protector would never have let him come here—unless he or she were dead or somehow imprisoned . . . or unless he'd been kidnapped and dumped here to die.

*Who would do that to a child of the Sidhe?* Elven politics were a tangled web, and the Unseleighe Court was as nasty as they came, but Elven children were precious and rare, and even the Dark Court would never intentionally harm an *Elven* child. Even the child of an enemy would be kidnapped and subverted, not hurt nor abandoned in the World Above. And the Bright Court valued *all* children, human

and Elven.

Did the boy *know* what caffeine could do to him? Eric couldn't just stand there and say nothing. That would be like standing by and letting someone commit suicide. But an ordinary mortal shouldn't know that elves existed . . . let alone be able to pierce the *glamourie* one had wrapped around himself to walk in the World Above unnoticed.

"That isn't good for you, you know," Eric said softly. Maybe the boy would take his comment as the knee-jerk remark of a health freak. Or maybe he'd see the truth behind it.

The boy glanced up and met Eric's eyes.

"Speak of it, Bard, and I will speak as well," the boy said warningly. His eyes flared wolf-green.

Oh, shit . . . Eric thought, his stomach sinking. He knows exactly what he's doing to himself. He's doing it on purpose.

"Come on, Jaycie," Ace said, taking Jaycie's arm before Eric could frame a reply. She led the boy away from Eric, back to his own corner of the room.

\* \* \*

*He knows exactly what he's doing.*

Eric sat huddled under a musty quilt with Kayla curled up under his arm, watching Jaycie drink Coke after Coke as Ace read to him out of *Lord of the Rings*. Magnus was sitting with his back to them, drumming out endless patterns on a rolled-up sleeping bag with a pair of drumsticks. It sounded like falling rain.

He was good. Eric could tell. But he certainly wasn't the concert pianist the senior Banyons wanted. Magnus' musical influences were considerably more contemporary than that.

And now Eric's problems were considerably larger than they had been when he'd arrived at The Place, because he could *not* just close his eyes to the problem that Jaycie represented. He not only had to figure out the best way to talk Magnus into coming home with him, he had to figure out what to do about Jaycie.

The only consolation—and it was a small one—was that Jaycie still seemed pretty functional. Eric knew that elves could spend years addicted to caffeine before finally falling into the Dreaming. Terenil had, after all.

But Prince Terenil had been an adult Sidhe, centuries old. Jaycie was still a child. How long could *he* keep this up?

For that matter, what was he doing here? How had he gotten out of Underhill? Elven children were rare, and well-protected. Eric had spent years in Underhill and had never *evenseena* Sidhe who wasn't a full adult.

Why didn't Ace or Magnus *notice*? Not what he looked like—*glamourie* was pretty nearly instinctive for the Sidhe, and Eric didn't expect either of them to be able to see through it—but that a couple of cans of Coke got Jaycie as drunk as half a bottle of bourbon would one of them? Didn't they *care*?

But looking at the three of them together, Eric knew that they *did* care. Watching Magnus and Ace with Jaycie was like seeing himself, Beth, and Kory from the outside, and Eric wasn't entirely sure he cared for the comparison. Sidhe were *enchanted*, in every sense of the word. The other two would never abandon Jaycie—or do anything against his wishes. They'd go with him wherever he ran, and do anything to keep from being separated from him.

And Jaycie had recognized him as a Bard. He'd as good as warned Eric that if Eric made any attempt to send him back Underhill, Jaycie would make trouble. Only Eric didn't know how much Jaycie actually knew—or had guessed—beyond that simple fact. Or how much trouble Jaycie could make.

At least Eric knew who'd been blocking Ria's scrying spells now. And that the Talent he'd sensed in the supermarket wasn't Magnus'.

It was Ace's.

She shone with it. Whatever it was—and that was something he couldn't tell—she was used to using it. Magnus might have a Gift as well—in fact, as Ria had pointed out, he probably did—but between Jaycie's *glamourie* and Ace's Gift, it was nothing Eric could sense. And he still didn't dare use magic. Jaycie would recognize it instantly. And he had no idea of what Jaycie would consider a threat.

*Great. Now I'm at the mercy of a paranoid teenage Sidhe runaway.*

But how paranoid were you if everyone really *was* after you?

Maybe Jaycie had fled Underhill for a very good reason.

## Chapter Nine: The Iron Man

Monday evening, Hosea invited Caity to dinner at his apartment. He hadn't seen anything of her since the previous Tuesday, and that was a little odd. Neither of them had set-in-stone nine-to-five schedules, so they usually took advantage of that to go around to movies and museums during the middle of the week when both were less crowded. Even when Caity was in the middle of a deadline, she usually liked to get away from her work for a few hours.

But Hosea hadn't seen her all week, and Caity hadn't been returning his calls. If this had been an ordinary thing—a dating relationship that one of them was tired of—Hosea would have taken the gentle hint and not kept trying to see her. But he didn't think it was. And so he'd enlisted Greystone's help to find out when she was heading down for the laundry room, and "just happened" to be going down at the same time.

She'd seemed happy to run into him, which had just been puzzling. If she'd wanted to see him, why not answer her phone messages? But he hadn't brought it up, not wanting to come on too much like the jealous boyfriend.

And it turned out she was free for dinner that very evening.

Since free-lancers lived from check to check—often with long dry spells in between—and musicians weren't necessarily all that plump in the pocket, she'd fallen in willingly with the suggestion of dinner at his place.

Promptly at 7:30, she arrived on his doorstep. Hosea had gotten in an hour before—he'd been busking the homeward bound traffic at a nearby subway stop—with just enough time to put on a pot of homemade soup that he'd started a few days before and slide a loaf of bread into the oven. Hosea was a good plain cook, and it was much cheaper to cook for yourself than to eat out.

"Smells good," Caity said, holding out a bottle of wine. "Peace offering? I finally got around to checking my phone messages. I guess you'd called," she said, flushing pinkly. "So did a lot of other people."

"We'd of run into each other eventually, Ah reckon," Hosea said easily. "Ah guess you were all tied up in a piece of work."

"Oh, I put the phone in the closet," Caity said, as if it were the most reasonable thing in the world. "It's less distracting that way."

Hosea supposed it was, and the Lord knew that artists were entitled to a few eccentricities if anyone was, but that sort of behavior hadn't been Caity's way for as long as he'd known her. And if her agent or her clients couldn't reach her . . .

"How about you come and help me set the table?" Hosea suggested, defusing the situation.

\* \* \*

It might be underhanded, but Hosea made sure that Caity had the lion's share of the wine she'd brought over the course of dinner. She tucked into her meal with good appetite, admitting that she'd been living mostly on peanut-butter sandwiches and microwave pizza.

"I just can't remember to cook. I've been so distracted," she said, sighing.

That was the second time this evening she'd complained of distractions.

"Is something wrong?" Hosea asked gently.

"Oh, well, I don't know," Caity said hesitantly. "I mean, how could you tell, Hosea? Really?"

"Well, to start with, you might tell your troubles to a friend, and see how they sounded then," Hosea said.

Caity smiled. It wasn't a very convincing smile, unfortunately. "I've met this wonderful man," she began, twisting her napkin between her fingers.

"Not like us, Hosea. Not like that," she added quickly. "But he's good and wise, and so very, very sad. People—the world—have hurt him dreadfully, but he's never complained. Only . . . well . . . you know Tatiana . . . I was talking to her a few months ago—just after I met him—and she said that it's wrong to give people money for training or magic. But what about when you put money in the collection plate at church? That's just the same thing, though, isn't it? Or when you give money to the Salvation Army? And it's not like I'm giving anything I can't afford to give."

She looked at him hopefully, her expression begging for reassurance.

"Caity, honey, you aren't making a lick of sense," Hosea told her gently. "Why don't you start from the beginning? Who did you meet? What's this about money?"

Slowly Hosea pieced the story together, as they moved from the table to the couch and tea and cake. He didn't like what he heard.

Over the winter, at a party thrown by some friends of friends of friends, Caity had met a fascinating and mysterious man. She'd been invited to another party a week or so later, for a smaller group of people, and the man was there again.

"He was just so interesting. He never talked much, and never about himself. And he was so kind. He was so interested in me . . . in all of us. I told him things that, well, I guess I've never told anyone," Caity said.

The parties continued, soon becoming a weekly thing, and Caity realized that they were being held because of this man: Fafnir.

"He never explained anything—it wasn't like we were his disciples, exactly. But somehow we all understood things when we were around him," Caity said. "Everything just became so clear."

"Like what?" Hosea said, careful to keep his voice neutral despite the sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Oh, about our lives, and our problems. That sort of thing. He has such great power—or he did have, before his trouble happened. And he would give us advice—he could always explain things so clearly. He's so wise—I think he must have lived a very long time. He doesn't look old, of course," she added quickly.

"Because of his power?" Hosea said. Caity nodded.

"And of course we support his . . . his work," she said, a faint note of defensiveness creeping into her voice now. "It's only right, because he does what he does for all of us. That's what the Guardians do, isn't it?"

Hosea had been taking a sip of tea when she spoke. He barely managed to keep from choking. "Guardians?" he said, doing his best to sound puzzled.

Caity heaved a deep sigh. "He never said we couldn't talk about what he does—it's not like the False Guardians don't have other ways of knowing—but I'd appreciate it if you'd keep this to yourself."

"Well, Ah certainly won't go runnin' to Tatiana with it," Hosea said, hoping she'd think that was a promise. He hated to break his word—and he'd certainly think hard about doing it—but he wouldn't hesitate to break a foolish promise if the stakes were high enough.

"Thanks," Caity said with a sigh. "Anyway, Juliana owns a building down on Tenth Avenue, and he's living there now, because one of the units opened up so she gave it to him, and we meet there a couple of times a week. I'm in the Outer Circle, but Neil's in the Inner Circle, and he told me some things . . ."

What followed was muddled and vague, but more than enough to thoroughly alarm Hosea. Apparently

someone calling himself Fafnir was claiming to be a Guardian—more than that, *the* True Guardian—and explaining his complete lack of overt magical abilities by the fact that some group called the False Guardians had cast a spell over him to strip him of his powers for some nefarious purposes of their own. He was being supported by Caity and her friends in some amount of style while he worked—so he said—to overthrow the False Guardians and reclaim his rightful position in the world.

It was the oldest con game there was, with some New Age trappings thrown in. But what made it particularly disturbing was that this Fafnir seemed to know at least a little about the genuine Guardians—enough to carry off a bad impersonation, at least.

"And he worries you?" Hosea suggested tentatively.

"Oh, no!" Caity said quickly. "I'm worried *for* him! The False Guardians figured he couldn't be any more trouble when they stripped him of his powers, you know . . . but he's got a plan for getting his powers back and re-founding the Guardians. And if the False Guardians knew that, I don't know *what* they'd do."

Hosea sighed inwardly. Probably about what I'd like to do to him right now. He's no judge of character, whoever he is, and you're a lot more worried than you let on, Caity-girl. For all you know, you could be talking to one of those False Guardians of his right now. And then where would the lot of you be?

"Well, don't you worry. But Ah'd like to help." That much was the honest day-long truth. "And Ah'd really like to meet this feller of yours. Do you suppose there's any chance o' that?" Hosea asked hopefully.

Caity looked doubtful, and Hosea didn't push things. He had more than enough to go to Toni with as it was. In comparison to Bloody Mary, it was small potatoes—nobody seemed to be getting really hurt, only fleeced—but it was worth talking over. With *areal* Guardian. Because at least part of what made the Guardians effective was the fact that no one—

Almost no one, he amended.

—*almost* no one knew about them.

"So you don't think there's anything wrong with what I'm doing?" Caity said. She stifled a yawn, glancing at her watch. "Goodness, look at the time! I came up here, ate all your food, talked your ear off, you must think I'm a complete fool!"

But she regarded him steadily, waiting for the answer to her question. And there was only one answer that Hosea could, in good conscience, give.

"Caity-girl, you're a full adult, in charge of your own life. If you're doing what you want to do, if nobody's making you do it, or scaring you into it, or forcing you, or lyin' to you, and it makes you happy to do it, then it's all your own business," Hosea said, trying to conceal the reluctance in his voice. "Ah've always figured that something that makes you happy and don't hurt you nor anyone else was a pretty reasonable thing to chase. Ain't that in the Declaration of Independence? Pursuit o' happiness?"

Her expression cleared into one of relief and she hugged him quickly. "I knew you'd understand. And I'll talk to Fafnir and see if you can meet him. He's always looking for good people to share the Work."

She left a little while later, promising to meet him for a coffee date in a few days—and to check her phone messages more frequently. But Hosea was far from settled in his mind. Tatiana was right, no



matter what Caity thought. Handing over money *was* a warning sign. No responsible teacher of magic asked for payment for their teachings, nor demanded gifts.

Nor *persuaded* people to give them things without coming out and asking for money and presents.

And though she might not be frightened, and it didn't seem that she was being forced, two things were certain.

Caity was being lied to.

And she wasn't as happy as she said she was.

\* \* \*

Eric spent the coldest and most uncomfortable night he had in years, curled on several flattened cardboard boxes beneath a couple of thin and none-too-clean blankets, with Kayla curled tight against his side.

He supposed he'd been unrealistic. He'd figured on being able to come in here and build a relationship with Magnus, figure out some way to talk to him that didn't begin and end with Magnus running off and losing himself again.

Obviously that wasn't going to work. Magnus already had a relationship—two of them, in fact—and that left no place for Eric. The only problem was, one of the people in that relationship was a desperately ill Sidhe boy, and Eric had to get him back Underhill. Somehow.

The easiest, quickest, and most politically correct (in all senses of the word) way would be to call up Jaycie's Protector—if that could be done—and send him home with him or her. Then he could explain—try to explain—to the other two what he'd done, and why he'd had to do it. That would be a start—not the start he'd intended or hoped for, but a start.

But sending Jaycie home might have problems of its own. He didn't even know which Court Jaycie belonged to. That shouldn't matter—not if he was returning a child, presumably to a Protector and parents who must have been looking for him for some time—but he did wonder. Underhill politics was a constantly shifting web of alliances and gossip. The two Courts maintained an uneasy and far-from-friendly peace, but the person of a Bard was sacrosanct, like that of a foreign diplomat here in the World Above, and no matter who came to his call, he should be perfectly safe from attack. Dark Court or Light, he could bring Jaycie's Protector back here, hand Jaycie over, and go on to the next crisis.

And if Jaycie's Protector was dead . . . ?

*Then I'll think of something else,* Eric promised himself resignedly.

He stood it as long as he could—without windows, there was no light in here except the candles, but by the cheap watch he'd picked up to go with the rest of his outfit it was a little after six—and started to get up.

"Where're you going?" Ace demanded, her voice sharp and awake. Looked like she hadn't been sleeping much either.

"Out," Eric said, keeping his voice soft and vague. "Gotta play."

Kayla yawned and stretched—she hadn't gotten any better rest than he had. "He plays for the commuters in the subway," she told Ace. "I gotta go with him so nobody takes his money."

"Don't come back until after it's dark," Ace said warningly. "And don't let anybody see you."

"We won't," Kayla promised.

\* \* \*

So they were being let to stay. That was one thing that had gone right, at least.

"We've got another problem," Eric said, when they were a few blocks away.

"Can we have another problem *later*?" Kayla pleaded. "I am going straight home into the shower, and then I am going to sleep in a real bed."

Eric hesitated. Why burden her with additional problems right now? Besides, it might be solved by this evening. "We can talk about it later," he said. "And meanwhile, we've got the whole day free before I come back here tonight."

"You mean before *w*e come back here tonight," Kayla said promptly. "More fun than studying. But I'm going to need some money."

Eric looked at her quizzically.

"I'm supposed to be a pickpocket, remember? Unless you want me to go around boosting wallets this afternoon, I'm going to have to pick up some ill-gotten gains somewhere for show-and-tell tonight. So I thought I'd hit up a couple of shops this afternoon to pick up some window dressing. And a couple of sleeping bags—I can say I went dumpster diving, or something."

"Good idea," Eric said fervently. Another night on that ratty floor and he'd start feeling his calendar age instead of his real one. "You can burgle my place. I've got a stash in the cookie jar in the kitchen. You already know the combination to my door."

"Works. And you?" Kayla said.

"Going to make an interdimensional phone call," Eric said, brandishing his flute. "See you later."

"Pick you up at your place about seven?" Kayla suggested. Eric nodded, and she waved, moving off.

\* \* \*

Central Park was 843 acres in the heart of New York City, stretching north from Columbus Circle all the way to 110th Street—51 city blocks. It was the brainchild of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux who, back in 1858, when city development extended only as far north as 38th Street, decided that New Yorkers needed a "greensward." Despite all attempts to pave it over in the next century and a half, Central Park endured, with its miles of pedestrian paths, lakes, lawns, and woodlands.

There were a number of places in it where a person could be as isolated as they cared to be, particularly

during rush hour on a Tuesday morning.

After about half an hour's walk, Eric found himself in an isolated grove of trees. If he shut out the city noises—and ignored the drifts of the faded paper and plastic garbage that accumulated in the months when the Park wasn't policed as often as in the spring, summer, and early fall—the place could do a pretty good imitation of a woodland glade. It was, Eric thought, the perfect place to cast his spell.

There were still more isolated places than the one he'd chosen, but those tended to be visited by serious bird watchers at odd moments—and bird watchers were uncannily good at sneaking up on you unheard. Strange to think of Central Park as a haven for birds other than starlings, sparrows, and pigeons, but it was. He'd run across the birders more than once; they policed the more remote spots for garbage and even had bird feeders set up high in the trees that they kept filled all year long.

Even if Jaycie were a Magus Major, if he was as young as he looked, he was too young to have much mastery of his magic—Elven magical training took decades, if not centuries—and the Cold Iron surrounding him here in New York would make his Sidhe magic work unreliably at best. Eric wasn't worried about being spied upon by Jaycie this far away from The Place, so Jaycie wouldn't know what he did here.

He meant to send out a Call to the nearest Protector in the World Above. Since there shouldn't be any Protectors in the World Above—since Protectors stayed very close to their Sidhe charges, and that meant Underhill—the one who came, if any came, should be Jaycie's. Then Eric would explain the situation, and Jaycie would go home before he could do any more damage to himself.

And if no one came . . . ?

*Burn that bridge when we come to it*, Eric told himself firmly. No matter why Jaycie had fled Underhill, he couldn't stay here.

*But suppose you're sending him back to something really bad?*

It was difficult to imagine. Protectors were bound with the strongest of oaths to put loyalty to their charges before *anything*—even the good of the Elfhome. A Sidhe Protector would die—literally—before harming their charge, or allowing them to come to harm. If Eric could summon up Jaycie's Protector, he need have no further worries about the boy's safety and well-being. If his own Elfhome was not a good place for him to be, Jaycie's Protector would simply take him somewhere else.

He raised the flute to his lips and began to play.

It was a clear morning—and therefore even colder than usual—and there was still frost on the grass under the shadows of the trees. Eric gazed at it—not really paying attention—as he filled the music with the magic of his intention.

*Calling—calling*—filling the notes with the image of the boy Jaycie, and the danger he was in from the World Above.

And suddenly spiderwebs of frost raced across from the frozen to the unfrozen grass, turning it all white and glittering in an instant. The trees went white as well, sparkling as if they'd been dipped in sugar.

And the day went dark. Not as if there were clouds, but as if someone had interposed a filter between Earth and the sun, leaching away the light.

Eric Banyon had faced Nightflyers, the Unseleighe Sidhe, the Wild Hunt. He'd riddled with a dragon. He'd traveled through parts of Underhill that were a close approximation of Hell.

None of it had prepared him for this.

He was surrounded by grief—drowning in it. Sheer anguish beat him to his knees. He couldn't tell if it was his own or someone else's. Pain—loss—devastating bereavement bordering on madness.

*Shield!*

He barely forced his shields into place—a *sloppy discordant wail of clarinets*—when whatever had come to his call changed tactics. Now he was at the center of a physical, not an emotional storm, though he could still sense the grief that lay beneath the attack.

He found himself at the center of a hurricane, but blood, not rain, was born upon the arctic wind. It glittered pinkly, freezing as it dashed itself against his shields, but Eric found time to strengthen them now—*mellow wail of horns*—and they stood firm against the assault as he staggered to his feet again.

What had come against him? What in heaven's name had he summoned? *Was this* what Jaycie was running from?

*Grief—anger—terror—pain—*

And he dared not risk a moment's distraction to try to communicate with it, whatever it was. Every ounce of his energy was concentrated on defense.

And he still couldn't see what he was fighting.

Then the attack changed again, the blood turning to shards of broken mirror, glittering wickedly in the dim bluish light. He could feel the pressure on his shields, and knew he had to risk an attack of his own, even though he didn't know what direction to launch it in. But anything was better than being battered to death by something he couldn't clearly see.

He ran a line of energy outside his shields—*skirl of piccolos*—and was rewarded with a sound like a string of firecrackers as the next assault struck it. His barbed-energy spell disrupted the mirror-storm, and the shards of glass fell everywhere on the bloody grass. In that instant, Eric got a glimpse of a tall figure standing off among the trees.

She wore long fluttering blue robes, and wept black tears from eyeless sockets. There was something vaguely familiar about her, but Eric didn't have time to stop to think about it. He simply threw everything he had at her.

She'd been preparing another attack as well. The two spells collided in midair, writhing around each other like mating snakes. The flare was so bright that Eric had to cover his eyes.

When he could see again, she was gone.

Cautiously, he lowered his shields, feeling the last of his energy flow out of him like water into the ground. The battle, brief as it had been, had taken everything he had.

The tree behind where she had stood was burning. The ground around him was covered with blood, as if somebody had dropped a 55-gallon, blood-instead-of-water balloon with Eric as the target. And fragments of broken mirror were sprayed around him in a circular pattern.

But the sun was shining normally again, and his attacker seemed to be gone.

"What just happened?" Eric said aloud. With a shaky gesture, he put out the burning tree, swaying unsteadily on his feet. He felt as if he were going to fall over any moment, but he *did not* want to fall down into broken glass and yuck. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to take careful steps until he was away from the mess, and then leaned carefully against the trunk of an undamaged tree a few yards away.

*What was that?* Nothing made any sense. The blood, the lamenting—that pointed to a banshee, but banshees were Low Court elves, tied to a Node Grove. Not only was there no Node Grove for fifty miles, Low Court Sidhe had nothing like the moxie of the thing he'd just faced.

But . . . *blood and mirrors*. There was one creature that description fit perfectly—and if he asked Hosea, he bet the rest of the description would fit, too.

But how had he managed to summon up the shelter kids' Bloody Mary while trying to call Jaycie's Protector?

Eric ran his hand through his hair, wincing at the grimy texture. He'd like to wash it, but he'd better just settle for a hot rinse if he was going to continue the masquerade tonight.

If Bloody Mary had come to his call, he must have tapped into the toxic imago that the shelter kids had created, Eric decided tentatively. *If it's here, and strong enough to be committing murders, and tied to kids in the first place, I guess it qualifies as a kind of Protector. I suppose I just called it up when Jaycie's real Protector didn't respond.*

It wasn't a wholly satisfying explanation, but it was the only one that fit the facts he had.

\* \* \*

*There was more than one way to skin a cat.* The Earthborn had some truly enchanting turns of phrase, really they did. Sometimes Gabriel Horn wondered exactly how many ways there really *were* to skin a cat. . . .

But wondering things like that didn't get him any closer to finding Daddy's Little Angel, did they?

There was, however, one more place he could look.

Humans called it the Astral Plane. The Sidhe called it the Overlight. Neither race understood it very well; the closest the Elven Mages could come to explaining it was that the Overlight was the subtle energy that surrounded All That Was, the way the white of an egg surrounded the yolk. It was bound by fewer rules than even the Chaos Lands, and nothing of flesh could enter it. But magic could open a gateway to it from anywhere.

And there were creatures whose Mage-crafted essence was subtle enough to survive there.

The difficulty with searching the Overlight was that all places in it were everywhere and nowhere at once. It contained no landmarks, nor could any be forged there. To search it was to search the ocean.

But it was equally true that all magic, both human and Elven, resonated in the Overlight. And that magic could be used as a beacon—did one possess the power and skill, and if the magician were unwary enough—to track its wielder wherever they hid, in Underhill or the World Above.

If one had the proper tools.

Gabriel Horn had the proper tools.

There was, indeed, more than one way to skin a cat.

Night was a time that the wasteful Earthborn used for sleeping. Gabriel used it for other things. He had spent the hours of darkness seated before his Mirror of Air, gazing into the Overlight, looking for the girl.

The flares and flickering beacons of unshielded Elven magics he dismissed at once. At the moment they did not interest him. Likewise, he set aside all investigation of shielded human workings, of humans working in groups. None of these were what he sought tonight, nor were the flares of lesser Talents. He wanted the girl.

At the back of his mind was the minor irritation that when he found her this way, he still wouldn't know where she was, nor would he be able to reach her. But in the end, that didn't matter. She would have disclosed herself, and his hunters would harry her to a place where he could See her directly.

Perhaps it was time to add a few more of them to the hunt.

Withdrawing his attention from the mirror for a moment, Gabriel gestured.

At once the room began to fill with shadows in the way that water might fill a cup. Gabriel smiled. His Shadow Hunt were not bound by the laws that bound creatures of flesh. One by one they came to him, allowing him to stroke their heads with the hand that wore the silver ring and fill them with his purpose, before they leaped through the mirror to run free in the Overlight.

Oh, the Earthborn would have bad dreams tonight.

His Shadow Hounds would search tirelessly, bound by no law. When Heavenly Grace used her Gift—and she would use it eventually, she must—they would mark the beacon and follow it to its source, some of the Hunt returning to tell him that at last his patience and diligence had been rewarded.

And his Shadow Hunt would find her, no matter what blighted, magic-dead hellhole she had fled to.

They were terrifying. She would run. They would harry her from her refuge, back to a place where he could See her directly.

But it would be far more satisfying if he were there for the View. When the last of the Shadow Hunt had slipped through his fingers and run free, Gabriel returned to his contemplation of the Mirror of Air.

He did not have much longer to indulge himself. The sun was rising. In a few hours, he would need to resume his disguise and return to his work. It, too, was rewarding, in its own small way.

But wait—there!

Not Heavenly Grace. Not the quarry he sought. But a beacon of such Power that he was tempted to set aside all thoughts of the girl to claim it.

Perhaps he should go see . . . ?

Quickly he summoned one of the Pack, and sent it to follow the beacon to its source before it vanished. With the Hound as a guideline, Gabriel summoned his elvensteed and followed after.

\* \* \*

He recognized the place immediately. The Accursed Lands. Almost he left again, but the flare of Power was too rich, too strong to ignore.

Bard.

Human Bard.

Undoubtedly a chattel of his Bright Court cousins, since no Bard bound to the Dark Court would dare to wander so, but what was he doing here? Gabriel ducked reflexively as a bolt of power lit up the sky. Fighting—in that copse of trees over there, just out of sight.

And—what a pity—so far from the protection of his lords and masters . . .

Gabriel waited.

He felt the moment that the Bard's foe vanished, and felt the Bard drop his shields. In that moment, he struck.

A simple spell, a spell of draining, of oblivion. The Bard was already tired. He could feel it. The spell was designed to dissipate the moment it was detected, but if it was not, it would go on, draining first magic, then life, from its victim.

And to make sure of his work, Gabriel cast a second spell, sweeping the area, sending out a Calling spell to those human predators who might well be nearby, calling them to come to the Bard.

And feast.

He would have liked to stay to see the results of his work, but he dared not remain. This place was too dangerous for his kind, and there was the faint possibility that the Bard might see him.

Gabriel set spurs to his elvensteed and vanished, well pleased with the morning's small entertainment.

\* \* \*

The walk into the park that had seemed so pleasant on the way in wasn't nearly as much fun on the way out. Eric had a pounding headache, and felt as if he'd gone without sleep for three nights, not one. If he'd had the energy, he would have called Lady Day to come and get him, but the thought of even that simple Call seemed like too much effort. It wouldn't be too hard to find a cab once he reached the edge of the park; he'd go home, pop a couple of aspirin, catch a few hours' sleep, and try to figure out what to do next.

If he couldn't summon Jaycie's Protector, that meant a trip to Elfhame Misthold at the very least. Maybe someone there would be able to summon him or her—or at least, find out why that wasn't possible.

Drained, exhausted, and preoccupied, Eric forgot the first rule of New York: always pay attention.

"Gimme the flute, man. An' anything else you got."

The boy seemed to appear out of nowhere, stepping in front of Eric and grinning nastily.

Eric stopped, confronting his assailant. It was a boy about Kayla's age; a true Urban Primitive: leather jacket, tattered jeans, hair elaborately dyed and gelled. Eric realized with a sinking feeling that he must have wandered into gang territory without noticing—or worse, made himself the target for one of the wilding packs that roamed the park. He could feel and hear others coming up behind him, and saw the boy's smile widen as his friends moved into position. Eric realized he'd missed his one chance to run, but his brain seemed filled with grey fog, and he was *sotired*. . . .

But he dropped the flute instantly, raising his hands and summoning the energy for a spell.

He never got the chance to complete it.

Something hard hit him on the back of the head, knocking him sprawling. He bit his lip, tasting blood, and the world seemed very far away.

He reached out to his magic, only to be hit again before the spell could be fully formed. He felt his magic spin away, out of control, as someone kicked him in the head.

The boys moved in, laughing, continuing to kick and bludgeon him until he stopped moving. And long after.

\* \* \*

Around noon, Kayla got up again and rifled Eric's cookie jar, then went off to find the things she needed for her pickpocket masquerade. Unless you were hooked up with a good fence, or were really stupid, the smart thing to do when you boosted a wallet was to toss the credit cards and ID, so she wouldn't come back with any of those. But if she'd grabbed a few purses . . . back when she'd been living on the street in L.A., Connie used to come back with the most amazing junk. Half-used makeup, and all kinds of crap. She could donate some of her own stuff to the cause, and maybe pick up a few donations from Tat and Margot, add a purse from an upscale consignment shop and a backpack from a Goodwill store, and she'd be all set for tonight.

Collecting the items she wanted took most of the afternoon, and then Kayla headed down to Jacob Riis, where Hosea was working. If anybody from The Place saw her, it'd be reasonable for her to be there, and she wanted to check in with Hosea anyway.

She arrived about the time Hosea was finishing up in the kitchen. Kayla drifted in and hung around, but she didn't spot anyone else she knew. Hosea spotted her, though, and his face was what you might call a proper study.

"You look like something the cat wouldn't drag in," he said, coming over to her. Kayla grinned at him.

"Well, I got good news, Too-Tall. We've found him."



"You've found the boy?" Hosea said, keeping his voice low.

"Yup. Alive and well. I'll tell you about it later. But first—Eric and me need something to sleep on for tonight. You got anything like that down here?"

"Think so. Hang on."

Hosea went into the back, and returned a few moments later with a couple of tattered bundles that might—once—have been sleeping bags.

"We collect 'em—through donations and all—to hand around when we can. You can bring 'em back when you're done. Or replace 'em."

"Thanks," Kayla said gloomily, tucking one of them under her arm and slinging the other over her shoulder. "These look like the real deal."

"As real as it gets, Little Bit," Hosea assured her soberly.

On the way home, Kayla filled Hosea in on finding Magnus and Ace.

"Ace? Little blonde girl, no bigger'n a minute, big blue eyes and plenty of sass?" Hosea asked, startled.

Kayla nodded.

"Ah think she's the same one that came to the shelter a day or two ago. Scared to death and wild as the wind."

"That's her, I guess," Kayla said. "She and Magnus and this other kid Jaycie are real tight. He's kind of a zone puppy, but sweet."

They'd taken the subway uptown. It was still early rush hour, and seats were available, but between Jeanette and the sleeping bags, it was easier just to stand at the back of the car as it rocked its way north.

"She tell you anything about herself?" Hosea asked.

"Hey, Too-Tall, we were doing good not to get thrown back out on the street again. It wasn't exactly all love and kisses up there. But she said it's okay if we come back tonight. I'm going to meet Eric here at seven and we'll go up there together. He's supposed to have spent the day busking, and I've spent it snatching purses and picking pockets," Kayla said cheerfully.

"Enterprising of you," Hosea commented dryly. "Ah'm sure Miz Llewellyn'll be right proud to hear it."

"Ria's cool," Kayla said comprehensively. "And it's not like I'm whack enough to really do it. But Eric said we've got another problem that he'd tell me about when he got back, and I don't think I want to know. It was bad enough when we just had to explain to this kid that he had a brother who was willing to get him off the streets and protect him from the Evil Clan Banyon, but somehow, I don't think Mags is going to dump his two buddies."

"He shouldn't have to," Hosea said. "But Ah've talked to Ace, remember? She won't go home

nohow—and she's got the shine on her, so she might have good reason not to want to go."

"And it's not like people just let you adopt strange teenagers off the street," Kayla said. "Elizabeth had to jump through hoops to get her hands on me. So I guess we've got a whole new set of problems. Here we are."

They reached their stop and got out. It was already dark, and they walked the rest of the way to Guardian House in companionable silence, where, by unspoken consent, they went up to Hosea's apartment.

While Hosea lit the stove and put on hot water, Kayla pulled out her phone and left a message for Eric, telling him where she could be found. Then she followed Hosea into the kitchen, poking through his cabinets.

"Tea, tea, and tea. Not even any Lipton's. Don't you ever drink coffee?"

"Ah'm afraid it'll stunt my growth," Hosea said with a straight face. "And you need all the inches you can get, Little Bit."

"Size elitist," Kayla muttered with a grin. She looked into Hosea's refrigerator and shuddered. "Let's order pizza."

Hosea grinned. "Well, okay. If you want to pay for it—the life o' crime bein' so profitable and all."

"There's gotta be something we can do," Kayla said, after three large pies had been ordered. "About those kids, I mean."

"The thing is," Hosea said, pouring tea for himself and instant cocoa for Kayla, "it's hard to keep kids out of the hands of families that want them back, once they know where they are. And most of 'em—like Miz Ace—would rather be on the street than back with their folks." He shook his head. "The halfway houses are full and have waiting lists, the foster-care program is a mess—and it don't apply in most cases—and the social services don't have a lot o' money. So the kids are out on the streets fending for themselves, and Serafina says that the average life expectancy of one of those street kids is about three months, and mostly nobody ever knows what happens to any of them."

"That sucks," Kayla said.

"There's some private programs that will take kids in off the streets, no questions asked, but the thing is, the kids have got to want to come in off the street and stay in the program freely: they're not jails. That means following the rules." He blinked at her, like a curious owl. She read the unspoken question.

"I don't think that would be a problem with Magnus and Ace, but Jaycie—" she shook her head. "Don't know. He's zoned all the time, but I can't tell if it's because he's a stoner or sick." She thought about it. "But you know, he pretty much does what Ace says, and if Ace says 'we go in,' I bet he will, and follow the rules, too."

Hosea nodded. "Thing is, it costs money to get in and stay in, which Ah know ain't a problem because Eric would be more'n ready to write a check, and if he couldn't, Miz Llewellyn would surely do it, as she's a mighty kind lady always willing to help folks in need."

"She'd kill you if she heard you say that, you know," Kayla commented.

"It's the plain truth," Hosea said placidly. "It just don't sound to me like any of these kids are ready to do that. But Ah'll give you the name and address of the place that'll take them in, no questions asked."

"And send the bill to Eric," Kayla said.

"And kick them back out on the street the minute they catch them with drugs, or doing any other bad thing," Hosea said. "Which is why they've always got room."

\* \* \*

The pizzas came. Seven o'clock passed, then eight, and Eric didn't show. Finally, at eight-thirty, Kayla got to her feet.

"Damn Robin Hood Banyon anyway. I bet he decided to pull a fast one on me and go back up there alone. Look, I'm going. If he does show up, tell him I went on ahead and to catch up with me there, okay?"

Hosea didn't look happy about the idea. "Ah'm not sure you oughtta be going up there by your lonesome, Little Bit."

"But I'm not going to be alone. I'll be there with all my new friends." *Thieves, prostitutes, drunks, drug addicts, and not one of them within a stone's throw of their eighteenth birthday. . . .* "And I will be incredibly careful. Look, it was hard for us to get in. I can't just throw that away. They'll talk to me. Eric just scares them; we're talking 'The Lost Boys' here; he's too old for any of them to really trust him. If I don't go back now, all that work'll be for nothing. And look. I'll even take my phone with me. I'll call you first thing in the morning. You'll know right where I am. If you don't hear from me, you can call the police, okay? You can call *Ria*. Honest. Besides, Eric's probably already there, so I've *got* to go!"

"Are you sure?" Hosea said, regarding her sternly.

"Hey, this is me, remember? Been to Underhill three times and survived. Not to mention the streets of L.A. I'll be fine." Kayla said, moving toward the door.

Hosea sighed. "Ah surely oughtn't let you do this."

"Look. The least I can do is keep an eye on Brainless Banyon's baby brother for him, right? And Toni's still got her contacts in the PD, right?"

Hosea nodded. "She keeps up with a few of Jimmie's old friends."

"Then if something goes really bad, I'll make sure I get us all arrested and you make sure Toni's friends let you know. And you come down and bail the four of us out. Say you're Ace's brother, or something—you look enough like her for that to pass. And Magnus is her stepbrother. Figure it out."

"Well, Ah'm glad to see you've got a plan," Hosea said dourly.

Kayla blew him a kiss and slipped out the door quickly before he could come up with any more objections.

\* \* \*

She'd shown him far more assurance than she felt. If anyone knew how dangerous the city streets could be, it was Kayla. But she had to go back, Eric or not—and what the hell was keeping him, anyway?

She walked over to the A and took it a couple of stops uptown. Even in so short a distance, the neighborhood changed drastically, but New York was a city in which even the same neighborhood took on a different aspect with each hour of the day. She pulled down her cap, and did her best to look as inconspicuous as possible, slouching along as if she belonged here.

Her Gift helped. Even with her shields up, she could tell what people were feeling, just skimming the surface of their emotions. Mostly she could sense if they were paying attention to her or not. Not paying attention was good.

But it was tiring, and she felt very much as if she *had* spent a whole day out on the streets by the time she walked across the park and reached the fetid alleyway that led to The Place. Making sure no one was looking, she slipped in through the back, over to the window.

It was dark.

"This way," a voice from the shadows said.

Kayla suppressed a yelp, recognizing the voice at the last minute. It was Jaycie, Magnus' friend.

"Up here," he said.

Kayla located the window mostly by touch. Why hadn't she thought to bring a flashlight? Although showing a light back here was probably high on the list of Missy Ace's dos and don'ts, come to think of it. She clambered through the window with Jaycie's help.

Once she was inside, and her eyes had adjusted to the dark, she could see the faint glow of light far above. "Come on," he said, taking her hand and beginning to climb the stairs.

\* \* \*

The Bard was gone, and that was good. When he had left this morning, Jachiel had wished very, very hard that he would go away and not come back. And he hadn't come back. He didn't mind the Bard's friend. She couldn't see him for what he was. She would make no trouble, so Jachiel didn't care whether she stayed or not.

But he really hoped the Bard would never come back.

\* \* \*

When she got upstairs, Kayla immediately looked around for Eric. She didn't see him, and her spirits sank. Ace and Magnus were sitting together hunched over a book in front of a battery-powered camping lantern. Jaycie dropped her hand and wandered back to the two of them, leaving Kayla to fend for herself.

She went back to the patch of floor where she'd spent the night, dropping her sleeping bag and backpack. She went and stood over Ace, who looked up.

*Showtime*, Kayla thought to herself.

"Am I supposed to give you the cut?" Kayla asked.

Ace didn't say anything, just stared at her, hard-faced.

"Every other place we stayed, somebody took a cut. So I want to know, is it you?" Kayla repeated.

Magnus snickered, looking a lot like a Baby Eric. Ace shook her head.

"You don't have to pay anybody to stay here, only I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anybody else about us," Ace said. "Because if too many people know, the police'll come in, you know?"

"That's fair," Kayla said. "Look, Eric and me, we didn't mean to make any trouble last night."

"Not your fault," Ace said. She looked around. "Do you know if he's coming back?"

"I thought he was already here," Kayla said. "I went off to, you know, do some stuff. And when I came back, he was gone."

She saw Ace looking at the pocketbook slung over her shoulder. You didn't need to be an Empath to catch the wave of distaste that radiated from the younger girl, though Ace kept her face carefully expressionless.

"Another thing," Ace said. "If you want, I can go to the store and buy things for you, if you don't happen to want to go. Just legal things, though. And you've got to give me the money before I go out."

That must have been what Ace had been doing when she and Eric had seen her in the supermarket, Kayla realized. Shopping for the other kids. But it seemed sort of odd that this bunch of kids would voluntarily hand over their money to her that way.

Kayla shrugged, saying nothing, and went to spread out her sleeping bag.

Since none of the other three seemed particularly inclined to chat—Ace and Magnus seemed to be *studying*, of all things, and Jaycie was watching them, drinking a Coke—she made the rounds of the other kids, trading her supposedly ill-gotten gains for useful items like a toothbrush, some hand sanitizer, candles and matches, magazines, and candy. Her barter and outright purchasing done, she went back to her own corner near Magnus and Ace, to read through her new magazines (or pretend to) and wonder where *thehell*/Banyon—the other Banyon—was.

It wasn't like Eric to disappear even at ordinary times—and twice as much not now that they'd finally found Magnus.

She'd checked her phone and e-mail before she'd left, and there hadn't been any messages on either one, other than one from Ria, saying she was going to be down in Washington for a week or so. Nothing from Eric. Nothing that would explain why he wasn't here now. She wished she'd been paying more attention this morning. But all she'd been thinking about was getting home. What the hell had he been saying about where he was going? To make a phone call?

No. To make an *interdimensional* phone call.

That could have a number of interpretations, but considering Eric, the simplest was that he'd had to go Underhill for some reason. Kayla relaxed a little. Time ran funny Underhill. You could stay there for hours, and come back to find out only minutes had passed—or just the reverse. Yeah, she'd found out about that the hard way, going in for a couple of months of tutoring at the deft hands of one of the Elven Healers of Misthold—because she figured she'd better learn how elves were put together in case she ever found one in pieces—and came out to find that it wasn't months she'd spent in there, it was years, and it wasn't a couple, it was lots. Thank God Elizabet had known where she was the whole time, and had definitely approved. Otherwise Elizabet would have been seriously pissed, and a pissed-off Healer had nasty ways of making disapproval felt.

Kayla felt a sudden wave of relief. Eric had probably just gotten turned around coming back to the World Above, or had to stay a little longer than he'd expected to. So she was doing the right thing by being here. Maybe she could even get the other three to like her a little while he was gone.

\* \* \*

Man, he must have really tied one on the other night. Eric couldn't remember the details, but he knew it had to have been a great party, because how could he have gotten this thoroughly wasted at a mediocre party?

Well, Faire folk knew how to party. And he was sure the details would come back to him eventually.

It was morning, and the ragged noisy cheer of the SoCal Faire penetrated the sides of the shabby blue tent that had been his constant companion on the Faire circuit for longer than he could remember. You could tell the time by the noise level: the louder the sounds of desperation, the closer it was to nine, when the Faire opened. Judging from what he was hearing, it must be almost that now. Eric rolled over, groping for his flute. His hand encountered a bottle, half full. He shook it, holding it up to the light and squinting at it through bleary eyes.

*Bushmill's. Cure everything from a broken leg to a broken heart.* Unscrewing the cap, he tilted the bottle back and drank, feeling its warmth lace through him, banishing the cobwebs. *Ah, that's better.* He rolled out of his blankets and crawled out of the tent, dragging on his shirt and groping for his belt.

Pain lanced through his head as he stood, and everything hurt—he must have fallen off Main Stage yesterday, or something—and he crawled back into his tent to find the Bushmill's to speed the healing process. Couldn't take the bottle into the Faire, though, so he took a moment to fill his belt flask, being careful not to spill a single drop. That should see him through the day. That and half a bottle of aspirin.

Whathadhe been doing last night?

*Whatever it was, I hope it was fun.*

The sudden wild howl of bagpipes ripped through his nervous system like a combination of acid and icewater. Eric moaned, and swung around to see Seamus, one of the Wild Northern Celts, tuning up his instrument—if a bagpipe could ever be said to be properly in tune—grinning like a red-headed fiend around the mouthpiece.

"Here, Banyon. You look like you could use this."

Karen Wolfsdottir—one of the German Mercenary Wenches—strolled over and thrust a wooden tankard into his hand. It was warm and steam rose from it. Eric sniffed. Coffee.

"If you finish getting dressed, you can join the parade onto the site. Not that I mind what you're wearing now," Karen said, leering at him appreciatively.

Eric took a swig of the coffee. Hot caffeine joined the Bushmill's in his system, bringing him further awake. He looked down at his bare knees and blushed. He guessed he'd been more ripped than he'd thought. He was just lucky he'd put on his shirt before showing himself to the world—though the Elizabethan smock that was the basis of his Faire costume covered him to mid-thigh, he didn't feel all that covered, particularly with the way Karen was looking at him.

She'd been chasing him all season—Eric remembered now—and while normally he didn't go for the barbarian weightlifter type, he was thinking it might not be altogether bad to let himself get caught. Particularly if morning coffee went with it.

"Sure and it'd be a hard thing t'be explaining to the travelers," Eric said in his best Faire brogue, finishing the coffee in a few burning gulps and passing the wooden tankard back to her. "So if you'll let me go make meself respectable, me fine lady, it'd be happy I'll be to escort such a delicate flower of chivalry as your fine self into the Faire."

Karen shouted with laughter and said something in a language Eric didn't know. In Mundania, she majored in Old English at UCLA, he remembered, and could swear in at least five dead languages. "Hurry back," she said, punching him—gently for Karen—in the shoulder.

Feeling much less like death now, Eric crawled back into his tent and dug through his things until he unearthed his boots and breeches. Quickly dragging a comb through his shoulder-length chestnut hair, he added a "pancake" hat in brown velvet with a long trailing peacock feather and appeared again, buckling his belt with the now-full flask around his waist, and hitching his gig bag over his shoulder: the perfect Elizabethan strolling player.

"Come on," Karen said. "I saved you a place."

Most of the folk were already on site—security and vendors had to be in their places before the doors opened, of course, but a lot of the players liked to go in together and, well, any excuse for a parade. . . .

Seamus and Donal were at the front, and at Seamus' signal, they both began to play, the howl of the pipes sounding like eleven cats in a bad mood, and the little column began to move forward: wenches, jugglers, mercenaries and strolling players of all kinds. Eric recognized a lot of familiar faces—there was Ian with his bodhran, and Linda beside him, dulcimer case slung over her shoulder as she piped away wildly on a pennywhistle; Ranulph the Melancholy Dane; Mistress Althea; a gaggle of Irish step-dancers, laughing as they tried to keep up with the procession and make last-minute adjustments to their ribbons at the same time. . . .

They passed through the Faire gates, going in among the big trees. The morning sun made slanting bars of golden light. All around him Eric saw the booths and signs of the place he'd spent so many happy hours. The last few moments before the travelers entered for the day was an enchanted time—not that Eric saw it all that often, if the truth be told—and if he had to choose a moment when the Faire was at its prettiest, he'd have to say it was now, with everything renewed, reborn . . . *magic*.

And he realized that he was home.

Chapter Ten:  
O'Mahoney's Frolics

It was a special Wednesday evening meeting of the Inner Circle—Fafnir had the smaller group meeting several times a week now, usually after the Outer Circle met, but tonight, he had told them, was to be special, for them alone.

He had provided them a new revelation last week: an audience with the Master Guardian who lived on the Esoteric Plane, from whom the Guardian Power flowed. It didn't matter that none of them had actually *seen* the image in the crystal or heard the Master Guardian's voice; by now they were all convinced they had.

Eventually, he would hint them around to understanding that the Master Guardian had actively blessed the plan to kill the False Guardians, but that there was no need to worry, that it wasn't murder, since the False Guardians weren't human any more, if they ever had been. In fact, to further soothe their fears, Fafnir would tell them that the False Guardians wouldn't even bleed if you cut them, but simply vanish in a puff of dust like the vampires on *Buffy*, so nobody would have to worry about getting in trouble with the police.

Who knew? It might even be true for all he knew. And once they'd helped him kill Paul Kern, Fafnir didn't really care what happened to any of them anyway.

But he needed to get them to do what he wanted first. Which meant he had to completely convince them not only that the False Guardians were real—and they were fairly convinced of that already—but that the False Guardians were after all of them now, and with deadly intent.

Which required a little assistance.

He glanced over to where Amanda was sitting on her mother's lap. Such a pretty child. Fafnir's interests in her lay in quite another direction than her physical charms. However, Sarah told him that Amanda did modeling work, which was good. It meant she was already used to doing things she didn't like, and following orders.

He'd discovered that the child was a natural psychic quite by accident. The day the Eye of the Inner Planes had first been delivered, Sarah'd had the girl with her. Amanda had stared into the shining ball, fascinated, and Fafnir could actually *feel* the power rising off her skin.

He'd distracted her at once—no telling *what* she might say if she went all the way into a trance—but he'd started working on Sarah immediately, telling her how fortunate she was to have such a powerful medium in her daughter, and saying how unfortunate it was that most young psychics burned out early because of their inability to properly ground and shield, or lost their powers because no one knew how to train them. It hadn't been long before Sarah was bringing little Amanda to him for lessons.

But the only lesson Fafnir was interested in teaching Amanda was how to go immediately into trance, where her powers would be entirely subject to his control. Once he had that—it hadn't been difficult—he'd started using Amanda as a channel to mold an Artificial Elemental, using her energy, and Sarah's, and his own, to give his own imagination form and life. He'd read about things like that in books,



and the directions seemed simple enough to follow. He'd been working privately with Sarah and Amanda for several weeks now.

He'd been very careful. The last thing he wanted to do was hurt Amanda. He just wanted to use her.

And now that he'd laid the groundwork, the Inner Circle could add more energy, feeding his creation, making it grow until it was strong enough for him to take control of directly.

He'd been a little surprised at first to find that this magic stuff actually worked and was so easy, but then, once he'd thought about it, he'd realized there was no reason why it shouldn't be easy. These Guardian guys existed, after all, and some, or maybe even most, of what they did was handwaving and persuasion, just as it had been in Andrew's case. And as far as Fafnir could tell from his reading, magic was just another kind of software. You followed the directions, and if you'd done everything right, and hadn't skipped a step, and the hardware was working right that day, you got results.

The last of the Inner Circle arrived, and Fafnir locked the door behind them. He waited until they had all settled and taken their places, then motioned to Sarah to bring Amanda into the middle of the circle, where the Eye usually rested.

"Last week you heard the words of the Master, of how it will soon be time to bring our battle to the Ancient Enemy. But before we do, it is only right that we protect ourselves against what they may try to do to us. And so, with your aid, I will attempt to summon one of my allies of old: a Protector. But I will need all your help in this."

But they weren't going to summon up an ancient ally. They were going to create something entirely new—their energy, his direction, and little Amanda as the focus and gateway. And then, instead of the protection they thought they'd created, Fafnir would have at his command an elemental assassin answerable only to him. And when his disciples found themselves savagely attacked by paranormal forces—sent, or so he'd tell them, by the False Guardians—well, then he'd have all the cooperation from them he needed, wouldn't he? They'd be convinced that not only what he'd told them was the truth, but that the False Guardians, having discovered that Fafnir had people helping him, were going to ruthlessly and coldly eliminate those people.

And since, without knowing it, they would all have helped create the monster he'd use to stalk them, any little private defenses they might have would be absolutely useless . . . .

"What must we do?" Luke asked.

Fafnir favored them all with his most benign expression, one he'd practiced for hours in front of a mirror. "All of you know Amanda, Sarah's daughter. She has been sent to us in our hour of gravest need. She is a natural gateway to the Ethereal Realm. When I have sent her into trance, she will be able to carry our call to the Ethereal Plane, and then—I may only hope—the Protector will hear. If it hears, and comes, it will be able to offer us some small protection, for I fear that the False Guardians are very near to learning what we have done and what we plan to do."

He waited, knowing they had to sell themselves on the idea before he went any further. That was the most important part of any con job: never rush the mark. He knew he had them all hooked already, though. Six months ago half of them would have just gotten up and walked out. Now they were all looking expectant, as if he'd offered the lot of them free unlimited high-speed Internet access. After a few moments, each of them hesitantly voiced their agreement.

"You want to help Master Fafnir, don't you, sweetie?" Sarah said to Amanda. "Come on," she said coaxingly.

Amanda hid her face against her mother's shoulder.

"She is shy among so many," Fafnir said, hoping that the kid would for God's sake not make an ugly scene that he'd have to think up some way to explain away. He took his pendulum out of his pocket.

The weight at the end was a faceted sphere of leaded crystal. It sparkled in the candlelight. "Amanda," he said in his most commanding voice. "Look at the dancing light."

Reluctantly, Amanda did.

\* \* \*

She didn't want to be here, but she was a good girl, and Mommy said they had to come, and that Master Fafnir was a nice man. But she didn't like him, and she didn't like looking at the dancing light. She didn't want to look at the dancing light, but she had to look at the dancing light, because Mommy said to, and Master Fafnir said to. Only when she did, everything went away, and she couldn't make it come back no matter how hard she tried until they let her, and she hated that. She couldn't cry, she couldn't move, and Mommy wouldn't understand why it was so bad.

*Please don't!* Amanda cried inside, where nobody could hear her. *Please make it stop!*

But no one listened.

\* \* \*

Kayla actually managed to get a few hours' sleep that night, for a miracle, curled up inside a worn-out sleeping bag in a Neverland gone horribly wrong. She'd watched both Magnus and Ace turn down opportunities to go out on "dates," and watched Jaycie eat an entire bar of baker's chocolate without throwing up, so she couldn't say she hadn't gotten some entertainment out of the deal. But Eric not showing up had been a definite bummer.

She watched the three of them, taking mental notes. Even if she hadn't known that Magnus was Eric's brother and that Ace was a Talent, she'd have known there was something not right about the three of them. Something off, in a different way from the way the other feral kids weren't normal.

Take the fact that the three of them didn't talk about themselves, even to each other. The other kids did, and even if it was mostly all lies, it was still talking. Those three acted like they knew the FBI was after them, and weren't giving up the tiniest speck of information, even false information.

Was it the Feds who were after Jaycie and Ace? It wasn't impossible; she'd been on the receiving end of one lot of black-project jerks, Eric and Kory and Beth had been tangled up with two more, and then there was Robert Lintel and Threshold, which had been yet another black-ops thing Ria'd inadvertently financed and abetted, until she found out what was going on. Kayla and Eric knew who was after Magnus, so there was every reason for him to be paranoid, but who was after Ace and Jaycie? More than just parents?

Maybe the three of them would go for that "no questions asked" place of Hosea's after all. The only problem was, someone had to be around to sign the check to get them in, and that meant either Ria or

Eric. And right now, Kayla couldn't get ahold of either one.

Around seven a.m.—about the time The Place started to settle down—Kayla slipped out and left. Eric had never showed up. She couldn't shake the feeling that something had gone wrong, very wrong, but she didn't know what.

\* \* \*

Lady Day was parked in front of Guardian House when Kayla got there.

"Hey," Kayla said, greeting the elvensteed. "Guess that means Eric's back, huh?"

The 'steed flashed her lights and revved her engine.

"Hey, cut that out," Kayla said, glancing around to see if anyone was on the street. "Somebody's going to notice. And aren't you supposed to be in the back? This is a no parking zone. You want to explain to Eric why you've been towed?"

Although the elvensteed would just Gate out of the impoundment and come right back, Kayla knew. Which would create problems of its own . . .

She started to walk past the bike, but Lady Day moved forward, cutting her off and revving her motor . . . anxiously? Could a bike be anxious? Although Lady Day wasn't really a motorcycle; she was an elvensteed, a living thing.

"Hey!" Kayla said, jumping back. "Stop that."

She tried walking around the back of the bike. Lady Day backed up, cutting her off again. Kayla swore. "I wish you could talk."

But elvensteeds couldn't talk, not in any of their forms. The most they could do was share emotions through a psychic link with their riders. Which meant with Eric, not Kayla.

"Is there something going on inside you don't want me walking into?" Kayla asked. *Playing Twenty Questions with a Harley clone. I gotta be losing it.*

Lady Day flashed her lights several times and rocked back and forth.

"Is that a yes or a no?" Kayla demanded, frustrated.

"What's going on?" Hosea asked, walking down the front steps of the building with his banjo slung over his shoulder. Then: "What's she doin' out front?"

"I don't suppose Eric came home last night?" Kayla said hopefully.

Hosea shook his head. "And by the look of things, his lady friend here's pretty upset about it."

Lady Day flashed her lights and growled, a deep thrum of engine.

"Just like Lassie," Kayla muttered.

"Do you want us to go somewhere with you, girl?" Hosea asked.

\* \* \*

"Took us long enough to figure it out," Kayla shouted into Hosea's ear a few minutes later.

The two of them were sitting on Lady Day's saddle—Hosea holding Jeanette in his arms—as the elvensteed roared across town. Kayla hoped the elvensteed's elvish cloaking device was in full effect, because otherwise they were just begging for half a dozen traffic tickets.

Hosea said something she couldn't hear.

Lady Day reached Central Park, and promptly took off into the park along one of the pedestrian paths, proceeding in a sudden ghostly silence as she stopped making motor noises—which were, for an elvensteed, strictly optional anyway. Kayla guessed that nobody *could* see them, because riding even a bicycle through some of these areas was forbidden, let alone a motorcycle.

Eventually they reached a clearing near the top of the park, and the elvensteed stopped. When they got off, she began racing around in circles again until Hosea sternly told her to stop. She crept off beneath a tree and stood there, looking about as pathetic as a motorcycle—or an elvensteed impersonating a motorcycle—could look.

Kayla and Hosea looked at each other.

"You're the one with the magic banjo," Kayla pointed out. "Do something magical."

Hosea set down his case, opened it, and took Jeanette out, slinging her strap over his shoulder. "Any suggestions?" he asked.

"Well, if Eric was here, he isn't here now. Can you see if he *was* here, maybe?" Kayla asked.

\* \* \*

Hosea slung the strap over his shoulder, slipped his picks over his fingers, and carefully began to tune Jeanette.

This looked like a perfectly ordinary—if deserted—stretch of the park, the sort of place he liked to come himself. If not for the fact that Eric hadn't been seen since yesterday morning—and the fact that his 'steed was fretting so about it—Hosea wouldn't give the place a second look. But even a suspicious inspection didn't turn up much of anything. Trees. Grass. Broken bottle glass and discarded trash.

*It's up to you and me, sweetheart.*

Hosea began to play.

"Mama Tried"—he'd always liked that one. Beneath the music he could feel Jeanette stirring unwillingly, looking around.

*:I hate that song, :she grumbled. Then: :Not dead. And not here, :she reported brusquely.*

"Was he here?" Hosea asked, still playing. He swung into "Banish Misfortune"—that was one of Eric's

favorites.

Confusion and irritation from Jeanette as she looked again. Hosea caught blurred symbol images of Kayla and Lady Day from her mind—both of them were easy for her to See because of their innate Power—then a distortion as Jeanette looked in a direction he couldn't follow.

:He was here. He stopped being here. It's all very confused, Hosea. It was a long time ago.:Jeanette's mental voice was a mix of irritated and plaintive.

Hosea brought the song to a close, sighing. The dead weren't bound by time the way the living were, and Jeanette was dead in every way that mattered. But they also tended to get just a little confused by time, and be a good deal better at looking into the past than the future. Either Eric really had been here a long time ago—and Lady Day didn't seem to think so—or something had been here since to muddle the traces Jeanette could pick up.

"He was here, but he isn't now. And we don't know what happened to him," Hosea said grimly.

"He said he was going Underhill," Kayla offered. "When he left yesterday."

"Well, that would make sense," Hosea said after a moment's thought. "Jeanette says he was here a long time ago, and that ain't right. But elves and ghosts don't quite seem to get along any too well, magically." If Eric had opened a Portal to Underhill here, the magic would dirty up the traces of his presence enough to confuse Jeanette's ghostly senses thoroughly.

Lady Day rolled over to them and flashed her lights silently several times. Kayla patted her on the gas tank. "I wonder why he didn't take his ride? That'd be fastest."

"Maybe the trip wasn't all his idea. You got any idea of how to get in touch with the Good Folks?" Hosea asked.

"Well," Kayla said slowly, "I know Eric e-mails Beth and Kory a lot. But I don't know how often they check their mail, and I know he says the Underhill servers run kinda funny sometimes. So if I e-mail them, I don't know how long it'll be before I get an answer."

"And Ah'd hate to worry someone if there wasn't any good reason," Hosea said slowly. "But maybe you'd better get in touch with them. Can't imagine why Lady Day'd be so twitchy if he'd just gone Underhill." He glanced at his watch. "Ah'd better get a move on to get to work. Why don't the two of you go on home and see what you can turn up there?"

Kayla turned back to the bike. "Does that work for you?" she asked.

Lady Day flashed her lights once, rocking back and forth unhappily.

"Look, we know he's in some kind of trouble now," Kayla told the elvensteed, "but until we can find him, there's not much we can do about it, is there? But we'll keep looking for him."

Lady Day sounded her horn in a long mournful *beep*.

\* \* \*

Back at Eric's apartment, Kayla checked the phone—no new messages from anybody—and then

switched on Eric's computer. Instead of sitting down, she wandered around aimlessly, picking things up and setting them down again.

It was funny how different a place looked when you knew its occupant wasn't coming home any time soon.

*Dammit, Banyon. You picked a great time to go missing.*

The only consolation was that she knew Eric could take care of himself if anyone could. He didn't have the brains God gave a carrot—at least in Kayla's opinion—but he always landed on his feet.

She sat down at the computer and opened Eric's address book, scrolling through it until she found Beth's Underhill address. She clicked on it, opening a new letter.

And stared at it. What could she say that wouldn't have Beth and Kory on Eric's doorstep as fast as their 'steeds could bring them here? Like *that'd* be any help.

But *hehad* to be in Underhill. He'd said he was going there . . . hadn't he? Or as good as.

But if he'd gone to Underhill, he'd have taken his elvensteed.

Unless he'd been *kidnapped* to Underhill.

But then Lady Day would have just followed him to Underhill—would have taken her and Hosea along with her without so much as a by-your-leave, probably.

But she hadn't.

She'd taken them up to the Park. Where there hadn't been anything. Where Jeanette had said *Erichad* been, and wasn't now.

And that didn't make any sense either. Because Eric wouldn't just go wandering off. Not when he was trying to figure out how to get Magnus to come home with him.

Reluctantly, Kayla closed the e-mail client, her message unsent. Maybe she'd try a couple of other things before she scared Kory and Beth half to death.

*I wonder how I find out if somebody's been arrested? No time like the present, Girl Detective.*

If Toni was home, she'd know.

\* \* \*

Hosea had several stops to make that day—no matter what else was going on in his life, he still had to cover rent and groceries, and that meant meeting his obligations.

But there was no reason why he couldn't earn the rent at the same time. . . .

Now that he knew what to listen for, he was getting more of the Secret Stories, tiny fragment by tiny fragment. Today, from the girls, it was more about the Blue Lady; how she not only protected children from the demons, but from the humans that demons had gotten to. Physical protection, that

meant—which sure fit in with those murders he and the Guardians were looking into. But you had to be a Special One to call her in that way, and you had to be in the worst fear and pain of your life, because she didn't come for little things, and when she did come, there had better be something there for her to protect against, or she turned back into Bloody Mary.

Kind of like calling on Elbereth Gilthoniel, except that she'd turn into Shelob if you called her for no good and urgent reason . . .

From the boys, however, he heard about the angels and their ongoing guerrilla war against the demons. They had a base camp in a secret place in the heart of a tropical swamp, and from there they mounted their ongoing campaign to drive the demons out of Heaven and the strongholds they'd made on Earth. Fighting beside the angels were the good ghosts, who actually could not do much except serve as scouts, spies and messengers to the living, because they had no angelic powers. Oddly enough, the entire campaign, down to the camp in a tropical swamp, had a familiar sound to it; when one of the boys named Julio described the archangel Michael as dressed in fatigues and a beret, bearded and carrying a rifle, Hosea realized why.

He kept an eye out for Ace while he was down at the shelter, but didn't spot her, and that worried him, knowing what he knew now. He wondered who was after her to make her as skittish as she was, and if Eric had managed to get himself tangled up in that, too. He'd been in on the whole Threshold thing; what if there was another black ops project that was using kids instead of adults, and Eric had stumbled into them?

He called Kayla in the middle of the day from the shelter phone, to find out if there was any news.

"I don't think he's Underhill," Kayla said. "I was thinking about it, and if he was, wouldn't Lady Day just have followed him?"

"Maybe," Hosea said cautiously. He had to admit it sounded reasonable, but the amount he knew for sure about elvensteeds could be engraved on the edge of one of his silver banjo picks and still leave room for a couple of Bible verses.

"So I thought maybe we ought to look for him here first before we bothered a bunch of elves," Kayla said tentatively.

"Are you real sure about that?" Hosea asked. "It don't seem to me like it would do any harm to ask the Good Folks if they've seen him."

"And have Beth pitch spinning kittens all over Eric's apartment with Kory along to sing tenor?" Kayla asked crossly. "The weird thing is"—there was a very long pause—"elvensteeds can *track* their riders. Eric told me that once. Over hundreds of miles in the World Above. And across Gates in Underhill. I remembered it when I was thinking about how funny it was that she didn't just take us Underhill after him."

So if she can track him anywhere he goes, why doesn't she know where he is? Hosea thought.

The unspoken question hovered between them.

"Why don't you have Toni help you check the hospitals?" Hosea said, very gently. "Ah'll be home as soon as Ah can."

But it was several more hours before he could fulfill that promise.

On his way into Guardian House, Hosea ran into Caity coming out.

"Oh, there you are!" she said cheerfully. "I was just up knocking on your door." Her smile faded a little as she inspected him. "You don't look like you've been having the best day in the world."

"Ah might have lost track of a friend," Hosea admitted cautiously, not wanting to spoil her mood. "But Ah'm sure he'll turn up."

"I guess this isn't the world's best time to invite you to a party, then," Caity said, drooping a little. "But there's one at Neil's place tonight. *He's* going to be there, and he said I could bring you, so . . ."

Hosea had never felt less like going to a party in his life, but the only person *he* could possibly be was the mysterious True Guardian Caity had talked about, and getting a closer look at the fellow was important. And Hosea suspected that if he turned down this chance, there wouldn't be another one. So he forced a smile, and said: "It sounds like just what Ah need to take my mind off my troubles. What time?"

Caity beamed. "I'll pick you up about eight." She hesitated. "Wear something nice, okay?"

"Ah'll turn up in my Sunday-go-to-meetin' best," Hosea promised firmly.

Caity stood up on tiptoe to bestow a quick kiss on his cheek, and hurried off. Hosea went on into the building.

He left Jeanette in his apartment and went down to Kayla's. She opened the door at his knock.

"Well, he hasn't been arrested," she said without preamble. "And he hasn't been committed—I called his shrink. She said she'd check the hospitals for me, too, but that I probably wouldn't hear back from her until tomorrow." Her face twisted.

Hosea held out his arms. Kayla flung herself into them, burrowing fiercely, choking on strangled sobs.

"Hush, now," Hosea said. "Wherever he is, Ah'm sure he's just a mite tangled up, is all. You know that boy's got himself a way with trouble. That's all it is. He'll be back in a day or two and apologize for givin' us all such a powerful fright, and everything'll be as right as rain. You'll see."

"You don't believe that," Kayla said, sniffing and pushing herself away.

Hosea fished out his pocket handkerchief and handed it to her.

"Ah do believe that we don't *know*," he said firmly. "And until we do know something for sure and certain, there's no point to borrowing trouble. Now, Eric's got a lot of enemies. But he's got a lot of friends, too, and he's got a powerful shine on him. You're doing the right thing looking for him the way you are, but Ah do wish you'd whistle up the Good Folks to help."

"You don't understand," Kayla said fiercely, scrubbing at her eyes with the handkerchief. "Kory couldn't do much even if he was here. New York is full of iron. Elves can't even survive here very long, let alone use their magic here all that well. So it's really up to us."

"Well," Hosea said, reluctantly going along with her argument, "that does put a different tail on the cat."



Why don't you come upstairs and let me feed you? Ah've got to go out tonight, but no sense in either of us goin' hungry, now, is there?"

"Sure," Kayla said dolefully, stuffing the now black-striped handkerchief into her jeans pocket. "Not much anybody can do before tomorrow, anyway."

\* \* \*

Hosea was just as glad he'd dressed in his best, but he still felt very much out of place when he and Caity arrived at Neil Grandison's apartment.

It was one of those glass-and-steel towers far uptown, the kind of place that looked as though it were steam-cleaned inside and out once a month, and where the tenants were probably chosen, not only by their financial worth, but by their appearance as well. Hosea wouldn't have been at all surprised to learn there was a building dress code.

As they rode up in the elevator, Caity gave him a number of last-minute instructions—not only to just be himself (as if Hosea would ever consider being anyone else), but to not "bother" Master Fafnir—"or to talk about the Work, because, you know, this is just a social evening, and there will be a lot of people here who don't know anything about it."

"Ayah," Hosea had said laconically. Apparently the Master was looking for a few more sheep, and Hosea set himself to do the best possible impersonation of a lamb ripe for the shearing that he could, setting his other worries—Eric's disappearance; where Kayla was spending her nights; the Bloody Mary murders that the other Guardians—*thereal* Guardians, as he still couldn't help but think of them—were pursuing; the Secret Stories—out of his mind for the moment. He could afford no distractions tonight.

\* \* \*

The apartment was large, decorated in what Hosea—who had seen more of them than people might expect to look at him—had come to think of as Rich Folks Style: wall-to-wall beige carpet, pale anonymous leather sofas, enormous expensive pieces of pottery, and modern art that didn't seem to go with anything else. Although somehow Miz Llewellyn managed to make her place look a bit more homelike, and Hosea suspected that Miz Llewellyn could buy and sell Mr. Neil Grandison out of pocket change.

There was a banquette set up as a bar in one corner, and the room was filled with people.

"Caity—hi. Is this your friend?"

A very manicured dark-haired man in a grey turtleneck and charcoal slacks came over, a tulip-shaped wineglass in his hand.

"Neil, this is Hosea," Caity said dutifully. "Hosea, this is Neil."

The two men shook hands. "You can put your coats in the back bedroom," Neil said. "*Heisn't* here yet," he added, his tone pitched for Caity's ears alone, though Hosea had no trouble hearing him. *Guess Ah'm not supposed to have any idea whoheis, although it'd take a pure simpleton not to guess.*

But Caity nodded, looking like a conscientious schoolchild, and bore Hosea off.

\* \* \*

They supplied themselves with glasses of wine from the bar, slipped sterling silver wine charms over the stems—a little fairy for Caity and, interestingly enough, there was a banjo that Hosea laid claim to—and then circulated, Caity sticking as close by his side as a hen with only one chick.

Despite Caity's promises that this was to be a purely social evening, there seemed to be only one real topic of conversation, conducted in hints and allusions.

And occasionally outright.

"—well of course I gave him the apartment. It was the least I could do for a man like that. He has such power."

The speaker was a middle-aged woman with long auburn hair—Juliana, it would be, if she was talking about the apartment, Hosea guessed.

"Aren't you looking forward to, well,*it*?" the woman she was talking to asked. She was a few years younger, with shoulder-length, light-brown hair in a complicated style.

"I'll feel better when*it* gets here, if we're going to have to deal with*them*," Juliana answered cryptically.

Hosea would have liked to hear more—it wouldn't be easy to fill in the blanks, though it ought to be possible—but Caity took his arm and steered him determinedly away. "I want you to meet Gregory," she said firmly.

"So you're Caity's musician?" Gregory said amiably, when they were introduced. "Music can be an important conduit of power."

"Ah wouldn't know a lot about that," Hosea said modestly.

He had a bit of luck then, because someone named Faith came and wanted Caity to go off with her, and Hosea settled himself to listen. People, he'd found a long time ago, tended to talk if you listened, and Gregory—who'd had several glasses of wine—was no exception.

He got to hear a great deal about the ancient brotherhood of Guardians who had been chosen before the beginning of Time to stand against the Darkness, of how their numbers had dwindled over the centuries until there was only one, of how the False Guardians had risen up (from where was an interesting question that apparently nobody was asking) to overthrow the True Guardian, but how one day the True Guardian would reclaim his power and found a new order of Guardians to take up his ancient work.

"—but of course that's all just a legend, isn't it?" Gregory said, belatedly coming to the conclusion he'd been talking too much.

"Ah don't think it is," Hosea said quietly. "An' Ah don't think you think it is, either."

Just then there was a stirring by the front door—*just like when the weasel comes into the henhouse*, Hosea thought uncharitably—and someone who could only be Caity's "Master Fafnir" entered the room.

One of the women hurried forward to take his cloak from his shoulders—and *it was a cloak*, Hosea noted with mild amusement—Master Fafnir wore a cloak, and a broad-brimmed hat, and carried a

silver-handled walking stick. *I suppose he must think he's Orson Wells.*

From Caity's description, Hosea had been expecting someone along the lines of Christopher Lee—tall, gaunt, saturnine, and Byronic—but Master Fafnir was none of these things. He was on the short side of average, a few pounds short of pudgy, and had the pale skin of those who spent all their time indoors under artificial light. His short brown hair was combed straight back, making no attempt to conceal a receding hairline, and his face was the sort at which you wouldn't look twice.

But his eyes made up for it all. They had the intense vividness that his every other feature lacked. They reached out and *grabbed*—and if it wasn't the kind of Power that Hosea was used to confronting in his work as a Guardian, it was a dangerous power nonetheless.

"And here is our newcomer—our Ozark bard," Fafnir said, moving through the crowd to stop before Hosea. His voice was surprisingly deep for such a small man, the resonant instrument of a trained actor—or of someone, like a politician, who knew just how potent a weapon a good voice could be. His voice sounded warm and hearty, welcoming, but Hosea, who could hear the music beneath the voice, heard another story—of someone who was calculating, cold, and avaricious, and was already assessing what use Hosea could be to him. He had certainly named himself properly—for Fafnir, the most avaricious of dragons, who amassed treasure for no other purpose than to possess as much of it as possible.

Hosea held out his hand, and Fafnir took it in both his own. He closed his eyes for just a moment, taking a deep breath. "You could do great things," he said simply, and moved on.

"Isn't he wonderful? And *helikes* you," Caity said excitedly, clutching Hosea's arm.

Hosea stood there for a moment, blinking. The man had a powerful personality. It wasn't hard to see how Fafnir had gotten all of them to follow him, at least in the beginning. The fellow was slick as greased ice, and if he'd been a little less suspicious, Hosea would have believed that Fafnir had seen right into him and known him for what he truly was.

But "Ozark bard"—now that was just highfalutin' poetry. Caity had certainly told Fafnir about him ahead of time when she'd asked if she could bring him, and for the rest, *whowouldn't* want to hear that they could do great things?

He hadn't thought he'd need to worry about shielding himself here, but charisma, and the pull of a large group all thinking the same way, could exert nearly the same amount of force as a trained magician's will. Now that Fafnir had arrived, Hosea could feel the pull of expectation all around him. Not nearly strong enough to entrap him, but worth warding against all the same.

*"Listen to your own song,"* his Gran'daddy had always told him. *"Ain't nobody can fool with you when you listen within."* Both Paul and Eric had told him the same thing, though their words had been different. Hosea concentrated, until the nagging tug he felt from the other people in the room receded, and he felt sure of himself again.

When he looked around, he saw that Fafnir had seated himself in a large leather chair in a corner—very much as if by right—and the others had all gravitated to him, as if, now that he'd arrived, he'd become the focus of the room. Someone brought him a glass of wine, and several of the women clustered around him, sitting on the floor around the chair. Hosea was both relieved and discouraged to see that Caity was among them—relieved, because it meant she wouldn't be dragging him out of any more interesting conversations, and discouraged because it meant she was very much under "The Master's" spell.

*But if there's one thing Ah know for sure, it's that you can't save fools from themselves, because fools have too much ingenuity.*

Though a few people left—apparently not finding Fafnir as fascinating as their friends did—Hosea stayed, and since Fafnir had greeted him personally and seemed to take a personal interest in him, the others spoke openly in front of him. Fafnir didn't seem to object to that at all, apparently having decided Hosea was completely harmless. Hosea hoped that someday he'd get the opportunity to change the man's mind. *Big and dumb don't always go together, Mister Weasel.*

He wandered, seemingly aimlessly, among those who were left, but in fact he was looking for someone in particular. Caity had said that Neil had told her some things that perhaps he shouldn't have, and Hosea was hoping he'd continue the practice if Hosea could manage to strike up a conversation with him.

At last luck favored him, and he found Neil over by the bar, playing gracious host among the wine bottles. Hosea waited until the two of them were alone.

"How are you enjoying our little party?" Neil asked him.

"Waal, it's real fascinatin' and Ah'm right honored to meet Master Fafnir," Hosea said, laying on his country-bumpkin act for all it was worth, "But truth to tell, Ah'm kinda worried about the Exoteric Plane consequences of the Work," Hosea said gravely. "Not on the Inner, you know, but the Outer."

Bless Tatiana for providing him with all the passwords and jargon he needed for this. She'd done a little skit at the last Basement Party—something about a bunch of Satanists accidentally calling up a New Age guru instead of the Devil—that'd been funny, if peculiar. Paul had laughed until he'd nearly dropped his drink, though it hadn't made all that much sense to Hosea. But *it had* included a number of useful terms for him to trot out now.

Neil seemed to accept that Hosea knew what he was talking about—and even better, that he had every right to ask the question. "Oh, you don't need to worry about that," he said easily. "There won't even be a body. In fact, as soon as one of them 'dies,' everyone will forget that they ever even existed. So it's the perfect victimless crime—if you can call it a crime. I'd call it justice, myself. After all, even if they were human once, they aren't anymore." Neil drained his glass, and reached for Hosea's. "Refill?"

"Surely," Hosea said. The potted plants and ornamental vases at the Grandison residence had been drinking well tonight, as Hosea had no intention of taking more than a sip of wine here. No one with any claim to real Power drank much at all, he'd found—of course Eric stayed away from liquor, but none of the Guardians drank much beyond the odd glass of wine, and the Basement Parties were never fueled by anything stronger than wine and hard cider, and not much of that.

If he'd needed any more proof that this was a hoodoo operation, it was the amount of vintage this room full of pretend Guardians were putting away.

Neil turned away and refilled both their glasses, turning back and handing one to Hosea.

"Jealous?" Neil asked, nodding toward Caity.

Hosea looked over to where Caity was sitting, resting her head on Fafnir's knee. The Master stroked her hair as he would pat the head of a dog.

"Ah'd be a pure fool to be jealous of a man like that," Hosea said with complete honesty.

Neil smiled. "You're one of us already. And when we become Guardians—and she's an Acolyte—it's going to be a whole new world."

"Ah can believe that." A new world somewhere in Upstate New York, Hosea thought. And a considerably smaller apartment that has barred windows.

"You look like you're a million miles away," Neil said. His speech was very slightly slurred now, the pattern of the chronic drinker who was nearing his limit.

"Ah was just thinkin', Ah wouldn't want to have *his* enemies," Hosea said, nodding toward Fafnir. "You're a brave man to throw your lot in with him like this."

"Oh, Master Fafnir will protect us," Neil said with complete conviction. "He's got *power*."

\* \* \*

Several of them—Caity and Hosea among them—were dismissed soon afterward. In the elevator down, Caity clung to him, giddy with something more than wine. Hosea had watched her closely, and she hadn't drunk that much.

But she was as flushed and coquettish as a woman in love—and not with *him*, Hosea realized glumly. With Fafnir—or worse, with the fantasy that Fafnir'd sold all of them on. And so she'd go on giving "The Master" money in the future—probably more than she could fairly afford—and doing things that made her just a little uneasy, and digging herself in deeper and deeper until she was too ashamed of what she was doing to ask for help to get out.

And right now, she wouldn't take Hosea's help even if he offered it, Hosea knew. She was in love with the whole idea of being part of a grand secret conspiracy for Good.

Would he have been, in her place? If Jimmie Youngblood hadn't had to die to make him a Guardian, if he hadn't already had the music magic? If somebody had walked up to him out of the blue and offered him something like this on a silver platter, promising him the chance to be a hero?

Hosea wasn't sure. But he did know that whatever Fafnir's secret society had started out as, it hadn't been anything like what it had now become, with all its loose talk of tidy convenient executions. Everyone in that room up there had gotten in deeper and deeper by degrees, until now someone like Neil could talk about killing someone as if it were the most natural thing in the world and never turn a hair.

What Fafnir was telling them seemed fairly clear to Hosea now—piecing together the various things he'd heard tonight with what Caity had told him earlier. Some of this group were supposed to become Guardians immediately, and the rest would become Acolytes—Guardians-to-be. And all of that depended on their executing the False Guardians once Fafnir identified them—which wouldn't "count," because the False Guardians would conveniently dissolve away into dust.

But Fafnir himself must know that wasn't true. Even if he did manage to capture and kill a Guardian, all he'd have for his pains would be a dead human being. The man was venal, not insane. He couldn't be intending to set these people up for murder—and even bedazzled as they were, when they were actually holding a knife to somebody's throat, they'd surely balk at using it.

And why should Fafnir give up his soft life just to prove he had ultimate control over the people he'd deluded? He could spin out this nasty game of his for as long as he could deceive his followers, and as long as they never actually tried to execute anyone as a False Guardian, it was simply another sordid and hateful scam, not an actual Guardian problem, wasn't it?

Or was there a plan behind the plan, one that didn't stop at murder?

\* \* \*

He saw Caity to her door. She wanted him to come in and stay awhile, but Hosea wasn't even tempted. When he romanced a lady, he preferred her to be in her right mind, and thinking of him, besides. So he made the excuse of an early morning, and waited until he heard her do up the locks on the inside, and went to see Paul.

Paul's business was free-lance computer design, and so he kept owl's hours. Hosea wasn't surprised to see a thin thread of light beneath his door.

"Ah need to talk," he said, when Paul opened the door.

"I was hoping you'd be by," Paul said. "There's been another Bloody Mary murder."

"Another one?" Hosea said, appalled. "I was out—"

"It doesn't matter. I doubt you could have done any more than you did before, and it's not as if we had any warning. Same pattern, same clues that lead . . . nowhere. How do we stop something like that?"

Hosea sighed. "If'n you knew her True Name, maybe. But the little'uns say it's lost."

"Well, the more you can find of the Secret Stories, the better. Maybe there's a clue in there, somewhere. But that won't be what you wanted to chat me up about. Come on in. I've got tea on the boil."

Every inch of the walls of Paul's apartment was covered with books. Software manuals battled for shelf space with esoteric leather-bound tomes, and peculiar curios, both modern and ancient, were tucked into every spare corner of space that remained. What floor space in the living room that was not occupied by a couch, chair, and table was filled with computer equipment, and more computers and books packed every free corner of both bedrooms. The result made Kayla's far smaller apartment look spacious by comparison.

Hosea transferred an armload of books from the couch to the floor and sat down as Paul went into the kitchen, returning with two large white mugs. When Paul said he was boiling tea, he meant it; the brew he brought Hosea was thick and dark, as strong as coffee. Hosea cradled the mug in his hands and wondered where to begin.

"You look like a chap with a problem on his mind," Paul said, settling into the chair. "And I'm supposed to have all the answers."

"Well, it could be a problem for all of us," Hosea said, "since apparently we're the evil False Guardians that this feller name o' Fafnir intends to hunt down and destroy."

"Well, there's an interesting beginning to a story," Paul commented, gazing at the wall above Hosea's head—which contained, of course, more bookshelves.

Slowly, Hosea told him the whole story, as far as he'd pieced it together: that Caity, along with about twenty other people, had fallen under the spell of someone calling himself Master Fafnir, who said he was a Guardian who had been stripped of his power by a coterie of Evil Guardians, and that once the lot of them had hunted down and killed the Evil Guardians and restored Fafnir's Guardian powers, he would be able to make them all Guardians as well. And meanwhile, they were all supporting him, to the extent of free room and board at the very least.

"Fafnir," Paul said musingly. "Interesting choice for *anom de ombre*. In Norse mythology, Fafnir was the eldest son of the dwarf king Hreidmar, and was turned into a dragon for his wickedness. Guardian of a great horde of gold, which he slew his father—some accounts say his brothers as well—to gain, a horde sometimes known as the Treasures of Light, though by all accounts the treasure was cursed, containing as it did the Rheingold. Slain by the hero Siegfried, eventually, Fafnir was." Paul sipped his tea.

"Knew about the dragon and Siegfried, didn't know about the other," Hosea said, interested in spite of himself.

"As for the rest, I'm sorry that Caity's involved, but I'd have to put the whole mess down to ordinary bloody-mindedness and cupidity on this Fafnir's part. Word does get out about us now and again. Sometimes the people we help talk more than they should, afterward. And a clever con man can put a lot together from very little. But it doesn't sound quite as if he actually knows anything about us and how we operate. After all, you were there tonight and he didn't spot you, did he?"

"Not that I noticed," Hosea admitted reluctantly. But he had to admit that if there'd been anything of True Power in that apartment this evening, he would have felt *something*.

"It's a nasty little game the man's playing," Paul said. "And a lot of people are going to be hurt—emotionally and financially—when it's over. But I wouldn't worry about it too much from our perspective. From what you say, there's no power there, other than the power of overpersuasion and the Big Lie. Those followers of your friend Fafnir's are living in the same fantasy world as all the other Charmed Ones, Chosen Ones, and Mage-Knights that litter the streets of this city, and until they do something actively wicked—or actually illegal—it's nobody's business but theirs, unfortunately. And Caity hasn't asked you for help with her problem. Remember that. We cannot intervene unless we are asked."

If there was one thing that grated on Hosea about the code the Guardians lived by, it was that, but he had no particular choice about accepting it. They could not intervene in a matter until someone asked them for help—or until their own Power demanded they intervene. And so far, neither thing had happened.

"So Ah guess there's nothing we can do?" Hosea said, disappointed.

Paul smiled. "I didn't quite say that. We can certainly see if the lads down at the Bunco Squad have an interest—it's a long shot, but worth a try. And you can go on being a good friend to young Caity. When she finds out that her guru's promises are nothing more than smoke and moonlight, she'll need one."

"And if they invite me back?" Hosea asked.

Paul considered the matter, gazing off into nothing for several seconds.

"Now *that* might be very amusing," he said at last. "Very amusing indeed."

Chapter Eleven:  
Here's A Health To The Company

Ria always found Washington to be an exceptionally unreal city—like Hollywood, it worked very hard at producing the intangible. Each city could point to a finished product, but the work involved in producing that product was labyrinthine and disproportionate—an elephant giving birth to a mouse—and for every finished task, a hundred were begun and abandoned. In both cities, lies and secrets were the order of the day—and the people with the most power were not necessarily those who were the most well-known.

Like every large corporation, LlewelCo did a certain amount of business in the nation's capitol—you didn't survive in the current commercial climate without keeping abreast of the laws and regulations that would affect your company—and so it maintained a permanent residential suite at the Watergate Hotel. It had amused Perenor to make the place his Washington headquarters, and Ria found a certain wry humor in keeping the address. She made good time from the airport, her limousine pulling up at the front of the building only an hour after her plane landed.

*There's a certain fitness in my being here,* Ria thought to herself. If she was not in Washington to topple a president, she certainly meant to bring down another man who thought himself above the law: Parker Wheatley.

Reaching the LlewelCo suite, Ria tipped the bellman, locked the door behind him, and went over to the desk. It was already piled high with phone messages and mail delivered by the efficient—and very discreet—LlewelCo underling who would be her assistant during her stay. Ria checked her watch and then her PDA. Siobhan Prowse, that was it, and she'd be meeting her here in thirty minutes. Maybe she could get her to unpack as well—or was that considered employee harassment these days?

She opened her briefbag and began pulling out files, the fruit of almost a year's careful intelligence-gathering on their dear Mr. Wheatley. It wasn't much, but she hoped it was enough to alarm the cautious careful men she was going to meet with in the next several days—men who probably would not have been willing to meet with her at all, Ria realized ruefully, if not for what LlewelCo had been in Perenor's time, and for her own very public profile following the Threshold debacle.

She had been able to do one of them a very great favor with the material she'd dug out of Robert Lintel's Threshold files, and she hoped he remembered it now. He was the one she was pinning her real hopes on, but it didn't do to have only one string to your bow, so she'd made several appointments. The first was in three hours.

Ria sighed, resting her chin on her hand and gazing out the window. She had a breathtaking view of the Mall. The city, seen so often in films and television, had a certain surreal quality to it.

Just as her visit here did. How often in the past had Perenor sent her off on assignments that bore too close a resemblance to what she was planning to do here—meet a man, dazzle him, bend him to her (or rather, her father's) will, and bear away the prize?

*But this won't be like all those times,* Ria told herself, though the promise rang faintly hollow. But it was true in every way that mattered. Though she could certainly cast a spell on any of the men she was to meet with and get him to agree to anything, such a *glamourie* would be only temporary, fading if she did not reinforce it over time. And a failed *glamourie* would be pointless—worse than pointless; it might play



right into Wheatley's hands. No, she had to discredit Wheatley with good old-fashioned facts and persuasion.

Not that it should be too hard, if she could only get them to listen to her. Funding a black ops group of ghosthunters and elfchasers was the last thing Washington wanted to be doing—or be seen to be doing—in the current political climate. They should be only too happy to shut down Parker Wheatley and his troop of little green men, if she could play her cards right. These days, there was a great need for scapegoats, particularly expensive scapegoats, to be sacrificed publicly to deflect attention elsewhere.

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Four hours later—the man she was to meet had been delayed in another meeting—Ria was sitting across the desk from a senior career intelligence official in an office with a splendid view of the Capitol Building. The nameplate on his desk said James Hatcher.

Not their main offices, of course. Officially, this meeting wasn't happening. Just as well.

"I'm still not sure why you came to us, Ms. Llewellyn," Mr. Hatcher said, smiling agreeably.

"I'm just a concerned citizen," Ria said, her smile equally agreeable—and equally insincere. "And I just think that a program like the Paranormal Defense Initiative is a rather odd way for the government to be spending money at a time like this. Or any time, frankly."

"I did some checking after our phone conversation," Hatcher said, "And I'm afraid I couldn't find any record of such a program."

"Perhaps it's already been closed down," Ria said guilelessly. "Or perhaps I don't have a sufficient security clearance for you to talk about it with me. Why don't I just tell you what I know, and we can go on from there?"

She began to speak, reading from the notes in her folder. After about two minutes, Hatcher stood up. "Excuse me," he said.

He walked out a side door of the office. About fifteen minutes later, another man came in.

He was considerably older than James Hatcher had been, and looked as if he ate at least three bureaucrats of Hatcher's caliber for breakfast every morning. He smiled warmly when he saw Ria, and held out his hand.

"Hello, Ms. Llewellyn. My name is David. James tells me you have some interesting information for us."

She shook his hand. "I hope someone finds it interesting. I find it upsetting."

David—apparently he had no last name—seated himself behind the desk. "I'm sorry to ask, but perhaps you wouldn't mind starting from the beginning?"

She repeated what she had told Hatcher, and continued until she got to the end. David listened with an expression of polite attention. Ria tried skimming the surface of his mind, but there was nothing there to hear; the man had a very disciplined mind, one of those who refused to even think about sensitive subjects in unsafe circumstances. She'd encountered one or two like him in her industrial espionage days.

"Well, this is all certainly fascinating," David said, when she'd finished her presentation. "And how did you happen to come across this information?"

"I ran into some people involved with Mr. Wheatley in connection with Threshold," Ria said, sticking fairly close to the truth. "After that I did a bit of digging on my own." She passed the folder across the desk and watched as David paged through it.

"And you say that this Parker Wheatley—a name I've never heard, incidentally—is hunting fairies?"

Now she could pick up a little. Enough to know that this was a lie. David knew Parker Wheatley very well, and didn't like what he knew.

"I believe that Mr. Wheatley thinks he's hunting paraterrestrials—whatever they are," Ria said. "It was the part where he was proposing internment camps for psychics that I found particularly charming, though. Awkward if this should get out."

David looked up sharply.

"Is that a threat, Ms. Llewellyn?"

Ria uncrossed her legs and leaned forward. "David, LlewellynCo is a multibillion dollar multinational company with a finger in a lot of pies. At the moment, one of our partnerships is prospecting for oil in Siberia, and they're using dowzers to locate likely drilling sites. A lot of companies use dowzers to locate everything from water to underground power cables, because they happen to be very effective. And dowzers are psychics.

"I've already been a ninety-day wonder, and frankly, I'm sick of it. Believe me, I have no desire at all to step back into the spotlight for any reason. But the idea that some government agency is going to start a, well . . . witch-hunt . . . it's just going to cost everyone time and money."

"I'm sure your fears are groundless," David said, getting to his feet. "May I keep this?"

"Of course," Ria said, getting to her feet. "I appreciate your time."

\* \* \*

*One down*, Ria thought, standing on the steps of the building a few moments later. The November wind was icy, and she wrapped her cashmere trench coat more tightly around her, turning the collar up to cover her ears.

"David" would know he didn't have the original copies of the information in that folder, and if he was good at his job, he'd probably have someone follow her—purely as a routine check. Let him. She could get rid of a tail if it ever happened to be necessary, and meanwhile, she might as well take the CIA on a tour of the sights of Washington. Tonight she had an appearance to make at a charity gala at the Kennedy Center—LlewellynCo had made a large contribution, so Ria might as well show the flag—and there was always the interesting possibility that David's inquiries might bring some of Wheatley's goons sniffing around her as well.

She'd enjoy that. She really would.

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"You do understand, don't you, Ms. Llewellyn, that *The X-Files* is a television show?"

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't try quite so hard to belittle my intelligence, Agent Babcock. I'm not the one who's set up a secret government department to chase elves, gremlins, and little green men," Ria responded tartly.

Another day, another appointment, this time at the FBI. The J. Edgar Hoover Building.

"So far we only have your word for that," Babcock said.

"I'd be delighted to find out I'm mistaken," Ria said, backing off a little. "It would also be somewhat comforting to know that this was a legitimate government department operating entirely within the terms of its mandate. And since it's operating on American soil with American citizens as its proposed targets, forgive me for assuming you'd either know, or want to know about it."

Babcock looked down at the folder in his hands. "I can't comment on that," he said.

"I appreciate that," Ria said. "And I'm not asking you to tell me anything. Look, anybody with the price of a newspaper knows that the intelligence communities are engaged in one hell of a turf war right now. And one of the ways to hang on to your turf is to make yourself look big and important and indispensable. So what if somewhere there was a little research project that developed delusions of grandeur? That's all it would take, Mr. Babcock."

Nathaniel Babcock had been the special agent involved with sorting out the tangled Threshold mess, so Ria'd had a lot of contact with him over the last several months. She'd decided to take her material to him rather than to someone higher in the organization for just that reason. He already knew her, and—for as much as it was worth—she knew that she'd managed to impress him as being relatively sane and level-headed. And all the information she'd brought him so far had panned out.

She could tell that he'd rather not be hearing about this now. There were already a few rumors floating around Capitol Hill about Wheatley, enough to have filtered down even to Babcock's relatively unexalted level. Wheatley's position apparently wasn't all that secure. But Babcock himself wasn't highly placed enough to take on a crusade of this nature, and hesitated, for a number of reasons that seemed good to him, to push the matter with his superiors.

Even though she was disappointed, Ria could sympathize with his position. There wasn't much hard evidence in what she'd brought him. And whistle-blowers didn't have a long life-span in any field.

He looked down at the folder again and sighed, suddenly becoming more human. "I know we've both seen weirder stuff, Ms. Llewellyn. But this . . . ? Internment camps? It's loony, Ms. Llewellyn. Nobody can just wave their hand and make things like that appear. And besides . . . half the police departments in this country have used psychics on their cold cases at one time or another. For terrorists, maybe, down in Gitmo, but . . . nobody'd go along with this."

"They would if somebody scared them badly enough, Mr. Babcock," Ria said softly. "And I think it would be a very bad idea if they did."

"So do I," Babcock sighed again. "Look, I'll put this in a report and pass it along up the chain. But without something harder to attach to it . . ."

"I know," Ria said. He'd do that much for her, she knew, but he was right: without hard evidence, the report would just vanish into somebody's file cabinet. Without a smoking gun, it would be hard to get anyone excited. And Beth Kentraine—the only human Ria knew of who'd actually encountered any of the PDI's operatives—would make a very poor witness to Wheatley's criminal behavior.

"Well, thanks for seeing me at least."

"A pleasure as always, Ms. Llewellyn," Agent Babcock said, rising to see her out.

\* \* \*

*Maybe I'm too old for this,* Kayla thought to herself, dragging herself into her apartment and collapsing onto her couch with a grateful sigh. She was only a few years older than the kids up in The Place, and it hadn't been so very long since she was living the very same way, but it seemed so much harder now. Maybe because now she wasn't running away from everything, focusing all her energy on looking no further ahead than tomorrow. *Shehada* future now, something none of those kids would have if they kept on the way they were. But most of them had already given up and stopped fighting.

Like Jaycie.

Magnus and Ace couldn't see it, and for a while Kayla hadn't been able to spot it either, but the kid was some kind of stoner. She couldn't figure out what his thrill was, though. He didn't smoke, she'd never caught him doing anything harder, and she was positive he wasn't spiking his Cokes. But he was zeeing out most of the time, and it was like neither of them noticed. She'd overheard them talking. Ace thought he was sick. Magnus was sure he was okay.

*Yeah, like anybody who sleeps twenty-two hours a day's in the bloom of clean-bodied health.*

Maybe she could do something for him. Pull him back from the edge; sweep the junk out of his system. It wouldn't keep him from poisoning himself again—however he was doing it—but maybe it would scare the three of them enough to listen to her, so they'd go into that program of Hosea's. She didn't know how long Ria was going to be in Washington, but Anita had her number there if Kayla really needed it.

Or maybe Eric would be back by then.

She was putting off checking her messages, because she didn't want to hear any more bad news. But there was no point in delaying the inevitable. And maybe it would be good news. For a big change.

Reluctantly, Kayla heaved herself up off her futon and went into the kitchen to play back her messages.

A couple from friends from school, sounding like strange messages from another world. One from Hosea, wanting her to come see him before she left again this evening. And one from Dr. Dunaway.

"I'm afraid I don't have any good news for you, Kayla. Eric hasn't been admitted at any of the city hospitals. Give me a call or stop by my office between two and three. I'm free then."

Kayla glanced at the clock automatically. Only ten o'clock. Hours before she could call.

And Eric was not in the hospital, not anywhere that Lady Day could find him, not anywhere that Jeanette could find him.

They were starting to run out of options.

Okay. I'm really scared now. Does that help matters?

She went back to the living room and huddled on her futon, trying to think.

And trying not to cry.

\* \* \*

There was a courier package waiting for Ria when she got back to the Watergate. Someone was certainly following her, but they were far away enough that she could only pick up the faintest wisps of intention, not enough to tell her who they were.

She picked up the package at the desk, glancing at the return address. New York. Something that Anita had sent down, then. She tucked it under her arm and went up to her suite, wondering what could be that important. She'd be going back in three days, and her staff was well-trained; people who felt they had to run to the boss with every little thing didn't last long at LlewellynCo.

She went up to the suite and stopped just inside the door. One spell assured her that it was empty now. A second . . .

*Oh, this is very interesting . . .*

She'd had visitors.

Ria watched as the shadows she'd evoked with her second spell moved about the suite, searching it thoroughly. It was unlikely they'd find what they'd come for, however: not only had she locked her last set of documents in the safe that came with the suite, she'd taken the precaution of rotating it outside of Time with a simple spell before she left. They could search until Doomsday and not find it.

Though apparently Doomsday had come early this year. . . . Ria watched in profound surprise as the colorless shadows quickly located the safe and swung open the hinged cabinet that concealed it. The four shadows clustered around it for several minutes of elapsed real-time before closing the cabinet again and moving on; apparently, while they could locate it, they were unable to break her spell and get inside.

They moved on, performing further actions in ghostly pantomime. What they were doing wasn't that hard to figure out. Their mission complete, the ghosts packed up their equipment and left. Reflexively, Ria stood aside to let them pass, even though they weren't really there, then walked into the middle of the room, knowing that her every move could be heard—and probably seen—by whoever had bugged her suite so thoroughly while she was out.

There were actually very few candidates for that particular honor, considering how easily they'd found the safe—and how long they'd spent trying to get into something they shouldn't have been able to see at all.

*How very nice of Mr. Wheatley to take an interest. But since there aren't any residual traces of magic here, I'm very much afraid all of his little toys are about to . . . fail.*

It wasn't as easy for her as it was for Eric, or for a pure-blooded Elven Magus. Their magic was innate, born in the blood. All of Ria's sorcery was hard-learned, a matter of years of training, study, and

practice.

But it was no less effective for all of that.

She raised her handbag higher on her shoulder and summoned up her shields to full strength, making sure her own electronic equipment was inside them. She'd be wanting it later, and nothing outside her shields was going to be particularly reliable after what she was about to do. Then she called up a particular spell she was very fond of—she'd used it a number of times before—and flung it out to encompass the entire suite.

The room lights flickered for a moment and then steadied. There were a number of hisses and pops from unlikely locations as tiny surveillance devices and their batteries gave up their stored power and memory.

Once her spell had run its course, she walked through the living room, office, and bedroom, making sure.

The phones were all dead. So was the television/TiVO/DVD/CD player. There was a black smudge on the inside of the lamp over her desk. The lights in the bathroom had exploded in a shower of broken glass.

Ria searched through the debris until she found the camera, a tiny object barely the size of her thumbnail. *Naughty, naughty, gentlemen, putting a camera in here.* She went back through the rest of the suite, searching until she'd collected most of the now-lifeless objects. Several in the lamps. One on the back side of the headboard of her bed.

:Now, she said, sitting down on the couch and cupping them in the palms of her hands, speak to me, creatures of crystal and fire, and tell me what you know. . . . :

It wasn't difficult to get them to give up their information. The bugging devices had been carried and placed with intent, and each had been individually assembled, so they retained more information than objects that had been mass-produced and expended carelessly. Though they were small, they knew their purpose, where they had come from, and who had brought them here.

A man named Nichol had led the team. Wheatley had found out she was asking questions about him, and wanted to know how much she knew. That answered the "why" of them looking for the safe. As for the "how" of them managing to spot it . . . Kentraine had said that the PDI had some technological method of cutting through the illusions the Sidhe could wrap around themselves, as well as the ability to render themselves magic-resistant and more-or-less invisible—to elves, if not to humans. And it looked like their detecting abilities might extend to sorcery, as well as Elven magery, even if they hadn't been able to break her spell.

Ria set the handful of hardware on the coffee table and regarded it. It was lovely evidence . . . only it didn't point to anyone in particular unless you had psychometric abilities. Anyone with money and connections could dip into this particular bag of tricks these days, and off the top of her head, Ria could name half a dozen people who would have a reasonable motive for wanting to spy on LlewelCo, including both the men she'd paid visits to here in Washington. And while being kidnapped by Wheatley might be an entertaining way to turn over that particular rock, she really had too much on her plate to waste her time playing out that particular end game.

So.

She leaned back, only to be distracted by a crackle of paper. The package from New York.

She fished it out from behind her and tore it open. Inside was a note from Anita that said: "Dear Ria: this came today by special courier marked 'Extremely Urgent,' so I'm overnighting it to you."

The package inside was wrapped in brown paper, tied with twine, and sealed with red sealing wax, superscribed in characteristic Spenserian script. The Post Office would have had no idea of how to handle it; Ria noted it had been delivered "By Hand."

It was a report from Inigo Moonlight.

*He said he'd call,* Ria thought to herself, vaguely piqued. But when she unwrapped the thick sheaf of documents she realized why he had not.

My Dear Miss Llewellyn—the cover letter began, handwritten, of course; she supposed the man had never even heard of the typewriter—I believe I have unearthed the identity of the young person who has come to the attention of our Mr. Wheatley, and if I am correct in my deductions, this individual is a wholly innocent pawn in the schemes of that madman. A Mr. Marley Tucker Bell has been missing from his home in Baltimore, Maryland, for the last ten days. Following his disappearance, both his home and his place of business, one Bell Books, a shop which deals in new and used books of the sort commonly termed "occult," have been thoroughly searched, and several interesting items have been abstracted from each venue. I attach an annotated list of *the items*. *Mr. Bell has for some years been engaged in the practice of the Art Magickal, with a particular specialization in goetic evocation and historical research, and I believe that it is through his agency that Mr. Wheatley has discovered the existence of De Rebus Nefandis, and the fact that this volume might well serve his larger purpose. We must not think too harshly of Mr. Bell, however, for few individuals are prepared for the shock of coming face-to-face with True Evil, and I very much fear that our young friend has been exposed to some physical duress to gain whatever cooperation he may have provided. I attach several photos of Mr. Bell, should you chance to come across him in your travels, for it is my conviction that he would under normal circumstances be most unwilling to assist Mr. Wheatley in any operation that this fiend in human form should contemplate. Supporting documentation and my further report is enclosed. As always, I remain your humble and obedient servant, Inigo Moonlight.*

Ria paged through the papers until she got to the photos—several 8x10s that looked like candid shots, obtained Heaven knew how. They were pictures of an enormously average-looking young man—late thirties, she supposed, with the faintly transparent look of Tidewater aristocracy; a face and bone structure that hadn't much changed since it had been exported from England around 1600, and one that would look equally at home beneath a Puritan crop or Cavalier curls. Or, as it was now, in an entirely modern—if a bit Young Republican—haircut. Marley Bell looked like a slightly naive college professor, of the sort that called up most women's mothering instincts. And while Ria had none of those to speak of, she was quite certain that Mr. Bell was in need of help just now . . . assuming he was still alive.

She pulled out the picture of Bell dressed in an argyle sweater-vest and white shirt, behind the cash register of what Ria supposed must be Bell Books, and studied it critically. Wheatley had kidnapped him. And—if she could place any credence in Moonlight's hunches at all—was trying to use him to punch a door through to Elfland, with or without the help of a 9th-century grimoire. Or had been, ten days ago.

She didn't think he'd succeeded. It took a Bard, not a Mage, to pierce the Veil Between the Worlds, and even then it was possible only in certain times and places—and with a Node Grove to anchor the newly-formed Nexus besides. Even the Sidhe Magi Major couldn't do it themselves, with all their power.

This was the break she needed. An actual *crime* to tie Wheatley to—and hang him with.

But it would be ever so much more useful with the testimony of a witness.

If Marley Bell were still alive.

Well, why don't we just go see? Ria said to herself. There must be a few laws in this town I haven't broken yet. And after all, Mr. Wheatley has invited me so very nicely to come to tea. . .

She pulled out her PDA and her phone and began making calls.

\* \* \*

Michael Myers was not his real name, of course, and Ria had never decided whether his choosing as his *nom de ombre* the name of a fictional Hollywood horror movie villain was an encouraging spark of whimsy or a warning sign of actual psychosis.

In the intelligence community, maybe the two things were identical.

Michael's was the third name on her list. There'd been some items in Threshold's files too sensitive to pass on even to Nathaniel Babcock. Things with international consequences.

It would have been simpler to bury them and forget them, but Ria couldn't bring herself to do that. Eventually the question of how to pass them on safely had led to Michael. The partnership had worked out before, which was why she was trusting him now.

She supposed he must have an office somewhere. She'd never bothered to try to find it. Tonight they were meeting at a place called Xavier's, a trendy District "drinkeateria" located near Capitol Hill. Xavier's was well-supplied with pseudo-Victorian stained glass, blond oak veneer, and even a few ferns. It was the sort of place to which the tragically hip repaired to meet and mate, as anonymous and impersonal as a paper cup. The perfect place to play spy.

Michael reveled in the trappings—or at least pretended he did. Ria was never sure. Michael did everything with utter sincerity, and believed in everything he did.

"You look like a cut-rate Bogie," she said as he sat down.

Raindrops starred the brim of the grey fedora and the shoulders of the tan trench coat of the man who settled into the booth opposite her. Dark hair, dark eyes, middle forties, lightly tinted glasses that he didn't really need. Michael worked very hard at looking just like everyone else. He could be an accountant, a bank manager, possibly even (although that might be stretching things) a dentist.

He wasn't.

"I'm much better looking. And I don't smoke. Which means I'll never die—of lung cancer, at any rate. It's good to see you again, Ria. Or should I say, 'Ilsa'? We really should meet less often."

Usually Michael kept the front of his mind—the interior monologue most people ran without knowing it—crammed with meaningless chatter. Ria had never quite decided whether that was because Michael suspected the existence of telepathy, or because there were a lot of things in Michael's world that he simply preferred not to dwell on. But tonight was different. She'd skimmed his mind out of habit—a bad



habit, but hers—and tonight his thoughts were clear and easy to read.

Years of practice enabled her to smile, to carry on as if she'd heard nothing.

"I have something for you. Then I want you to do me a large number of favors. Then we won't see each other again, Michael," Ria said.

No matter what happened this evening, that much was true. And Michael would help her because he didn't care about his future any more, and because it would amuse him to do so, for some reason buried too deep for her to quite catch.

Michael was dying.

It was one of those wildfire cancers that ripped through the system too fast for surgery or drugs. He knew. His bosses did not, but he knew that wouldn't be true for much longer. She could see his plans clearly in his mind: vacation—Greece, Michael had always liked Greece; time the arrival of the documentation of his condition for when it wouldn't matter any more and make sure the body was found so there'd be no loose ends to worry anyone unduly. He wouldn't have to do it this way, except for the fact that he'd lose his passport when he retired; that was just the way it was. And he wanted to see the sun rise over the isles one more time. . . . *"The isles of Greece, the isles of Greece! Where burning Sappho loved and sung . . ."*

With a wrench, Ria cut the connection to his thoughts. More proof that eavesdroppers never hear anything they like.

"Favors," Michael said, smiling as if he didn't have a care in the world. "Well. I'm from the government, and they say that means I'm here to help you. So what do you have for me?"

\* \* \*

Over drinks and dinner, Ria explained about Wheatley and the PDI; giving him the information she'd originally been intending to bring to the meeting.

"You already mentioned this to Babcock over at the Fibbies, and to a dear boy among the Christians In Action who told you his name was David, didn't you?" Michael said.

"I thought I'd share the joy," Ria said dryly.

"But I'm sure you saved the best for me," Michael said encouragingly.

"Today some of Wheatley's goons broke into my suite over at the Watergate and bugged the place thoroughly, though I can't prove it—anybody with a dollar and a dream can buy that kind of equipment these days." She sighed. "There's a certain piquant irony to that which I will probably appreciate in a few years, though I doubt it even dawned on Wheatley. But better yet, I'm fairly sure he's kidnapped a civilian and is holding him hostage somewhere—my best guess would be that it's in his offices here in Washington. So I thought I'd go look," Ria said.

Michael regarded her for a few moments in rapt contemplative silence. "By yourself?" was all he said.

"No. I was going to bring along a couple of experts."

"This would be—ahem!—to assist you in engaging in an illegal search of the premises of one of our intelligence agencies?" Michael seemed to be having some difficulty keeping a straight face, but to his credit, he managed it.

"I'd prefer it if it weren't completely illegal," Ria said demurely. "So if you could arrange for a warrant, and to deputize me and two other people as U.S. Federal Marshals—or whatever you prefer—that would certainly make things easier," Ria said blandly.

"I see. And you would want all of this when?"

Ria checked her watch. "By eleven o'clock tonight."

Michael leaned forward, completely serious now. "Just who is it that's gone missing, Ria?"

"A young man named Marley Bell—the blameless and only surviving scion of a fine old Baltimore family, if that makes any difference. Bell disappeared ten days ago. My sources say that Wheatley is convinced that Bell can help him locate these Spookies he's fixated on." She raised an eyebrow. "Whether or not this is pertinent, I don't know, but I believe that Wheatley is so fixated on his figments of the imagination that he'd ignore an al Qaeda operative driving a tanker full of jet fuel towards the Senate if he thought he saw a goblin across the street."

"And how sure are you that this Bell is squirreled away somewhere in the PDI's offices?" Michael asked.

"According to what I could dig up on them, they don't have a lot of secondary locations and safe houses. If he's anywhere, he's there." Simple logic told her that much. *If he could have been located by magic, Moonlight would have told me exactly where he was—which means he's either behind heavy-duty shielding, or dead. And the only place with magical shielding that I can think of is the PDI headquarters.*

"What if he's already dead?" Michael asked pragmatically.

She shrugged; Bell was just a name and a photograph to her. His value was that his abduction proved Wheatley had gone way over the top. "Then I'm sure Wheatley's documented it. And I'm sure you don't care just how you get access to those files."

"And why are you not leaving this to the professionals?" Michael asked.

"Call me a thrill-seeker."

Michael smiled grimly. "I could call you a lot of things, Ria, but 'thrill-seeker' would be fairly low on the list. I take it you've done something like this before?"

She gave him a long look, and a hard one. "More often than you'd think."

He blinked first. "I'll have to take your word for that. All right. Let's just say your interests and some other people's coincide on this one. But there's a condition. I'm going in with you."

\* \* \*

At two o'clock, earlier that same day, Kayla was in Oriana Dunaway's waiting room.

She could have called, but she hadn't been able to sit still. She wanted to do something—anything—to find Eric, but all the things she could think of just somehow seemed to add to the disaster. Telling Ria, for example. Tell her *what*? That they'd misplaced Eric? Ria would lose it big-time.

"You're Kayla Smith, aren't you? I'm Dr. Dunaway."

A slender blonde woman came out into the waiting room. To Kayla's relief, she didn't offer to shake hands.

Kayla stood up. Dr. Dunaway shook her head, forestalling Kayla's first question. "No, I haven't heard anything new. But maybe if you could tell me a little more about the situation, I could offer a few suggestions. Why don't you come into the kitchen? This is my lunch hour, so I'll have to eat while we talk."

\* \* \*

"—so you say that Eric's elvensteed doesn't believe that Eric has gone Underhill, but can't locate him here in our world, nor can his apprentice?"

"Yeah, that's about it," Kayla said, sipping her iced tea.

The kitchen of Dr. Dunaway's apartment was a high-tech marvel in chrome and white that looked more suited to surgery than cooking. Kayla sat at the counter across from Dr. Dunaway. Dr. Dunaway was eating a salad. She'd offered Kayla some, but Kayla was too keyed up to eat.

"And the spirit bound into Hosea's instrument says that Eric isn't dead?"

Kayla nodded, taking a deep breath and willing herself to remain calm. Yelling wouldn't help matters, but Dr. Dunaway's dispassionate calm was almost unbearable. It was as if she didn't *care* what happened to Eric.

*Get a grip, Smith. Of course she cares. But it's her business not to get involved. She's a shrink. She couldn't help people if she got all involved in their stuff.*

"Well, then. Let us consider what we *do* know. We know that Eric is unavailable to his elvensteed, which would know if he was simply dead, or had been taken into Elfhome. We therefore must assume until we know otherwise that Eric is alive and still in this world, and is for some reason unable to give his name to the admitting physician at any hospital or psychiatric facility in the area, since I've checked with the area hospitals and no patient has been admitted under that name in the last seventy-two hours."

Kayla nodded. "And he isn't in jail. A friend of mine checked that for me. Or . . ."

"Or the city morgue?" Oriana finished for her, very gently. Kayla nodded. Toni had checked that too, even though Lady Day seemed to be certain that Eric wasn't dead.

"Well, it's good to know that all the obvious possibilities have been covered. But let's consider how he could be in the hospital without our knowing. I think the most likely thing is that he *is* in the hospital system somewhere as a John Doe admission. If he disappeared just after he left you, he wouldn't have been carrying any identification, there would be no way for anyone to learn his name from his personal effects, assuming he were admitted to a hospital in a state of unconsciousness. Furthermore, if he *was* unconscious when admitted, there is a one hundred percent chance that anyone who had found him first stripped him

of anything valuable, which would include any ID he was carrying. So the next thing you'll need to do is search for all the John Doe emergency admissions that match his physical description. Tedious, but not impossible."

Kayla stared at Dr. Dunaway in confusion. "But . . . if somebody just hit him over the head . . . Lady Day would still know where he was."

"My dear child," Dr. Dunaway said chidingly, "an enchanted motorcycle is hardly the most powerful magician at work in the world. If Eric has been placed under a spell of concealment . . . or if, for some reason, he has concealed himself . . . he could be quite difficult to track by magic. But the physical is harder to conceal than the ethereal in most cases. If his body remains in New York, it can be found."

*And if it isn't . . . ?*

It was time to stop kidding herself and make those phone calls.

\* \* \*

Ria had wanted to go in alone—or at the very least, go in with someone like Michael, whom she wouldn't have to take responsibility for. But she needed someone human with her, watching her back, because the PDI's toys wouldn't work on humans. Wheatley's people had the ability to render themselves completely invisible to the Sidhe—and she had no idea how well their equipment would work on someone who was half-Elven. Live-fire conditions were not the time to find out, either.

She'd tried to reach Eric this afternoon when she'd first decided to break in to the PDI, but he wasn't answering either of his phones, which was annoying. When she'd checked in at her office, Anita said that Kayla was trying to reach her, but Ria let that one slide—even if somebody was dead (unlikely), that problem would have to wait until tomorrow. She needed all her attention focused here.

If she couldn't have Eric to watch her back, that left a paid professional. And a very short list.

\* \* \*

"I'm so glad you could make it on such short notice," Ria said.

The hotel room was downtown, only a few blocks from tonight's destination. She'd rented it this afternoon without trouble—there were a few perks to carrying a Centurion AmEx—and it was as secure as sorcery could make it. There were two other people in the room.

One of them Ria had met before. His name was Raine Logan. He was only a few inches taller than she was, but he carried himself as if he were six feet tall. His black hair was brushed straight back from a deep widow's peak, and he had the trim, sculpted body of someone who worked out with weights for more than show. Logan had worked for Gotham Security up until about a year ago, when he'd quit to go into business for himself. Gotham Security was the best private security agency in the field, and Logan had been one of their best operatives.

The woman with him was his opposite in every way save her air of utter competence: tall, fashion-model slender, with a frizzy halo of carrot-red hair and a dementedly cheerful grin. She wore yellow-tinted, aviator-shaped glasses that did little to conceal the spray of pale gold freckles across her cheekbones. Both of them wore jeans, sneakers, and dark nylon windbreakers over black T-shirts that concealed the latest generation in Kevlar vests.

"Well, gosh, you're Ria Llewellyn, and all," the redhead said, widening her eyes. "I mean, gee, we saw your picture in *Time* and everything."

Nobody, Ria thought, could possibly be this feather-witted. Still, she gave the kid points for a good act. It probably even fooled some people.

"I want to be very clear on the fact that what I'm asking you both to do is illegal," Ria said carefully.

"So you said," Logan observed. "We're here. Melody stays with the ride."

"That's the plan," Ria said. She didn't bother to ask if Melody was good. She'd specified good. "This time, you're not here to protect me. You're here to protect this man once we find him"—she brought out the best of the photos of Marley Bell and passed it to Logan—"assuming we find him. His name is Marley Bell. If I'm not with you when we leave, get him out, drive him to this address"—a second slip of paper—"and hand him over to whoever's there. Naturally, I expect to be with you. But if it comes down to a choice, choose Bell."

Logan passed the photo and the paper to Melody, who studied both carefully.

"And after that?" he asked.

"Disappear if you can. If you can't, you'll have LlewellynCo's full backing. I've made the arrangements. Your contact will be Jonathan Sterling at LlewellynCo West."

*Because if I'm not with you, I'll either be dead, in custody, or finding out just what the PDI's position is on human-Elven hybrids.*

"We'll be meeting a man there," Ria went on. "His name is Michael. He's getting us in, but other than that, he's running an independent operation. If he gets in trouble, don't wait for him, don't cover him."

"Understood. Time to armor up, then," Logan said. He picked up the case at his feet and opened it onto the table.

He pulled out a light Kevlar vest and passed it to Ria. She slipped it on, pulling the straps until it fit snugly.

"Radios." He set earpieces, throat mikes, and transmitters on the table. Ria picked up one set and put it on, peeling the adhesive off the pickup and placing it against her throat.

"Thermite pencils. Should open most locks. Night goggles. You won't want to turn on any lights. And these are for you." He lifted a layer of padding out of the case, removed two weapons and passed them to Ria. "Your preference, I believe."

A .38 snubnose revolver—a Colt Bulldog—and a Desert Eagle .60 caliber. The one was easy to conceal, with reasonable stopping power against most normal humans. The other could bring down a horse or stop a car.

Holsters, spare magazines, and speedloaders followed.

"Thanks," Ria said, smiling tightly. "I didn't think I was going to need these to lobby my representatives."

She slipped the Desert Eagle into its holster and stood to press the holster against the Velcro patch at the back of the Kevlar vest. It was heavy—the gun weighed almost nine pounds loaded—but it held. Her coat would cover the lump it made. And she shouldn't need to get to it in too much of a hurry. The Bulldog and the spare ammo could go in her pockets.

Logan was already armed—Ria knew he favored the Desert Eagle as well—and while Ria didn't see any weaponry about Melody's person, that didn't mean it wasn't there. She picked up her coat and stowed the last of the equipment in its pockets.

"Let's go."

\* \* \*

Their "ride" looked like a showroom stock Lincoln Navigator—black, with tinted windows. Ria didn't ask to see any of the optional extras, but she assumed it had them. Logan was thorough, and she hadn't been coy when she'd told him her needs.

*"I'll need a car and a driver. The driver has to be the very best at high speed evasive driving, and know Washington and the surrounding area. The car has to be capable of going off-road, over rough terrain, outrun the local law, stop everything up to an assault weapon—and frankly, I'd prefer up to light antitank, but I won't ask for miracles—blend in, and seat four."*

"Do you want a Blaupunkt player with that?" was all Logan had said.

\* \* \*

Michael was waiting for them at the address Ria had specified. He'd changed his trench coat for a blue nylon bomber jacket and baseball cap and a pair of tinted shooter's glasses. He was wearing fatigues.

"Logan," he said.

"Michael," Logan said.

I guess it makes this easier that they know each other. Or harder, Ria thought.

"Here's your warrants. Try not to need them. They're forged." He handed Ria several blue folders and a badge case. "Welcome to the Justice Department."

Michael turned to the door. Like most of the office buildings in Washington, it had a keycard lock. He produced a card and slipped it into the slot. The light flashed green. The three of them walked inside.

The lobby might have been that of any large corporation—no fancy inlaid seals on the floor here, just a reception desk and security gates similar to the ones in her own building in New York. Two guards seated behind the desk. *One for use and one for show.*

"May I see your identification?" one of the security officers said as they approached.

*Both armed. And a panic button within reach that will seal the building and alert on-site security personnel, but no one outside. She's just about to reach for it. . . .*

"No," Ria said simply. She made a gesture, and both guards settled back in their seats, staring straight ahead, asleep with their eyes open.

She pointed. Logan and Michael headed toward the elevator, going around the barrier and the screening gate. Ria turned back to the security console.

*:Sleep,* she said silently, placing a hand lightly on the security console. Within seconds, all the lights and monitors dimmed to black. She turned away, following the two men.

Michael's keycard opened the elevator as well.

"Where to?" he asked. "I warn you, this is where the fun begins."

"Five," Ria said without hesitation. It had been a number much in Nichol's thoughts, as far as the objects he had handled retained them. And it was as good a place to start as any.

"Here we go."

The doors closed. The car began to move. And everything went completely silent.

Not in a physical fashion—Ria could still hear the mechanical sounds of the elevator, the sounds of breathing and heartbeats, and even—if she Listened—what Michael and Logan were thinking.

But everything else—the hum of Power, the background hum of all the other minds within her reach, the faint sense of other preterhuman intelligences now and again—all that was gone, shut off at the instant the doors had closed.

*I guess I've come to the right place, then,* Ria thought, fighting down an uncharacteristic wave of anxiety at the odd sense of blindness. This was shielding on an inconceivable scale. It didn't matter how much Power you had. Punching through these shields would be simply impossible. Any form of magic that required Piercing the Veil simply wouldn't work here—human sorcery would be powerless, and Elven magic would burn out quickly, unable to renew itself without its link to Underhill.

*But a human/Elven hybrid ought to be able to show them a few tricks, if I'm careful . . .*

The doors opened.

"Showtime," Michael said.

\* \* \*

He'd tried another conjuration—after what Nichol had done to him he'd been afraid to do anything else. He'd fasted and prayed, knowing all along it was useless but going through the motions anyway, wondering if he had the courage to cut his own throat.

He should have. But instead he'd kept on, finding safety and comfort in the familiar prayers and invocations, thinking—God forgive him—that at least they'd leave him alone while he was in the workroom.

But they hadn't.

Suddenly—after hours? days?—all the lights had come up. He'd stood there, stunned by the sudden actinic brightness, and two men had come in, walking across his carefully drawn diagrams as though they were meaningless scribbles, dragging him from the room. He was weak by then from fasting, dazed from the sudden interruption. He'd barely had enough sense of self-preservation left to keep from protesting.

He'd been sure, then, that this was the worst thing they could do to him, this disparagement and contempt for his sacred Art.

They'd had so much still to teach him.

They'd brought him to another room. With a last vestige of self-mockery, he realized it was also a workroom. *Their* workroom.

There, time had ceased to have any meaning. Very soon, Marley Bell would gladly have broken the holiest and most sacred oaths he'd ever sworn, only they didn't care about those.

Elves. They wanted to know about elves.

He knew about elves, of course—the medieval inquisitors had been obsessed with them, and no one who studied old grimoires and the history of magic could avoid at least a passing familiarity with the Inquisition.

They hurt him.

He told them everything.

But it wasn't what they wanted to know.

They said he was lying.

And they hurt him again.

He had never understood before that time how the fear of pain and the fear of death could be separated, but in that room they taught him. In that room, they taught him to fear life, for only the living suffered, while the dead were beyond pain. But he was young and strong—they told him that—and his capacity to endure was extraordinarily good.

They said he worked for the elves. He swore he did not—over and over he swore to them; his soul was his own; he hadn't sold it; what did they *want*?

They wanted him to tell them about what he did with the elves.

Nothing—*nothing!*

And they hurt him again.

Perhaps, they said, he worked for the elves without knowing it . . . ?

And dear God, he'd seized upon that possibility, anything to be able to give them answers that would stop the pain, stop the whine of the generator, the lancing of the fire through the electrodes taped to his body.



But still his answers weren't right, though he tried, he tried very hard, he really did, begging them to just tell him what they wanted him to say, he'd confess to it, all of it. . . .

Pain, fire, and the stink of his own burning flesh.

\* \* \*

He woke up in his cell, lying on the floor.

He'd been here before, he thought, though by now he knew his memory was not completely trustworthy. Sometimes they stopped and let him rest before taking him back to their workroom again. So he wouldn't die too quickly, Marley supposed.

The first time, he'd thought it was over, that they believed him. Then they'd come for him and begun all over again, asking the same questions in endless variation. Now he no longer hoped. He'd tried making up the answers they wanted, but when the pain began he couldn't keep his stories straight.

His muscles shuddered uncontrollably, cramping and spasming painfully. His bones felt hollow, and his mouth tasted of bile and blood. His throat was raw from screaming.

*Mother always told me the world was going to hell. And she was right. More than that, it's already there.*

Was it worth trying to move? Maybe, to get from the floor to the bed. He might be able to manage that. And maybe they'd left him some water.

There was a sudden loud sound. Marley cringed. He couldn't help himself. It came again.

Gunfire.

Suddenly there was a sizzling sound, like frying bacon, from the door of his cell. It began to swing inward. Marley cried out, finding the strength in sudden terror to scabble backward on hands and knees.

*Not now! Not yet!*

\* \* \*

There hadn't been anything she wanted on Five; a corridor of anonymous doors, deserted at this time of night. Marley *had* been there, briefly, but he wasn't now.

"Come on," she said to Logan. "Michael?"

Michael was regarding the corridor of anonymous doors like a boy with a roomful of Christmas presents, unable to decide which one to open first.

"Oh, I'm fine here. But you'll want this," he said, offering her a second keycard. "Use it wisely. And do try to stay out of trouble."

"Of course," Ria said with grave amusement. She left Michael there, happily opening doors, and went out into the stairwell.

:Where are you, Marley Bell?:

It was a simple Seeking spell, one she used every day almost without thought, but now she could feel the cost of it, the power that she spent that went unrenewed, draining away like water poured into sand. Ria dearly wished she knew exactly *how* the interior of the PDI was shielded—was it just the whole building, or were some interior rooms separately shielded as well?—because without that information, she might be about to make some lethal mistakes.

But she had an answer—or part of one, anyway.

"Up."

Seven was occupied. The lights were on, and Ria could hear the fleeting hash of thoughts. But there was no one in sight, and that was good.

She knew Bell was somewhere on this floor, but that left a lot of places to look. She hadn't wanted to push for details down in the stairwell—she didn't know how much reserve she had, and once it was gone, it was gone—but now that she was closer, it was worth trying again.

"We need to get out of sight while I look for Bell," she said. Logan asked no questions. They moved off down the corridor, choosing a room at random.

It was dark and empty. Ria looked around. Curious. Doctor's office, some kind of infirmary?

Then she saw the generator in the corner and Ria knew exactly what this room was used for.

"I can't work in here," she said tightly. "Let's find someplace else."

Marley had been in here, and recently. No doubt of that. But he wasn't here now. And her sorcerous psychometry wouldn't be at all reliable against the background noise produced by torture.

Logan nodded, his face impassive, and opened the door.

And a man in a green suit started shooting at them.

Logan kicked the door shut and shot through it all in one swift motion. Ria heard a scream, and wrenched the remains of the door off its hinges.

The man was down, but Logan had shot low. He was still alive. Amazingly, he smiled. "I was right," he whispered. "Right all along."

"Where is he?" Ria snarled, grabbing the man's jaw in her hands.

She couldn't hear his mind. His thoughts slid away from her in a peculiar way, as if she couldn't quite reach them.

But he'd been where Marley was now. He'd touched him. And now Ria was touching *him*. And that was all she needed.

"This way," Ria said, getting to her feet and taking off at a run. "Buy me time."

\* \* \*

The man on the floor of the cell looked very little like his photographs. Dazed, emaciated, naked, filthy, and covered with contact burns, he scabbled away from her, whimpering in terror.

She didn't have time to either soothe or reason with him. She crossed the cell in a stride and hauled him to his feet, then slung him over her shoulder in a fireman's carry. She was stronger than she looked, but it was still awkward.

This was it. Her spells were tapped. Blowing the lock on Bell's cell had taken the last of them. All she had left was a little innate ability to read minds, and she didn't require that to see that things were going straight to Hell in the proverbial handbasket.

She hadn't expected the building to be deserted, though it would have been nice if they could have just walked in, found Marley, and walked out again. She didn't even cavil at a little cold-blooded murder, if it came down to it; anybody who forced her to kill them wasn't likely to be anyone's innocent child.

The only trouble was, the PDI seemed to be even more paranoid than *she* was.

She saw a flicker of movement outside the cell—it wouldn't be Logan; Logan was up ahead, securing the way to the stairwell—and fired at it. It pulled back.

"I'm pinned down," Ria said into her throat mike.

"Coming," Logan said.

Ria smelled smoke.

She fired again, just for fun. An office building was a lousy place for a firefight—all straight lines and no cover. And if the bad guys could get to the cell door and shut it, she'd be bottled up here with Marley, and that would be a fine end to the evening.

She wondered where Michael was.

Suddenly everything went black.

*Power's gone out*, she realized after a moment's surprise. There was a flicker, then the backup generators went on, bathing the corridor in a faint amber glow. The smoke smell was stronger now.

There was a figure crouching low in the doorway, reaching for the door. Ria shot. In the enclosed space, the Desert Eagle spoke like the Wrath of God. The muzzle flash blinded her for a moment; when she could see again, Ria stepped out into the corridor.

"Three more on this level. I started a fire," Logan said quietly behind her.

"Let's take the stairs," Ria said.

If things had been wrong before, they kept getting worse. When they got to the stairwell, the keycard didn't work—and Ria had no more spells to expend.

"Power failure probably seals every floor as a security measure," Logan said. "Nice. Melody. Basement retrieval. Find a way."

Logan reached into his jacket for the remaining Thermite pencils and began taping them to the door.

"They'll take about a minute to burn through the lock," he said. "We'll make for the basement level."

He motioned her back around the corner. Ria leaned against the wall, letting it take Marley's weight while she covered Logan and tried to watch in all directions at once. He'd said there were three of them still on the floor. She'd feel much better if she got to shoot all of them.

Logan joined her as the Thermite began to sizzle and flare. Ria closed her eyes against the glare, listening hard.

Something.

Not thoughts, but more of *adisturbance*. The same sort of disturbance she'd felt when she'd tried to read the thoughts of the dying green-suited man.

"Down!" Ria shouted, swinging blindly toward the thought-shadow. Marley slid from her shoulder, hitting the ground as she ducked and fired.

Logan fired just after she did, and when Ria could see again, he was standing over a body.

"One down," he said.

She turned away to check Marley. He was breathing, but unconscious. Just as well. She heaved him onto her shoulder again.

There was a crash as Logan kicked the door open.

The stairwell was dimmer than the floor had been. They took the stairs all the way down, moving as fast as they could. They'd left two hostiles alive behind them, and it would require no great detective ability for the PDI to trace their movements. But there were no interior doors blocking the stairwells, and no one followed them. Bless OSHA and its finicky requirements for government office buildings. Even ones that weren't supposed to exist.

But the door that led out to the basement was steel, and solid, and locked. Very thoroughly locked.

"No good," Logan said, inspecting it. "What I've got left won't get us through."

Ria swore, feelingly. But suddenly she realized something.

She could Hear again.

Whatever shielding Wheatley had put around his little fief didn't extend below the second floor. She was weak, and still far from the top of her game, but she had her external power source back.

She took a deep breath, and reached out and touched the door.:*Open!*:

Magic wasn't effortless for Ria, but it had never been this hard before. She felt herself greying out,

needles of strain lancing through her; the forerunner of a really spectacular headache beginning behind her eyes.: *OPEN!*:

After several seconds, a grinding shudder passed through the metal as its locks released. The door shifted in its frame and a crack of light appeared all along the edge. Logan pushed it open. His face showed no surprise. Ria doubted his expression would change if he saw the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse appear accompanied by the Angels of Mons.

They stepped out carefully into the dark, silent, underground garage, Logan going first. Ria strained her senses to the uttermost, but heard no trace of thoughts that might indicate an ambush. The weight on her shoulders was utterly slack, barely breathing.

"Very nice, Princess, but I'm afraid you're just going to have to put him back."

She knew the Men in Green were shielded against her sorcerous telepathy, and the background hash of other minds had kept her from Hearing the faint trace that did leak through their shields. Ria swung around—awkwardly, with Marley's weight to compensate for—to face the man who stepped out from behind the car.

No wonder they hadn't been followed. The agents had known they were running into a trap.

He was wearing the same green suit they all wore, with Kevlar armor over it, and holding a Mossberg 12-gauge. Ria didn't think it was loaded with rubber bullets. On the opposite side of the garage, two more agents, also in green, also heavily armed and armored, rose up out of concealment.

"Oh, I really don't think she should have to do that," Michael said, strolling into view.

He was holding a grenade in one hand, and a briefcase in the other. The man facing Ria flicked a glance toward him, but his weapon never wavered. Michael stopped a dozen feet away.

"You'll want to know if I've pulled the pin. I assure you I have. You'll doubt me. But it's not being quite *sure* that adds so much zest to our daily lives, don't you think, Mr. Collins?"

There was a squeal of tires and a flare of headlights. The Lincoln Navigator roared down the ramp, headlights flaring.

That got Collins' attention, and in the moment he looked away, Ria put three rounds into his chest just as the other two PDI agents opened up on the Navigator. The impact knocked Collins flying. She could hope it killed him, but she couldn't be sure.

"Ria—*catch!*"

The briefcase came flying toward her. She staggered as she caught it, gripping it against her with her gun arm, clutching at Marley's body with her free hand.

Bullets were flying everywhere, and any one of them could take her down—or kill Marley. She crouched low, using the bulk of the Navigator as a shield. Michael simply stood there, as unconcerned as if there were no men, no bullets, no guns.

The doors of the Navigator popped open and she staggered forward, throwing Marley and the briefcase ahead of her. She clutched at the back of the seat in front of her as the SUV began to accelerate, and

barely managed to draw her legs in before the doors slammed shut with a bank vault *chunk*.

In the rearview mirror, she saw Michael drop the grenade into his pocket and placidly raise his hands. The two agents were standing behind the car now, firing directly into it. The vehicle shuddered as it was struck, but the bullets had no other effect.

"Hold on," Melody warned.

They hit the security barrier with a jarring impact as the Navigator accelerated. Ria and Marley were flung back and forth jarringly against the seats as the Navigator bounced over the debris and out into the street, still accelerating.

It had just begun to turn when the explosion shook the night.

*"Never lie, Ria. It causes wrinkles,"* Michael had told her once. The grenade had been live, just as he'd said.

*Goodbye, Michael. I'm sorry you didn't get to see Greece again.*

"Drive for your life," Ria said harshly.

\* \* \*

"Where is he?" Beth Kentraine demanded.

Apparently the e-mail servers to Underhill were working just dandy at the moment. Two hours after Kayla had sent her e-mail—worded as tactfully as she could, under the circumstances—both Beth and Kory had shown up on her doorstep—or rather, Eric's doorstep.

They walked in—a tall blond man and a shorter, red-headed woman, holding motorcycle helmets beneath their arms. Beth Kentraine's hair had originally been black, Kayla remembered, but the elves had changed it for one of her disguises, and Beth had never changed it back. Both were wearing dark maroon motorcycle leathers, having ridden here from the Everforest Gate on their elvensteeds.

"I don't know," Kayla said miserably, opening the door wider to let Beth and Kory enter Eric's apartment. "Nobody knows. Except maybe his ride, and she ain't talking."

"I will go see what I may discover there," Kory said, turning to leave again. As he left, he rested a hand on Beth's shoulder. Kayla could feel the unspoken communication flow between them.

"You want tea?" Kayla asked.

"I want to know where Eric is," Beth said tightly. "You didn't say much in your e-mail, other than that he'd disappeared suddenly and—"

"Well, so does everybody else," Kayla snapped, interrupting what promised to be a Beth Kentraine special. "Want to know. An' all I know after three days is that he's *probably* not dead and *probably* not in Underhill. And how are you folks?"

"Why did you wait so long to tell us?" Beth half-wailed, sinking down onto the couch. "Eric doesn't just—disappear. We could have helped."

*I'm sitting in a building full of magicians with a talking gargoyle on top, and none of them could do jack,* Kayla thought crossly. But she couldn't be mad at Beth. Of everyone whose life had been disrupted by Elven magic, Beth's had been the most deeply affected. For the rest of her life, Beth could only be a visitor to the World Above, and not only because every Alphabet Agency there would be looking for her till the end of time because of her supposed involvement in the Poseidon Project mess.

There was Kory to think of, as well as baby Maeve. Kayla knew that Beth and Kory were bonded together far more closely than any pair of human lovers, but Beth Kentraine was still human, and Korendil . . . wasn't.

Underhill it didn't matter. Here in the Real World, it did. And according to Eric, if Beth spent enough time in Underhill, she'd reach a point where she *couldn't* come out, ever, not even for visits because, unless she was shielded by massive protection spells, she'd automatically attain her true age, the age she would have been if she'd been living outside of Underhill all along. And once enough time had passed, that would mean instant death. So Beth could only make the briefest of visits to the World Above, and pretty soon, not even that.

Beth had the happiness she'd always dreamed of—a loving husband and a child. But—just like in a fairy tale—there was a price to pay.

"That's why I called you guys, Beth," Kayla said. "I do need help. I've been trying to get through to Ria, but Anita says she's tied up with an emergency down in Washington. Hosea's good, but he's still an Apprentice Bard, and he's already looked for Eric and can't find him. Dr. Dunaway thinks Eric might be in a hospital somewhere, shielded so Lady Day can't sense him, and unconscious so he can't give his name. So . . . either Kory's magic can help, or you can hire me a private detective to start checking the local hospitals for John Doe admissions, because they're not going to listen to a college student who's not related to the guy, and hiring help's gotta be faster than doing it ourselves. You know how many hospitals there are in the New York area?"

*And what if he isn't in any of them? Let's hope she doesn't bring that up, because I don't have any good answers for that one.*

Beth raised an eyebrow in an expression familiar to Kayla from a thousand *Star Trek* re-runs, but Kayla's list seemed to have convinced her that Kayla hadn't just been sitting around.

"So. Tea?" Beth said at last.

\* \* \*

The tea was steeping by the time Kory returned. His doleful expression told them he'd had little success.

"She knows he went to the Park, and there he became . . . lost to her," Kory reported, coming into the kitchen.

"Lost?" Beth demanded.

"How lost?" Kayla echoed.

"'Lost' " is the only word she has for what she experienced," Kory answered grimly, lifting the lid of the teapot and staring down into it as if the answers he didn't have might be there.

Kayla stared at him, fascinated as always, despite the seriousness of the situation. She knew he didn't really look like what she was seeing. Kory was an elf—pointy ears, cat's eyes, and all—but the *glamourie* he cast showed her a normal—if stunningly beautiful—man. Slender, taller than average, long wavy blond hair flowing over his shoulders and green eyes to die for, the kind that model bookers would chase down the street waving contracts at, but still human.

"Not dead, not kidnapped Underhill. Only . . . lost," Kory said, sounding puzzled. "And that should not be."

"Where in the Park?" Beth demanded. "What was he doing there?"

"I can take you there," Kayla said. "Or anyway, Lady Day can. Eric said he was going to 'make an interdimensional phone call.' That's what he said *exactly*. So for a while I thought . . . "*You thought he'd gone Underhill to make arrangements for someone to take care of Magnus, and that's why you didn't worry until it was way too late for worrying.*"

Should she tell them about Eric's brother? Kayla hesitated. Maybe she'd tell Kory, if she could get him alone, but Beth didn't look like someone who needed additional stress right now. Come down to it, neither did Kayla. She still hadn't made up her mind whether she was going to try to go back up to The Place again tonight. *Not* going felt a lot like running out on Eric when he needed her—there wasn't anybody else to keep an eye on Magnus. But right now Magnus wasn't going anywhere. At least she hoped he wasn't. And Eric might need her help more than Magnus did.

"Earth to Kayla?" Beth said.

Kayla blinked, startled out of her thoughts. What had she been saying a moment before? Running on four hours sleep a night—if that—wasn't doing her brain a lot of good.

"You were saying that you thought Eric had gone Underhill," Kory prompted her, pouring tea.

"Yeah," Kayla said, relieved. "But then, when Lady Day got all upset, it looked like not."

Kory regarded her soberly. Beth might have missed everything she'd left out of that explanation, but it didn't look like her little elf buddy had. Kayla bit her lip, praying he wouldn't ask the next obvious question, because right now she was too tired to come up with a really convincing lie.

"Well," Beth said, "let's finish this and go up to the Park and see what we can see."

\* \* \*

"See?" Kayla said. "Nothing here."

Beth looked around, wrinkling her nose. "Not a really nice place. I bet a lot of muggings happen up here."

The three of them stood in the same clearing that Lady Day had brought Kayla and Hosea to three days before. Except for the addition of a few more bits of garbage, it was unchanged.

"Probably," Kayla said. "But we should be pretty safe." There were three of them, after all, and the 'steeds could get them out of here at the first sign of trouble. Plus the fact that Kory could probably turn



into an Elven Knight at the drop of a hat and pull a sword or something and scare the heck out of anybody who looked at them funny.

"Forgive me for asking," Kory said, "but *how* did you look, when you were here last?"

Kayla thought back. "Hosea had his banjo with him. He used Jeanette to look around."

"And Jeanette is a disembodied human spirit?" Kory asked.

"Yeah," Kayla said. *My homie, the Ozark Bard with the haunted banjo.* "She said he wasn't here and he wasn't dead."

"But perhaps she did not see all there was to see," Kory said. "My power is not great—and in this place it is far less than otherwise—but perhaps it can tell us more."

"Be careful," Beth said.

Kory smiled at her. "With you and Maeve to think of, how could I be less than careful? Yet Eric is our true friend, and I will do no less than all I can for him as well."

*Elves. By the time you figure out what they've actually said, they've made off with the keys to the Mint,* Kayla thought in irritable fascination. But she was complaining mostly to distract herself, she knew. If Kory *could* find Eric, or at least find out what had happened to him . . .

*Then maybe at least we'll know where to look for you, Banyon.*

Kory kissed Beth lightly on the cheek and walked away from the two of them, until he was standing in the middle of the open space. A trampled track of grass, not quite a path, showed where most people crossed through here, and Kory stood just to one side of that. He slipped off his leather gauntlets and set them gently aside on the ground. For several moments, his hands sketched patterns in the air.

At first there was no result, and Kory frowned. He seemed to push against something, and the *glamour* around him faded away as he funneled all his power into the spell, so that now Kayla could see his long pointed ears, pale skin, and slanted brows clearly.

The patterns in the air seemed to take on more solidity now, becoming faintly glowing shapes, though they sparked and faded away almost at once. Kayla got the impression they weren't supposed to do that, because Kory swore and muttered under his breath, his frown becoming even more thunderous.

But at last they steadied, the pattern burning steadily with a pale blue-green light, hanging in the air before him like disembodied neon.

"I cannot hold it for long," Kory said, sounding a little breathless. "Let us pray that it shows us what we need to see."

And Eric came walking through the Park.

He looked subtly unreal, like bad CGI, but it was Eric, dressed as Kayla had seen him last. He was staggering, exhausted, carrying his flute in his fist. Around him the light was different; though it was late afternoon in the here and now, Eric walked through the light of early morning, adding to the strange sense of disconnection for his watchers.

"Eric?" Beth's voice was a symphony of distress. "Oh, Blessed Lady, what's happened to him?"

"This is okay," Kayla said quickly. "He meant to look that way. I'll explain later." She put a hand on Beth's arm. Only the fact that she couldn't sense anything from the Eric image kept her from running over to him. But this wasn't Eric. This was *amovie* of Eric, from three days ago.

But she couldn't stifle a groan of dismay as Eric walked, oblivious, right into the midst of five punks lurking in the underbrush. Didn't *hesee* them?

There was no sound, only images, but it wasn't hard to guess what they were saying. "*Give us all your money,*" or something like that.

She watched as he dropped the flute, as one of them hit him from behind with what looked like a length of pipe wrapped in electrical tape, as he fell to the ground and all five of them kept on hitting him. One of them had a baseball bat.

The image vanished.

"I'm sorry," Kory said, staggering back and gasping slightly. "I could not hold the spell any longer. But now we know what happened to him." He shook his head, as if slightly dazed, and Kayla could see—and feel—what the spell had cost him.

"I'll kill them," Beth vowed, in a shaking voice. "I'll find them and I'll kill them all."

Freaks, Kayla thought numbly. Just an ordinary mugging by ordinary freaks. It could happen to anyone.

But it shouldn't happen to Eric. Eric was a streetwise New Yorker by now. He knew better than to go wandering through this part of the Park—through any part of the Park—as if he were half-asleep. And what had happened to him just before this? He'd looked like death on toast. Even without his flute, he should have been able to stop them.

But he hadn't.

Kory gathered Beth into his arms and held her close. "We do not know that what this appeared to be was all this was. My spell could show nothing more than the external images of things. But now we know this much. And surely someone must have found him and given him succor," Kory said, as if it were the most reasonable thing in the world.

"Which is the closest hospital?" Beth demanded.

\* \* \*

Gotham General Hospital covered several city blocks. It was the largest hospital in the city, and it had one of the best burn trauma units on the East Coast. Jimmie Youngblood had died here.

*I never wanted to come back here,* Kayla thought, walking up to the information desk. She was just as glad she'd cleaned up and gotten respectable on the off-chance that Beth and Kory might be showing up. Her story wasn't going to make a lot of sense as it was.

"I wondered if you could help me," Kayla said. "I'm looking for my brother."

The woman behind the desk smiled. "Is he a patient here?"

"That's the thing," Kayla said. It wasn't hard to look nervous, frightened, or scared—all those emotions were right below the surface, and she let them well up and spill over. "I don't know. I think he might have been mugged up in Central Park Tuesday morning. Is he here?"

\* \* \*

A short time later, the three of them were seated in an office across a desk from one of the hospital's many administrators.

"Why do you think your brother might be here, Ms. Smith?" Mr. Wilson asked.

It wasn't hard to cry, so Kayla did. "It's the closest," she said around a wad of Kleenex. "He didn't come home Tuesday night. I called the hospitals, but there isn't an 'Eric Banyon,' in any of them."

"Perhaps he's just—"

"It isn't going to kill you to check," Beth Kentraine interrupted in a hard voice. "White male, mid-twenties to early thirties, brown hair, brown eyes, no distinguishing marks or scars, admitted unconscious or disoriented and still in that state. Last seen wearing a green raincoat, if that helps. How many of those can you have gotten in here since Tuesday?"

"In New York, quite a large number," Mr. Wilson said, with a faint sigh. "Ms. . . . ?"

"Connor. Beth Connor. I'm Eric's ex-wife. This is my husband Kory. Look, if he's here, we want to find him. And you want to bill his insurance company. Let's help each other out."

Kayla saw Wilson twitch at the mention of the word "insurance"; Beth had struck a nerve there, all right. But he turned to the computer terminal in silence.

After a few moments he turned back to them.

"Are you quite sure your brother was in Central Park Tuesday morning?" Mr. Wilson asked.

Kayla nodded.

"And would you happen to know his blood type?"

"Oh, yes," Beth said calmly. "Eric is O Positive."

Mr. Wilson sighed, sitting back in his chair.

"Ms. Smith, Mr. and Ms. Connor, we have a patient here who may—only may—be Mr. Banyon. The police brought him in Tuesday afternoon, after he'd been spotted by a jogger. He had no identification on him. He'd been . . . severely beaten. He was unconscious upon arrival, and he hasn't regained consciousness. His condition is . . . very serious. He was just transferred out of ICU this morning."

Beth clutched Kory's hand, hard. Kayla hugged herself tightly.

Wilson winced again, though only someone like Kayla would have noticed. "If you'll come with me, I'll take you up to his room so you can make an identification. Please remember, this may not be the man you're looking for."

*Who else could it be?* Kayla thought desperately.

\* \* \*

It took them several minutes of walking to reach the room, and Kayla was lost immediately in a bewildering maze of elevators and corridors. All around her, even through her shields, she could sense the litany of pain and damage from the rooms around her. *A hospital, she thought wryly, was no place for a Healer.*

But if Eric was here—if it was Eric—it had to be Eric—she could Heal him, get him out of here—

Mr. Wilson stopped before a closed door.

"I'd really prefer if only one person went in," he said.

Beth started forward, but Kory held her back.

"Kayla will go," Kory said.

It made sense. She was the Empath, the Healer. No matter how messed up Eric was, conscious or not, she'd be able to reach him. Kayla took a deep breath, squaring her shoulders. "Kay," she said.

Mr. Wilson opened the door.

The room held six beds. Two were empty. Kayla heard the susurrant sound of ventilators, the faint metronomic beeping of heart monitors, the odd bleachy smell of sick-sweat. It reminded her of the last hospital room she'd been in. Jimmie's.

But no sweet stench of cooking flesh. Not that, at least.

The curtains were drawn around each bed, concealing the occupants. Mr. Wilson stopped at one and parted the curtains at the foot.

"Is this your brother?"

"Gimme a minute." Kayla steeled herself to look, the image of the beating Eric had taken still sharp in her mind.

She was braced for horrors, so she didn't lose it. Not quite.

They'd shaved most of his head, and part of it was covered with an odd lopsided bandage. Both his eyes were swollen shut, the flesh around them black and red. His nose had been spectacularly broken, and it looked as if his jaw had, too; it was held in place by a brace. Both arms were splinted, and one leg was suspended at an angle, held up by a traction brace; multiple fractures, she guessed. Tubes snaked beneath the sheets, some led upward to suspended bags. A machine was breathing for him.

"Eric?" Kayla whispered. *Oh, Jesus, ERIC . . .*

She clutched at foot of the bed. It would take days, maybe weeks, to repair all that damage. Where did she start?

*Start with him waking up. That would be nice.*

"Yes," she managed to say, nodding. "That's Eric."

"I'm sorry." He reached out to put a hand on her shoulder, and Kayla moved before he could touch her, going up along the side of the bed to stand at Eric's side. "Could I . . . just stay with him for a few minutes?"

"Of course. Can we get in touch with your parents?"

Kayla stared at him blankly for a moment before realizing that he meant *Eric's* parents. "No. They're dead."

Wilson hesitated, on the verge of saying something he obviously didn't want to say to her. "I'll be outside."

Kayla waited impatiently until she heard the door close again.

"Hey there, Sleeping Beauty," she said. "Time to wake up."

She pulled off her gloves and stuffed them into her pocket, then reached out and touched Eric on the forehead. *Come out, come out, wherever you are. . . .*

\* \* \*

"—make an appointment for you to talk to Dr. Rodriguez tomorrow afternoon. He'll be able to give you the specifics of Mr. Banyon's condition. And if you can stop by the Admitting Office on your way out, we can get most of the paperwork taken care of," Mr. Wilson was saying to Beth and Kory when Kayla came out.

\* \* \*

Beth took one quick glance at Kayla's face and took a step sideways to put herself between Wilson and the young Empath. Whatever had just happened in that room wasn't good, and Kayla looked just about to lose it.

Kory—Lady bless him!—picked up on her cue and shepherded Kayla ahead of him toward the elevator. Beth set her mouth on "babble" and pasted her best insincere smile on her face, the one that had served her well, in a previous life, whenever she'd had to deal with network TV executives.

"Thank you for everything you've done, Mr. Wilson. I'm afraid I don't have Eric's insurance card with me but—do you have a fax number here? I know he's got a fax, I could go home and fax you the information as soon as we get back to his apartment. Kory and I are staying with him. Eric introduced me to Kory, actually; we've all known each other for years. I live out on the West Coast now, in fact I was just in town for a few days on a visit; this is such a horrible thing to happen; I told Eric that moving to New York was a horrible idea, but honestly—"

"They'll take care of all that down at the Admitting Office," Mr. Wilson said. "And of course the police will want to get in touch with you."

"Police?" Beth said, her voice skittering up an octave despite herself. "Oh, because he was *mugged!* Well, I don't know what I can tell them. But sure; gosh, I went through that last year out in SF when someone stole my purse. Not that this is anything like that, of course." She laughed, a little jaggedly. *Oh, Blessed Lady, not the police! I don't think I can handle that. . . .*

But she managed to keep right on babbling.

\* \* \*

"What's wrong?" Beth demanded, as soon as all three of them were in the open air again.

"Beth," Kayla said, "it's him. *But he isn't in there.*"

## Chapter Twelve: Rocky Road To Dublin

They picked up a tail about two miles away from the PDI, and Ria doubted it was anyone nice, with every LEO in D.C. converging on the explosion.

She'd gotten Marley into her trench coat and managed to get him buckled into the passenger seat beside her. At least, if they *were* stopped, he wouldn't look as immediately suspicious as he would if he were naked.

He was conscious—his eyes were open at least, and he was holding onto a bottle of water—but Ria didn't know how well he was tracking. Still, she had to try. When she showed up at Nathaniel Babcock's doorstep out in Silver Springs, Marley had to have his story straight. She would have liked to have taken him straight to Walter Reed, but that had been going to be Michael's play. Now she was going to have to fall back on her second choice. Maybe Nathaniel could parlay a promotion out of this.

"Marley, can you hear me?" she asked gently.

"Are we going to lose them?" Logan said to Melody.

"We can but try," Melody said cheerily.

Ria shut her mind to the conversation in the front seat. Either they'd lose their tail or they wouldn't. There was little she could do about it without more rest. She felt bruised in places that didn't even have names, and she had a pounding headache. If she tried a spell now, and lost control of it, she could do as much damage to her own side as to the enemy.

"Marley?" she said again.

Slowly, he turned toward her. "I don't know anything," he whispered. He stared at her with an

expression of hopeless despair.

"That's right," Ria said. "Parker Wheatley kidnapped you and tortured you, and you didn't know anything. I'm going to take you to friends. They'll protect you from him."

"No," Marley said in that same strangely docile tone, shaking his head very slightly. "That won't help. He worked for the government, you know."

"He was a sick, crazy man," Ria said gently. "And if you tell my friends what he did, they'll see that."

"Elves," Marley said with a sigh. "He wanted to know about elves."

"But elves don't exist," Ria said firmly. "And anybody who believes in elves is crazy. So Parker Wheatley is crazy. When you talk to my friends, they'll understand. They'll help you."

The Navigator doused its lights and made a sharp left, bumped up over a curb and down a flight of steps—across one of the pedestrian malls that were a feature of downtown—and zoomed on. There was a grinding crunch as it squeezed between a park bench and a piece of sculpture, then a long grating sound as it made its way down an alley just barely wide enough to accommodate it.

"That's done it," Melody said with satisfaction, zipping out into the street and hitting the lights again. "I don't think we're radar-opaque any more, though."

"They won't believe me," Marley said, still in that same flat, dead voice. "They'll believe him."

Ria made herself believe what she said, because Marley was hearing tone more than words right now. "You don't have to worry about Parker Wheatley, Marley. Mr. Wheatley is about to become a footnote to history. Just tell my friends what he did to you."

She patted the briefcase on her lap absently, wondering what was in it that Michael had been so sure was worth dying for.

She'd find out.

\* \* \*

It was almost four by the time they reached Babcock's house. Ria got out of the car—the doors stuck a little, but Melody finally got them open—and took a moment to divest herself of all suspicious equipment and weapons. She took the briefcase, and helped Marley out of the car.

"Now disappear," she told the other two. "I'll take care of the rest."

Logan nodded. The Lincoln's doors shut.

She stood there for a moment, holding Marley up, as the Navigator disappeared—more sedately now—into the distance.

It was cold. Her breath fogged the air. She could feel Marley shivering.

"Come on," she said. "Let's go."

He stumbled with her up to the front steps of the house. All the windows were dark. Ria rang the doorbell. There was a pause, then a sudden wild barking from inside, and the sound of scrabbling at the inside of the door.

Several minutes passed. The dog stopped barking abruptly. Then the outside lights went on, and Nathaniel Babcock's face appeared at the window. He stared at Ria for a long moment before dropping the curtain again.

The door opened on the security chain.

"Ms. Llewellyn?" he said guardedly.

"Yes, Mr. Babcock. It's all right. I'm sorry to bother you at home. I've brought a friend who needs official help. His name is Marley Bell, and up until several hours ago he was being held prisoner by Parker Wheatley and the PDI."

Babcock closed the door and took the chain off, then opened it all the way. He was wearing a plaid wool bathrobe over striped pajamas and looked very ruffled. One pocket of the robe sagged, as if something heavy rested there. In the living room behind him stood his wife, her arms full of a squirming black-and-white cocker spaniel, one hand firmly clamped over its muzzle.

"Bab?" she said.

"Go back to bed, honey. And take Bingo with you, would you? This is business."

The woman sighed and turned away, hefting the dog higher in her arms and letting go of its muzzle. It began to bark again as she carried it off down the hall. The sound continued until it was muffled by the sound of a closing door.

Ria stepped inside, carrying Marley with her. Babcock stared at his bare legs as Ria lowered him gently into the nearest chair. It was pretty obvious that Marley was wearing nothing but her coat.

"What's this all about?" Nathaniel said.

"The short version goes something like this," Ria said, rubbing her forehead wearily. "Mr. Bell owns an occult bookstore in Baltimore. About two weeks ago—I found out yesterday—Parker Wheatley went off the rails and kidnapped him, apparently on the theory that Mr. Bell was an agent of these parahumans he's after. He's had Mr. Bell tortured. A doctor would be nice."

"And where do you come into this?"

"I was left holding the baby," Ria said. She chose her next words with care. If she said anything that indicated she'd committed a crime, Nathaniel would have little choice but to take notice. "A friend of mine entered the PDI tonight with what he told me was a Justice Department warrant. He's dead now. Nathaniel, how much of this do you really want to know?"

"I didn't want to know this much. Are you sure he was tortured?"

In answer, Ria reached down and pulled open the trench coat, exposing one of the burn marks on Marley's chest. Nathaniel's face went very still.



"I'm going to go get dressed and make some calls. Don't go anywhere."

\* \* \*

After that, things happened fairly fast. Mrs. Babcock, Nathaniel's two boys, and the spaniel Bingo—still protesting, intermittently, these intruders in her domain—were quickly dressed and removed from the house. The expression on Nathaniel's wife's face as she drove off indicated that this wasn't the last Nathaniel was going to hear about this, either. Three unmarked but highly obvious official cars arrived in the Babcock driveway. A doctor made a quick examination of Marley Bell and asked him a few questions before having him taken off to a hospital under full security.

Ria managed a quick look through the briefcase. Michael hadn't had much time inside, but what he'd managed to get should be enough to hang Parker Wheatley from a high gallows indeed. Memos, work documents, position papers—several with Wheatley's own signature—all detailed the PDI's quest to end the "paraterrestrial menace" in plain language that made Wheatley and his band of little green men sound like raving lunatics.

She told a short and highly expurgated version of her story to the senior case agents who arrived at Nathaniel's house along with the doctor, and then, more or less as she'd expected, was driven back into Washington to be interviewed at the J. Edgar Hoover Building several more times by a number of people much higher on the FBI food chain than Nathaniel Babcock. She'd kept her story simple, knowing that they really wouldn't be able to disprove it.

And knowing what she did about Washington politics, they wouldn't want to. If Marley told a different story about his rescue, they'd put it down to the disorientation of his captivity. And they might not ask him about that part at all.

Ria's story was simple and contained a lot of the truth, as the best lies always did. She'd gone to Michael with the information about Marley, and Michael had done the rest. She willingly gave them everything she had about her past dealings with Michael, knowing that at this point there was no one left in Michael's organization to compromise. Michael had taken her with him to the PDI so that she could identify Marley when he brought Marley out. If they thought that was odd, the only person they could complain to about it was dead.

Michael had brought Marley and the briefcase to the car. She gave up the briefcase, admitting freely that she'd looked through it: who wouldn't? Michael had gone back inside. Ria had heard gunfire. There'd been an explosion. Michael hadn't come back. Ria had panicked and driven off.

A nice, neat story. And very nearly true. And if anyone wondered where her car was now, she made sure with a few well-placed spells that they didn't ask. By the time the little spells of Misdirection she'd managed to cast wore off and they *did* ask, she could tell them she'd sent one of her drivers out to pick it up. Just what they could expect from an annoying civilian, when all was said and done.

They'd wanted to hold her for further questioning, of course, but Ria had other plans, and—by now—the magical muscle to back it up. *Aglamour* would wear off eventually, but by the time it did, she would have had a chance to muddle her tracks even more thoroughly and put up a hedge of lawyers around herself. She had every intention of cooperating to bring Wheatley down. But *on her* terms.

One simple spell bought her five uninterrupted minutes' use of her cell phone to call for a Llewellyn car to be waiting for her downstairs. Another—more complicated—series of spells convinced the people she was talking to that she really wasn't very central to their actual investigation after all, and that she might as

well be allowed to go back to her hotel until they needed her again. Since that was so counter to their own inclinations, the spell wouldn't hold for long. But then, it didn't have to. Just for long enough.

An agent escorted her out of the building. Her car was waiting. Ria didn't breathe quite freely until its door had closed behind her.

"Back to the Watergate, Ms. Llewellyn?" the driver asked.

She considered it for a brief instant, but no. She doubted Wheatley was the sort to give up easily, and the wheels of justice—or even payback—ground exceedingly slow. She'd stung him, she was quite sure he knew by now who his enemy was, and she had ample proof of how little interest he had in playing by the rules.

If he gave her enough trouble, she could certainly make him vanish. But making him vanish wouldn't serve her aims nearly as well as thoroughly discrediting the PDI would.

"No. Just drive around for a while. I'm going to make some calls."

\* \* \*

"What do you mean 'he's not there'?" Beth demanded, pacing back and forth.

They'd been about to have this conversation right there on the steps of the hospital, but Kory had made Beth wait until they'd gotten back to Eric's apartment. It didn't make things any easier.

Kayla was huddled in a ball of misery at one corner of the couch, knees drawn up to her chin and arms wrapped around them tightly.

"They really did a number on him," she said, her voice low. "But that shouldn't matter. Hell, Jimmie was *dyin'*, an' she was still there. But I touched him, an' . . . it was like he was *empty*." She shuddered, remembering. It had been like touching a piece of meat at the supermarket. Warm, and breathing—thanks to the hospital's machines—but . . . empty.

"No," Beth whispered, her face twisting with pain. Kayla winced at the agony she could feel sheeting off Beth. The better you knew someone, the harder it was to shield against them.

"Could he be . . . hiding?" Kory suggested. He stroked Beth's hair, and Kayla felt Beth's pain ease a little.

"Maybe," Kayla said dubiously, trying to forget it was *Eric* in that bed and think. "Elizabet said that happens sometimes. With physical trauma or a bad psychic shock. It's sort of what happened with Ria. It took us almost a year to really put her back together, and it took two of us. I wasn't with Eric long enough to take a good look. And if I am going to take a really deep look, I'm going to need an anchor and some protection. I could use Hosea. Or Ria."

She noticed that Beth didn't make her usual face when Ria's name was mentioned, for a change. That was nice.

"Has anything bad happened to Eric recently?" Beth asked. "Something that could make something like this happen?"

*Other than seeing his parents again, and finding out about Magnus, and like that?* Kayla thought. "I didn't think so," she said, honestly enough. "He's been seeing that shrink, and everything—I better call her and tell her we found him, and then call Elizabeth and ask her what to do. And dig out Eric's insurance card to keep the hospital happy." *And get farther away from you, lady, before I gnaw open a vein just from being around you.*

Kayla swung off the couch and went into the bedroom. Eric would have left his wallet there. There was a second phone there as well.

The first thing she saw, sitting on top of the dresser in plain sight, was Magnus' bus pass. She grabbed it.

Kory reached over her shoulder and plucked it out of her hand. He'd followed her into the bedroom so silently she hadn't heard a thing.

"Gimme that!" Kayla hissed, grabbing for it. She glanced around him, but Beth had stayed in the living room, for a mercy.

Kory, far taller than she was, held it easily out of her reach.

"A brother," he said quietly, not even needing to look at the card to be able to know—magically—what it signified. "Lost. And Eric was looking for him when he disappeared. Or . . . had found him?"

"He knows where he is," Kayla said, giving up. "He'd run away and come here—to New York. That's why Eric was dressed like that, in the Park. He wanted to gain his confidence a little, so Magnus would trust him when Eric told him he was his long-lost brother and wasn't just going to hand him back over to his folks. Don't tell Beth," she pleaded.

"Because Beth would worry?" Kory said, smiling faintly. "Is he safe?"

Kayla thought hard. Was he? Were the three of them? "For now," she said reluctantly. "He's with two other kids, and Eric said both the other two have Talent." *And he said there was a problem. Was the problem why what happened to him happened?* "If . . ." *If I can't make him wake up, if he stays like that—NO!* "I'll tell Ria where they are and what's going on. Hosea says there's a halfway house they can go to, to get them off the street, if nothing better. I'll make sure nothing happens to any of them. I swear."

Kory regarded her steadily. He looked about Beth and Eric's age, but Eric had told her once that Kory was about two centuries old. Even if the Sidhe lived for about a zillion years, that had to count for something, didn't it?

"A great responsibility for one so young. Yet Eric would not have entrusted it to you were you not capable of it. I only wish . . . had he come to us, the children could all be safe in Misthold even now. But those days are gone, and we each have our own road to tread. We will keep his confidences between us, then."

He sounded wistful, and sad enough to make Kayla start bawling then and there. But all he did was hand her back the bus pass and leave.

*Why does everything have to be so effing complicated?*

Kayla stuffed the card into her pocket, and after a moment remembered that she was supposed to be looking for Eric's insurance card and making phone calls. She knew one thing for sure. She wasn't going

anywhere tonight. Those kids were just going to have to get along without her for one night. If she was going to help Eric—if Eric *could* be helped—she couldn't do it on four hours sleep on a cold bare floor.

\* \* \*

She left a message on Dr. Dunaway's answering machine, and then called Elizabeth. It was four hours earlier in California; Elizabeth answered after several rings; she'd probably been outside in the garden. November was a milder month in L.A.

"Eric?" Elizabeth had caller ID, and would recognize the phone number.

"No, it's Kayla."

"Kayla! Tell me what's wrong."

"If you're so psychic, you tell me," Kayla said, making a feeble joke. She drew a shaky breath. "Elizabeth, I need some advice. . . ."

\* \* \*

The call took longer than she'd expected, but Kayla felt much better afterward. Elizabeth had been able to offer her a number of helpful suggestions, and one strict warning: not to heal Eric's body before she had established a link with his mind. To do so might be to sever the link between the two forever, especially if magic, and not simple trauma, were involved in Eric's injury.

She'd barely hung up the phone when it rang again. Kayla picked it up before the answering machine had time to cycle through.

"Eric?" came the familiar voice at the other end.

"Ria?"

"*Kayla!* Where have you been? I've been calling your phone whenever I could, but nobody's answered, and this line's been busy. I'm sorry I couldn't get back to you sooner. I got your messages. What's wrong?"

"Eric's in the hospital in a coma," Kayla said, too tired to pretty things up.

She could almost feel Ria change gears, even through the phone. "How long?"

"Since Tuesday."

She heard Ria take a deep breath.

"What happened?"

"He got mugged up in the Park. And . . ."

Kayla clung to the phone, unable to go on. He's in a coma and I can't wake him up, because I can't find him! What if I never can find him! What then?

"Kayla?" Ria said gently. "I know there's more. Tell me."

"I . . . I tried to wake him up and I couldn't."

There was a longer pause. Kayla knew that Ria understood everything she hadn't—couldn't—say.

"Kayla, I want to come up there, but I can't. I don't know how long until I can. You're at Eric's? I'm sending Anita over there. She'll take care of everything you need. Money, lawyers, everything. Let her handle the hospital. That's what I pay her for."

"Ria? Beth and Kory are here."

Kayla thought she heard a muttered curse—or maybe smothered laughter—but wasn't sure.

"Of course they are. Do they know about Magnus?"

"Kory does. He, uh, found out."

There was another pause. Kayla could almost hear Ria thinking furiously. "Is he going to be reasonable?"

"Depends on your definition. He'll keep his mouth shut for a while, though. But we gotta get them—Magnus and some other kids—off the street, and without Eric around . . . Hosea says there's a halfway house they could go to, but it costs money."

"Have Anita write the place a check. Don't worry about the money, Kayla. Money's for spending. Now listen. Make sure they move Eric to a private room with a special duty nurse. I'll call Anita to give her the details. And get those kids off the street as soon as you can. Dorland's getting close; it's only a matter of time before he finds Magnus. Damn it! That's my other phone! I've got to go. I'll call you again as soon as I can. Take care of yourself."

The line went dead.

Kayla took a deep breath, and ran quickly through a couple of grounding and centering exercises before coming back into the living room. Having Ria in the game made her feel a lot better, even if Ria couldn't be right here right now. There were few mundane problems that LlewellynCo-level money couldn't solve.

When she came out, Beth and Kory were sitting on the couch, Beth curled up under Kory's arm. She'd been crying.

"That was Ria," Kayla said. "She's sending her personal assistant over here to help deal with the hospital."

"Why doesn't she come herself?" Beth demanded.

"I don't think she can," Kayla said. Empathic powers didn't work over phone lines, but Ria had sounded really frustrated when she'd said she was stuck in Washington for an indefinite period. And there were very few things that could keep Ria Llewellyn from doing exactly as she pleased.

About forty minutes later, Anita arrived. Anita Sheldrake was Ria Llewellyn's personal assistant, watchdog, and gopher, and if she had any objections to being called out at the end of her workday to run even more errands, they didn't show.

"I'm very sorry to hear about Eric," Anita said, coming in carrying two large plastic bags. "I picked up some Chinese food on the way over. Ria called me in the car and said you probably hadn't thought about cooking." She walked into the kitchen and set the bags down on the table, then came back out, opening her brief bag and pulling out a notepad.

"Now, we can get Eric moved to a private room with round-the-clock private duty nurses tonight. Ms. Llewellyn would appreciate it if you would allow me and Derek Tilford—he's one of our lawyers—to sit in on your meeting with Dr. Rodriguez tomorrow. That's at 2:30?"

"Yes," Beth said suspiciously. "Why?"

"That would be . . . in advance of any problems," Anita said carefully.

"What kind of problems?" Beth asked, starting to sound dangerous.

"Well, Gotham General is obviously going to be concerned that you might take exception to their treatment of what they originally thought was a homeless man, especially now that he turns out to be a rather well-off and well-connected Juilliard student. And Ria said that you'd prefer to be kept out of things as much as possible, Mrs. Connor," Anita said diplomatically.

Kayla felt as much as saw the bolt of blind panic flash through Beth. Beth Kentraine-or-Connor could hardly afford to have her picture all over the *New York Post*.

"Yes," Beth said wearily, leaning back against Kory again. "Yes, I would."

"So Mr. Tilford will assure them that if they play ball with us, we'll play ball with them—in the nicest possible way, of course. He'll make sure you don't have to talk to the police. Why should you? You weren't even in New York when the incident happened. So if I could just borrow Eric's ID and insurance cards for a moment to jot down some numbers—and I'll leave you my card, and Derek's—we'll meet you at the hospital tomorrow, okay?" Anita said.

\* \* \*

Kayla walked Anita out, saying she wanted to see if Hosea was home anyway, which was true. In the lobby, Anita stopped.

"Kayla? Ria wanted me to give you this when I could get you alone." Anita took a plain white envelope out of her brief bag and handed it to Kayla.

"This contains five blank signed checks on one of Ria's slush accounts. You can make them out for a total of up to fifty thousand dollars. If that's not enough, let me know and I'll deposit some more money."

*Merry Christmas*, Kayla thought numbly. She knew Ria was rich, but it was easy to forget until something like this happened. She folded the envelope several times and stuffed it into her pocket. "Uh . . . this is probably enough. But I'll let you know."

Anita nodded. "I'm really sorry about Eric. Is he going to be okay?"

"We hope so," Kayla said. What else could she say? Anita nodded again, decisively.

"See you tomorrow then."

\* \* \*

Hosea hated being pulled in several directions this way. He wanted to be out looking for Eric, but his work for the Guardians was just as important. People were dying.

He needed to hear the rest of the Secret Stories. But the children wouldn't tell them except to each other. They believed that bad things would happen to them if any adult knew them.

Maybe that was true. Maybe the real reason that Bloody Mary was loose in the world was because some grown-up, somewhere, knew the Secret Stories and had found a way to use them somehow. But he knew that wouldn't stop him from trying to find out the rest. He was sure that if he knew her Secret Name—the one the littlest children believed turned her from a monster into a protector—it would help. And the clues must be buried somewhere in the Secret Stories.

\* \* \*

He hadn't been in the door of Jacob Riis for more than five minutes before Michaela Groom, one of the volunteer day-care teachers, came trotting up to him with relief all over her face. "I'm glad you're here," she said, without preamble, signs of stress in her voice, on her face, in her posture. "We just got a visit from some well-intentioned idiots doing a story for one of the TV stations who got the nickel tour, then proceeded to hand out candy right, left and center before I could stop them. Chocolate—of course—and the kids all stuffed themselves silly. The ones that aren't sick have been vibrating like Buzzy the hummingbird all morning. They're just starting to come off the sugar high, and those of us that don't have screaming migraines are ready to drop."

Hosea nodded; he knew what she wanted before she asked it, since he had the reputation of being able to calm kids down. "You tryin' to get the little'uns down for a nap?" he asked.

Michaela rubbed her forehead. "And having no damn luck," she confessed. "I picked the wrong week to try and stop smoking."

"Ah'll jest see what Ah can do," Hosea promised, and ambled into the room where the youngest usually took their afternoon naps.

Sure enough, it looked like the aftermath of a tornado. The mats the kids were supposed to nap on were everywhere, and so were the kids. Rather than trying to get their attention, Hosea just settled into a corner with Jeanette, opened her case, tuned her quickly, and started to play, softly, a medley of old lullabies his grandmother had taught him. The banjo notes fell among the screaming, running, fighting children like rain. And, like rain, at first the music just ran off them without any effect. But as he willed calm and peace and sleepiness into the music, gradually fights broke up, kids dropped down onto mats, the noise quieted. Some of them looked up at him in surprise, as if they hadn't realized that he was there; others dragged their mats over to his corner and flung themselves down to listen. Yawns began, and yawning was contagious. Eyelids drooped, heads went down onto arms.

:Whoever the idiot is who decided to hand out candy ought to be shot, Jeanette said, acerbically.:No, wait, I have a better idea. We ought to fill these kids full of candy again and drop them all off at this house.:

"Not a bad notion," Hosea murmured. His eyes flickered over the little knots of kids who were still awake, but at least now they were sitting and talking instead of fighting and screaming. He strained to

hear what they were saying, and thought he caught the words "Bloody Mary."

His concentration lapsed for a moment, and he missed a couple of notes.

*:Yo, Music-Man; concentrate on what you're doing, and let me do the listening.:*

It wasn't often that Jeanette volunteered to do anything: Hosea snatched the offered help and went back to soothing overstimulated minds and bodies. These were the littlest of the children—none older than six—the ones who had absolutely stonewalled him in any attempt to get the Secret Stories out of them. Either they were too shy, or too afraid to trust him or any adult.

The murmuring went on in the far corner. He played as softly as he could, and hoped that Jeanette was better at hearing what was being said than he was. Finally, as Michaela lowered the lights, the last of the kids dropped off. He let the song he was playing trail naturally off at its end, then picked up the case and tiptoed out through the maze of randomly strewn children.

"How a man your size can move so quietly, I'll never know," Michaela said, shaking her head, when he reached the door and she closed it behind him. He just grinned.

But he was glad that she couldn't see past the surface of his grin, because it didn't go any deeper than the skin. He wanted to have a serious conference with Jeanette, because the little that he had heard of the Secret Stories just sounded worse and worse.

He tucked himself up into an unoccupied corner, and began to play again, softly. "Talk to me, partner," he said, under his breath.

*:You already know what the start of the Story is, Jeanette said, after a moment. The demons put Heaven under siege, led by Bloody Mary. They overran Heaven. No one, not even the angels, knows where God is. He might be the demons' prisoner, He might be in hiding, He might even be dead. Most of the kids think He ran away when He saw her.:*

A bitter start to a sad story, but it explained the hopelessness in the shelter kids' lives. "And the angels regrouped and are fighting back. They have a secret camp deep in some tropical swamp. They're led by the archangel Michael, who happens to look a lot like a feller name of Che," Hosea said.

Jeanette snorted mirthlessly and took up the Story again. *Heaven's been ruined and is full of demons. There's nowhere for the good dead to go except to the angels' camp. But an angel has to find them and lead them there, because they can't find the way on their own. So the children do their best to help their dead relatives find their way to the angels' camp, by leaving a ticket to the camp on their grave, or where they were killed. Here in New York, it's any pink advertising flyer. At least they can get those.*

Hosea smiled. He'd wondered why the kids had been so hot about collecting those. Now he knew. "An' the bad dead, well, they go straight to the demons anyway. The demons make all the bad things happen. They made those planes fly into the Twin Towers because they were trying to kill everyone in New York."

*:At least it's a reason they can understand, Jeanette said grimly. She hesitated, almost as if she were gathering her thoughts, as Hosea continued to play. The good dead scout for the angels, and where they can, they fight on their side. They come to kids to warn them when they can, and do what they can to keep Bloody Mary away. The kids know that demons can corrupt anyone, even your parents, so no*



adult is really safe to be around, because the demons can turn them at any point.:

Hosea winced. The world of the Stories was a terrible one, where every adult was an enemy, or a potential enemy. But, sadly, it was an accurate reflection of the children's lives. Once again, he took up the tale in turn, adding what he knew.

"Thinkin' about Bloody Mary can bring her to you. She hates kids; whenever one dies, she's happy. Whenever one's turned to the bad, an' is workin' for the demons, she's happy. But she used to be good, the Blue Lady, an' if you're a Special One, you can turn her back to the Blue Lady, an' then she'll protect you. An' that's where Ah don't get it, Jeanette," Hosea said sadly. "Why'd she go to the bad in the first place?"

:Oh, Hosea—:Suddenly Jeanette sounded just as sad as Hosea felt—with none of her usual cynical sarcasm.:Oh, Hosea. That's what they were talking about just now. She hates children, because hers was murdered. She hates God because He allowed it. The Secret Stories say that once, when people were still good to each other, when there were no wars and no fighting and no drugs, she was able to be good, but when things got awful and her own child was killed, she lost it and became Bloody Mary.:Jeanette sighed.:Now the only way to turn her back is either to be a Special One and turn her for a little time, or to learn her Secret Name and remind her of what she was.:

"Only nobody remembers what it was," Hosea said.

:No,:Jeanette agreed.:Nobody remembers her Secret Name.:

\* \* \*

It was a long, depressing walk back in the grey dusk, with a faint icy mizzle spitting down out of the sky, and for the first time since he'd come to live at Guardian House, Hosea did not feel his spirits lift when he was inside his own door again. The apartment seemed empty, and conversely, too full of memories of Jimmie.

How, *how* was he to turn so sad a tale around? The misery that had created it had so little hope in it—too little to build on, it seemed. The only "hope" the children seemed to have was for the Special Ones, and even they could only turn Bloody Mary for a few moments. This was too much for him—

Maybe he was more sensitive than usual, but when he heard footsteps in the hall, he knew that it was Kayla, and he knew that whatever she had to say was not going to help the despair that was settling over him. Hosea opened the door at Kayla's knock.

"Come on upstairs," she said. "We've got news, and most of it's bad."

\* \* \*

When Kayla got back upstairs with Hosea, Greystone was there, since it had gotten dark enough for the gargoyle to abandon his perch atop Guardian House without being missed. Kayla realized that he and the other two had already met. They were trading small talk that sounded strained. Everyone kept sliding around the subject of Eric, to the point where there was a great, big Eric-shaped hole in the middle of the conversation.

It seemed a relief to have the newcomer among them. For a few moments, anyway.

"Kory, Beth, this is Hosea Songmaker, Eric's apprentice," Kayla said. "C'mon, Too-Tall. Let's get the grub dished up."

\* \* \*

None of them really felt like eating—except maybe Greystone, to whom food was an endless novelty—but Kayla chivied the others into it while she filled Hosea in on the events of the day. Even when the mind and heart rebelled, the body still wanted fuel. *Gotta feed the beast*, Kayla reminded herself, filling a bowl with rice and steamed vegetables, and balancing a selection of *dim sum* on top. Anita had brought enough to feed at least six people, which was just as well. There wasn't much in Eric's fridge, and Kayla didn't really feel like shopping. Even with feeding Greystone, there'd be enough leftovers to take care of breakfast.

"You're right lucky you found him when you did, and got him on the insurance," Hosea said, when the three of them had finished bringing him up to date. "'Spect they were fixin' to shut down the machines an' all, an' from what Little Bit here says, that wouldn't be the best thing just now."

Beth stared at him in horror. "You mean, just . . . turn him off?"

"If they couldn't turn up any next of kin, and he didn't look like waking up," Hosea said, "that'd surely be on their minds. Nobody wants to be cruel, but there's only so much money for charity, Ah'm findin' out, and a bed in a big city hospital costs a lot of money, and seems like there aren't ever enough of 'em to go 'round."

"But they can't," Beth protested. "They couldn't."

"Hey, Red," Greystone said reassuringly. "Nobody said it was gonna happen. Right, Hosea?"

"That's right," Hosea said. "Ah just mean to scare you a little, Miz Kentraine, on account of Ah suspect that's what they mean to do tomorrow, if Eric's as bad off as Kayla says. But you just let Miz Llewellyn's folks do all the talkin' there, and don't you pay no mind to what those doctors have to say. Little Bit an' me, we'll find Eric, no matter how long it takes. Ah promise you that. We'll bring him back to you. You can rest your mind easy on that."

Hosea might not be a fully trained Bard as yet, Kayla thought, but nobody could beat his bedside manner. By the end of the evening, Beth had actually relaxed a little and lost some of her haunted look.

"Ah suspect, too, it might be a good thing for you folks to go on back to Underhill after that meetin' tomorrow as well," Hosea said. "Kory here, he isn't going to be any too comfortable if he spends very long around here, is he?"

"I can stay as long as needful," Kory said firmly, but the guilty look that crossed Beth's face was all the answer to that either Kayla or Hosea needed.

"But neither one o' you wants to be around if people come askin' awkward questions," Hosea pointed out. "Specially if that fancy lawyer can't manage things with the police the way he says he can. You aren't any farther away than e-mail, and if you want to give me your address, Ah can write you myself on Eric's computer. And you can come back every few days. But your baby's going to be missing you."

"He's right," Kory said reluctantly, after a long hesitation.

"I guess . . . I just hate to leave without knowing. But Maeve . . . would you like to see a picture of her?" Beth asked hopefully.

Hosea smiled. "Ah was hopin' you'd offer."

"Me, too," Greystone chimed in.

They all crowded around as Beth dug into her purse and withdrew a small crystal oval. "Not exactly a photograph, but it's what they use Underhill. Here. Look."

She held it up. Captured in the crystal was the image of a golden-haired toddler about a year old, standing in a meadow. She wore a short green gown trimmed in sparkling embroidery, and a little cap trimmed with a rosette of ribbons that fluttered in an unseen breeze.

The picture was moving.

"Hey . . ." Kayla said, fascinated. As she watched, the child's attention was captured by something she couldn't see. Then an enormous butterfly with spectacular purple and turquoise wings floated into view, hovering just above her head. She grabbed for it, then sat down abruptly, off-balance, looking very surprised. The butterfly circled, and came to perch on her cap.

Beth turned the crystal over. The same meadow, but obviously a different day. Maeve again, this time dressed in riding clothes, being led around in a circle on the back of a tiny perfect elvensteed; a full-sized horse in perfect miniature. A tall, red-haired woman in armor was walking close beside her to make sure she didn't fall. Kory held the 'steed's lead.

"There's a couple of dozen in here," Beth warned. "Are you sure you want to see them all?"

"Of course we do," Hosea said, speaking for all of them. "She's beautiful."

"As soon as Eric's back, you gotta bring her around for a visit," Greystone said. "I gotta get my chance to babysit again."

Beth laughed. "You'll have to fight Lady Montraille for that honor. She never lets Maeve out of her sight!"

After all the pictures had been seen, it was time for Kayla and Hosea to go, though Greystone promised to stay and keep Kory company for a while longer, since neither one needed sleep as mortals did.

\* \* \*

"Do you really think getting Eric back's going to be as easy as you told Bethie it is?" Kayla asked Hosea. He'd insisted on walking her all the way down to her door.

"Not easy," Hosea said, meeting her gaze unflinchingly. "But possible, no matter what's happened to him. Eric won't give up, and neither will we. And he's got a lot to come back for."

"Magnus," Kayla said, not needing to say more.

"Ayah. Ah don't say he took the best road there, but he took the road he took. Now you go get yourself a good night's sleep, and get ready to face those doctors in the morning."

"Oh God," Kayla sighed. "Sooner or later they're going to find out I'm not his sister."

Hosea grinned wolfishly. "Well, Little Bit, Ah'd say that by the time they do, Miz Llewellyn's money and lawyers will have made it so they won't care one bit."

\* \* \*

Deep night was the best time for sorcery. At night the unawakened hive-mind that was New York was as close to somnolent as possible, and the Etheric Currents could be more easily manipulated.

Or whatever.

The man known to his followers as Fafnir, Master of Treasure, entered his apartment, closing the door behind him. As he did, he sloughed off his mundane persona and its worldly concerns as easily as a snake shed its outgrown skin. The mundane world and its tedious concerns was something he wasn't going to have to worry about much longer.

He went into the bedroom—it had a key lock; it wouldn't do for any of the sheep to wander in there accidentally and see something that would jar their preconceptions of who "Master Fafnir" was—and stowed away his briefcase and work clothes, taking care to cover them carefully in plastic bags as he did. Even this room smelled faintly of the frankincense he burned so profligately.

Changing into one of his Fafnir outfits—it was a role he lived every moment he could, as befit one that he intended to assume permanently—he went back to the living room again. There was important work to do before dawn and the city's awakening made it impossible.

He lit several of the candles and one of the braziers. Most of what he did was to set the stage for the sheep, but not all. The unconscious mind was a kind of idiot child as well: it required props and staging to be coaxed to perform properly. The trained will could only do so much.

Now they would see what Amanda and the Circle between them had managed to do.

He went into the kitchen to pour himself a snifter of Calvados before beginning—a gift from Neil; very nice. Returning to the living room—the frankincense was smoking nicely—he pulled over a small table and then went to get the crystal.

Setting the box on the table, he opened the lid. The "Eye of the Inner Planes" glowed with the luminescence of fine mineral quartz, and Fafnir smiled. Nothing more occult here than the power of money. Anything would serve—a mirror, a bowl of water, even a ball of ordinary glass—but why not use what his obliging sheep had provided? It was merely a place to rest the outer eyes while the inner eye did its work, after all.

He'd laid the groundwork in all those sessions with little Amanda, not only rendering her malleable and compliant, but preparing the shape and the intent of the Artificial Elemental to which his sheep had lent—and would continue to lend—the power of their credulousness. They hadn't the wit to know the difference between creating something and summoning something already created, and Fafnir had no intention of enlightening them.

It had been done before. It was, in fact, just about the simplest magical operation to perform. There was even a book about it, written back in the seventies, called *Conjuring Up Philip*, by someone named Iris

Owen. That was where he'd gotten part of his original idea. Only his creature would be far more powerful than a simple table-knocking, Ouija-board-communicating spirit.

His would be lethal. And answerable only to him.

The others thought it was a Protector, a magical watchdog that would protect them from the False Guardians.

Wrong.

He concentrated on the crystal, letting his mind empty except for the single image. It had come to him when he'd first started working with Amanda, and it was as good as any other. . . .

A gaunt woman, tall, terrifying, her mouth open in a soundless scream of anguish. Pale blue draperies fluttered from her limbs, and she glowed with a spectral light. From eyeless sockets she wept endless black tears. . . .

There was a flicker of blue light in the crystal, and Fafnir drew back with a gasp. The room had suddenly grown cold. He drew a deep breath, rubbing his arms nervously.

Yeah, that should work.

He closed the box, rubbing his eyes. There hadn't been anything there, of course. A trick of the light. But if it worked on *him*, the sheep should be terrified.

Soon he'd call the Inner and Outer Circles together to—or so he'd tell them—make them all known to the Protector for purposes of their protection. That was when he'd call it up to attack them. His creation. Under his control. And he was immune to whatever it would do, of course.

He'd tell them that what happened next was a preemptive strike from the False Guardians. They wouldn't know the difference. He'd chosen them all very carefully: none of them knew enough about magic to challenge him. And they certainly wouldn't doubt anything he told them after his toxic thought-form ripped through the place. It might even kill a few of them, which would make it stronger yet. And then they'd be terrified, willing to do *anything* he said.

Then all he had to do was actually locate one of the Guardians. It shouldn't be all that hard. His sheep had friends in high places, there were very few things secret from a computer, and any reluctance they had to break the law should be gone once his creation had done a little damage. Then he'd find Paul Kern again—the right Paul Kern, the one who'd been a computer consultant at Andrew Reaney's firm about ten years ago.

And then he'd become a Guardian. And have *real* power.

He frowned. Maybe it would be a better idea to hold the meeting at Neil's. He wasn't sure how destructive that thing was going to be, and he had no desire to have *his* apartment trashed.

He took another deep breath, shaking off the last of his unease. Yes. Things were proceeding just as they ought.

\* \* \*

At 2:30 the next day, Kayla sat in a hospital conference room with Kory and Beth on one side of her and Anita and Derek Tilford, the LlewellynCo lawyer, on the other and listened to Dr. Rodriguez—who'd brought a lawyer along with him as well, it turned out—explain how it was really unlikely that Eric was ever going to wake up again.

The doctor used a lot of words like "massive cranial trauma" and "intercranial haemorrhagia" and "deep tissue bruising" and "no evidence of EEG activity," but it all boiled down to—bottom line—in the hospital's opinion, Eric was a vegetable, and if he hadn't woken up in the last three days, they didn't think he was going to wake up any time soon. Like ever.

And there were Decisions to be made—the way he said it, you could hear the capital "D" very clearly. And just who was going to make them?

Derek Tilford coughed gently. "Actually," he said, self-deprecatingly, "Ms. Llewellyn holds a power of attorney on Mr. Banyon's behalf to be exercised in just such cases. I have a copy of it here to add to the hospital files. I'm sure you'll find it all in order."

He passed the paper across the table.

*Even if the ink ain't quite dry on it yet,* Kayla thought. And who knew? It might be the real deal. Ria and Eric were tight, and there wasn't anybody else in the World Above who could stand up for Eric in a case like this.

"Ms. Llewellyn wishes every effort to be made to restore Mr. Banyon to full health," Anita said firmly. "In fact, in the case of the necessity of long-term care, she'd prefer to transfer Mr. Banyon to a private facility of her own choosing. Perhaps you could tell us when that might be possible?"

"Not for at least a week," Dr. Rodriguez said, on firmer ground now. "Leaving aside the injuries to his head and spine, we've already had to operate once to control internal bleeding. I'd prefer to wait."

"So he could still wake up?" Beth said, her voice tight with hope. She'd kept quiet through most of the discussion of Eric's condition, but could contain herself no longer.

"We can always pray for a miracle, Ms. Connor," Dr. Rodriguez said, getting to his feet. "But I don't want to raise any false hopes. In my opinion, that's what it will take."

\* \* \*

Hosea was waiting for them outside of Eric's new room.

"He isn't a pretty sight," he warned Beth as she put her hand on the door. "And he won't know you're there."

"I want to see him," Beth said stubbornly. Hosea stepped back. Beth and Kory went in. Kayla stayed with Hosea. She'd already seen Eric. And she didn't want to be anywhere near Beth when she did.

"How'd it go?" Hosea asked, once the two of them were alone.

"'Bout like you said. Hospital was setting us up to pull the plug, but it turned out Ria's got a power of attorney from Eric—fancy that—and LlewellynCo wants to keep him plugged in. So now it's up to us." She hugged herself and shivered. "Anita said that Ria wants to move him to a private clinic, but the doctor

doesn't want to move him until he's better . . . and I can't even start in on making him better until we can *find* him and put him all back in one piece."

"Which means we do it here," Hosea said. "It'll be a thought awkward figuring out how to work around those private nurses of Miz Llewellyn's, though."

"Damn," Kayla muttered. "Can't your Guardian friends do something about that?"

Hosea smiled faintly, considering the matter. "Ah expect they can at that."

A few minutes later, Beth and Kory left the hospital room. Beth was weeping, and Kory looked stricken.

"You'll help him, right?" Beth said fiercely. "He's going to be all right?"

"Ah promise you, we'll do everything there is to do," Hosea assured her firmly.

"Then fare you well, Bard," Kory said. "And Danu's fortune attend your work."

\* \* \*

Late that same night, Hosea, Kayla, and Paul Kern returned to the hospital. No one saw them enter the building, or ascend to the wing that held the private rooms.

The three of them stood in the hallway and watched as Eric's private nurse—a no-nonsense woman in her fifties—left the room and walked down the hall.

"She won't remember leaving," Paul said quietly. "I can keep her out as long as you need me to."

The three of them went into the room.

Paul locked the door as soon as they were inside; with Greystone's help, his spell would keep nearly everyone from seeing or hearing anything that went on in here, but there was a tiny percentage of the population that was completely impervious to magic, and there was no point in taking chances.

Hosea set down his banjo case and opened it.

"You're not going to play that thing, are you?" Kayla asked, alarmed.

"Won't know till we come to it," Hosea answered mildly. He slung the strap over his shoulder and began to tighten the strings.

Kayla went over to the bed. Eric lay unmoving beneath the sheet and blanket, just as she had seen him before. It might be her imagination, but the sense of *absence* was nearly palpable.

"I'm just going to do a quick check," Kayla said. "Elizabet said not to Heal him before we got his mind to come back, but I want to make sure there ain't something goin' wrong in there that the doctors maybe missed."

"You need an anchor for that?" Hosea asked.

"Nah," Kayla said, taking a deep breath. "It's just physical stuff. Easy-peasy." *Yeah, right.*

She stuffed her winter gloves into her pocket and reached out and laid her fingers, very gently, against the side of Eric's face.

The hospital room fell away.

She raced through his body. Torn muscles; flesh cut by the surgeon's knife; the hard alien presence of surgical sutures; bruises and broken bones . . . she felt the power well up within her, wanting to reach out, to begin the work of Healing, and held it back with an effort. Not now. Not yet.

Even through the drugs coursing through his bloodstream, she felt the pain. With an effort, she blocked it out, searching further, memorizing the damage so that she could ignore it later. All this, terrible as it was, would heal on its own in some way or another, given time. There was nothing here that was immediately life-threatening. The surgeons had done good work.

With an effort, she lifted her hand away, leaving her work undone.

"Fascinating," Paul said, watching her.

*Yeah, I'm just a dream walking.*

"There's nothing here that can't wait," Kayla said aloud, taking a deep breath.

"Then let's go," Hosea said, reaching out his hand.

Kayla took it, and reached out to Eric once more.

This time she forced herself to close her Healer's senses to the song of pain and damage that his body sang, isolating it and shunting it aside. She was seeking something else. She was seeking Eric himself.

As before, when she had sought Jimmie's consciousness in the Guardian's charred and ruined body, she found herself in a house.

It wasn't real. It was a construct, a symbol, a kind of fantasy that allowed her to do her work, the way she sometimes saw the bodies she worked on as machines, or video games, or even songs. She didn't waste her time trying to see the truth behind the symbol. That was pointless. It was okay for her to see a house. All she had to do was hunt through the place until she found Eric.

*Simple. Not.*

The place she found herself in wasn't Eric's apartment—or rather, only part of it was. This place had a lot more rooms, all of them dark. She summoned up a flashlight and used it to light her way.

"Eric?" she called. "Eric? It's Kayla."

No answer. And worse, no sense that there was anyone here listening.

She passed from a room that looked more or less like Eric's living room at Guardian House, down a long corridor lined with doors, all shut. Conscientiously, she opened every one and looked inside, stopping at intervals to call Eric's name and identify herself, and always receiving the same sense of



*absence* in response.

Some of the rooms looked as if they were long-deserted, cluttered with ancient junk. Some looked as if they'd been used, at least until recently. Some of the rooms had more doors leading off them, and there might be closets as well. She hesitated, considering searching them. *Try the main rooms first*, Kayla told herself. *You can come back here later if they don't pan out.*

It took her quite some time to finish checking the main rooms of Eric's mind, though she knew her subjective sense of time was no indication of how long had passed in the outside world. No matter how many rooms she passed through, and how fantastic their contents, all of them were dark and empty. Deserted.

At last she found herself standing before a gate—all lacy wrought silver, with touches of gold. It wasn't locked. She pushed it open and went inside.

The room beyond was huge, giving the faint impression of a cathedral, though, looking around, Kayla couldn't quite say what it was that gave her that notion. The chamber was round, the arching ceiling a fantasy of interlocking vaults. When she shone her flashlight up there, the roof sparkled.

She shone the light on the floor beneath her feet, and discovered it was a mosaic, each tile no larger than her smallest fingernail. The pattern was something elaborate and geometric in blues and greens, as detailed as the finest Persian rug. All around the edges of the room was a young forest of miniature flowering trees, every one in bloom, each in an elaborately painted pot that echoed the colors of the floor.

In the center of the room was a fountain.

*This isn't like anything I've ever seen*, Kayla thought, puzzled. But the images she saw when she Healed could come solely from her subject's mind as well. She wondered if there was something in Underhill that looked like this.

She also wondered what the room was *for*. Every "room" in a subject's mind was keyed to a talent or memory. She looked at the fountain again. Wasn't water supposed to have something to do with creativity, at least according to some symbol systems?

She walked over to it.

The fountain towered twenty feet in the air, and covered a good portion of the floor. From what she could tell, it was one of those things that ought to be spitting out jets of water in all directions, and possibly even play tunes—water harps, they were called.

But the water in the basin lay still and unmoving, and the fountain was silent.

*If this is the symbol of Eric's creativity, we are seriously screwed.*

She hesitated for a moment, then passed on to the small doorway on the far side. It was barely wide enough for her to get through, but no gate blocked it. It led down a steep flight of stone steps.

*Going down. Sub-basement, collective unconscious, repressed memories, childhood traumas, right this way . . .*

The stairs were steep and slippery; not a place Eric visited in his own mind very often, if she had to guess. But—if she was right about what the fountain room symbolized—a place intimately connected to his creativity.

Have I mentioned lately how much I really hate pop psych?

At last she reached the bottom. Wherever she was, whatever this place was to Eric, it looked to Kayla like the basement of a very old building. It was walled off in places by hastily built brick walls, now dusty and crumbling with age. Some of them had been torn down. Others had holes knocked in them. Some still stood firm. She felt a faint flicker of hope. He could be down here, behind one of those walls, and that might be why she'd been unable to sense him.

*Oh, please, let that be it.*

"Eric?" Kayla said aloud. "Eric, it's Kayla. Are you here?"

Nothing.

"Eric, it's Kayla," she said again. "We need you to come back to us. You've been hurt, and I know you're confused, but you can't stay here. You need to come back."

She didn't know if he heard her. Hell, she didn't even know if he was here. *She* didn't want to be here: it felt too much like trespassing, with all of the guilt and none of the thrill. She'd never been this deep in someone's mind before, not even Ria's. She shone the light around the walls, searching for something, anything, that would tell her where he was—or failing that, which way he'd gone.

A door.

There was a door in the back wall.

She knew it wasn't there, not really—neither the door nor the wall—but she saw them. She ran over to it, the light from her flashlight swooping crazily over the walls of the dark basement.

It was wood, old thick shabby splintery dusty wood, of the same vintage as the rest of the basement that wasn't really there. There was no handle, no way to open it. The only thing that was new was the padlock and hasp on it, gleaming brightly in the light of her flash, mocking her.

Kayla grabbed the lock and yanked. If she could tear it free, she could probably pry the door open.

No go. It was like trying to yank open the wall itself. The lock held firm.

As she stepped back, she stepped on something soft. She squawked and jumped, then turned her flashlight on it. Something dark blue and dusty . . . and familiar. She bent down and picked it up.

Eric's cap. The watch cap he'd been wearing that day up at The Place.

It was here. *He'd* been here, by this door. This was a clue, a sign that this was the right way. Only how was she supposed to get through the door?

Kayla blinked, straining to see the lock clearly, and suddenly she realized there was a reason she couldn't.

The light from her flashlight was dimming.

She concentrated, willing it to burn brighter.

And it didn't.

### Chapter Thirteen: Over The Waterfall

There was a jarring moment of discontinuity, then she was back in the hospital room again, staggering back against Hosea.

"Whuh . . . what?" Kayla gasped. She coughed, and took a deep breath, realizing she hadn't been breathing for a little too long. Nausea made her shudder.

"Come over here and sit down," Hosea said firmly. He led Kayla over to a chair and pushed her into it, then reached into his backpack and took out a bottle of apple juice. "And drink this."

Kayla gulped down the apple juice thirstily. Being jarred out of a Healer's trance was no fun, but she suspected the alternative would have been worse. "What happened?" she asked hoarsely, handing the empty bottle back to Hosea.

"Not much from where Ah stood, until you stopped breathing," he said soberly. "Right then Ah figured it was time for you to come on home. Ah called to you, an' you didn't answer me, so Ah yanked you loose. Ah'm sorry if Ah hurt you some, but you weren't lookin' any too good."

"I'm glad you did," Kayla said honestly. "I think I went a little too far. But it still wasn't far enough."

She explained where she'd been, and what she'd found.

"So I think that Eric's somewhere on the other side of that door. But I don't know what the door means, or where it goes. And from what you say, trying to find out nearly killed me."

"Hmn." Hosea made a noncommittal sound. His fingers moved over the strings of the banjo, raising faint echoes of melody. He cocked his head, as if listening. After a moment, he raised his head.

"Jeanette says you should let her try," Hosea reported. "She says she's dead already, so going down there won't hurt her none."

"Let her try? How?" Kayla demanded.

"Let her go through you into Eric," Hosea answered. Absently, his fingers began picking out a soft counterpoint on the banjo's silver strings.

"Can she do that?" Kayla asked dubiously.

"There are records of ghosts temporarily possessing the living. I suppose this situation would be

analogous," Paul said, speaking up from his position by the door for the first time.

Kayla grimaced. She didn't like the idea of just letting a ghost walk into her, much less the semi-reformed ghost of Jeanette Campbell.

But what choice did they have? She could try getting through that door again herself—and fail, get hurt, or possibly do serious damage to Eric. If Jeanette failed, they probably wouldn't be any worse off than they were now.

"I guess it's worth a try," she said reluctantly.

Hosea smiled just a little. "Jeanette ain't any more eager to do this than you are, if it makes you feel any better," he said.

"Not a lot," Kayla admitted. "What do I have to do?"

"Let down your shields and give her a link to Eric," Hosea said. "Show her where you went. But . . ." Hosea hesitated, "you'll need to keep the link tight, whatever happens. If it breaks while Jeanette's all stretched out like that, Ah don't know what'll happen to her. Or to Eric, for that matter. Nothin' good, seems to me."

Kayla thought about it. It was a risk. But it was a risk either way. They couldn't just *leave* Eric like that.

Sure, there were other things they could try. They could wait for Ria to get back, maybe have her cast a spell to yank Eric back from wherever he was. Or Paul might be able to do it.

But either of them would be working blind. And Kayla wasn't sure it would be a really good idea just to yank Eric out of wherever he was, without seeing just where that was. They might do even more damage that way.

Sending Jeanette in might be the best thing. At least Kayla could see what she was doing. And she wanted to make up for her past, so it wasn't as if she couldn't be trusted to do her best.

"I can handle it, Too-Tall. You just concentrate on your ghost-wrangling. Well, here goes . . . something," Kayla muttered, taking a deep breath and getting to her feet again. "But if this doesn't work, I'm taking up tatting."

She resumed her position at the head of the bed, taking Hosea's hand again. His free hand, she noticed, he kept firmly pressed over the banjo's strings.

She touched Eric's forehead again. There was a spark of contact, but she waited, not letting it pull her down inside this time.

And then *cold*. Colder than anything she'd imagined. She felt cold flow through Hosea and into her; through her, and into Eric.

*Don't break the link. If you do, they're both toast.*

But all her instincts screamed at her to let go, not to follow them down into death; Elizabet had warned her. . . .

And then she was there.

"Well, come on, where do I go?" an irritable voice said from behind her.

Kayla turned around. She was back in the darkened apartment again, inside what was currently passing for Eric's consciousness.

And there was Jeanette.

The only time Kayla had seen Jeanette Campbell alive, her body had been completely reshaped by Aerune mac Audelaine's sorcery into that of a half-Elven sprite; his hellhound. She'd seen Jeanette once after she'd died, but that had been in Aerune's dreamworld, and the connection hadn't been really good. There Jeanette had been mostly a blur, her image flipping back and forth between her hellhound form and what she'd really looked like in life.

This, Kayla guessed, was Jeanette as she really had been: a moon-faced woman in boots, jeans, and a biker jacket, her long light-brown hair pulled back in a ponytail.

"Get with the program, would you?" Jeanette said impatiently.

"Come on," Kayla answered, hefting her flashlight.

\* \* \*

"Down those steps. There's a door at the back. It's locked. I think he's somewhere on the other side, if you can get through."

"Nothing to worry about there, kid. I brought the key along." Jeanette patted her pocket.

Kayla didn't ask what she had in there. She had a feeling she'd rather not know. "Do you, uh, want to take the flashlight?"

Jeanette looked surprised that she'd asked. "Don't need it. Every place looks the same to me now."

She went through the smaller door and disappeared.

Kayla stared at the doorway, although she was pretty sure it wasn't going to do anything interesting. *What do I do now?*

*And how long do I wait?*

\* \* \*

This was the best year the Faire had ever had. The weather had cooperated—not too hot, not too cold—and the travelers had been generous; he'd made enough to buy a new shirt and a pair of those fancy custom boots he'd had his eye on for as long as he could remember. There were good parties every night, and he never, ever, had a hangover.

Eric was having a great time.

Sometimes he wondered if there was something he was forgetting. In the moments before he was quite

awake some mornings, he was *sure* there was. But he could never quite remember what it was—and now that he'd moved into Karen's big tent, there weren't a lot of mornings that he got to spend time in quiet reflection. Karen was definitely a morning person. Eric was not.

On the other hand, there were advantages. Coffee. Breakfast. Not missing Morning Parade. And those were just the G-rated ones. . . .

But . . .

Had the Faire always used to go on all week? He couldn't remember going back to the mundane world once since he'd gotten here.

It was hard to think about something so irrelevant during the day, and the evening parties had their own logic, but Eric had finally remembered to ask Karen about it one evening, when they were gathered around the fire with some of the Wild Northern Celts and the rest of the German Mercenary Wenches.

"Hey, Ian!" she'd shouted. "Eric wants to go back to Mundania!"

"What would he want to do that for? We come here to get away from there!" Ian had shouted back merrily.

"Faire isn't good enough for you, Banyon?" someone else had called amiably out of the darkness.

Someone played a mocking trill on a pennywhistle. There was a ruffle of a bodhran; whoever had it actually managed something that sounded perilously close to a rim shot. There were cheers and scattered applause.

The wench on Eric's other side—a brawny lady named Hulda—had elbowed him robustly in the ribs, nearly making him spill his tankard of mead. "If you're bored, Banyon, we can think up a few more distractions for you. . . ."

He'd never really gotten an answer. But he guessed it didn't matter. The Faire was the Faire, and how it ran was Admin's business, not his.

It wasn't like there was any other place else he was supposed to be, after all.

And the weather was good.

The perfect Faire.

The perfect summer.

\* \* \*

*So this is what's behind the door.*

Jeanette pulled it open—it wasn't locked, no matter what Kayla had said—and stared.

On the other side was . . . summer.

Summer, and . . . a parking lot? An open field, actually, though the cars were parked in neat rows,

hundreds of cars. Jeanette noted, even though some of them were obviously new, none of them were recent models.

I can see—and feel !

Everything was *real* again, as real as it had been when she was alive. Jeanette stepped through the doorway, taking a deep breath. She could smell summer and dust, and hear wind, birdsongs, and distant traffic. When she looked down, she could see herself—and feel her leather jacket beneath her hands.

It was like being reborn.

The world was in color again, a thing of shape and depth, experienced through her own senses, not in stolen glimpses through Hosea's eyes and thoughts.

If she had this much reality here, no wonder the kid had nearly died. Any place that was good for ghosts couldn't be good for the living.

She took a moment just to *feel* the sensation of sun on her face—why didn't people appreciate things like this before it was too late? To be able to feel her lungs fill when she took a breath, to be able to feel the wind pass over her face, to be able to feel the warmth of the sun; the living could experience those things every day of their lives, and they didn't care. . . .

But she had work to do. And no matter how real this felt, it wasn't. It was somewhere between a dream and an illusion; either way, it was bad news for somebody.

It would have been easy to get sucked in, if she hadn't been what she was and—even more—*who* she was. If she hadn't gotten every dream she'd ever had twisted and used against her by a mad Sidhe Prince. After Aerune, no pretty little paradise was ever going to suck her in, because her experience told her that no matter what she saw, there was *always* going to be something nasty lurking under the surface.

Maybe that was why the Secret Stories hit her right in the gut she didn't have anymore. No matter how rotten her life had gotten—a lot of which was her own fault, she could see now—at least she'd been able to keep some of her secret dreams intact almost to the end. Those kids Hosea worked with had gotten *their* shattered before they got two digits in their ages.

Jeanette walked on, into the open field, looking around curiously. There were people driving up and getting out of cars, and walking toward a destination in the distance. She could hear faint scraps of music on the air, something sort of medieval. All the signs for the parking were done in antique script as well. There were bigger signs in the distance, welcoming visitors to the Southern California Renaissance Faire.

*Very bizarre.*

A gleam of sunlight on chrome off to one side caught her attention. There was a big cream and maroon Harley touring bike parked under one of the few trees here in the field. It looked oddly familiar. She walked over to admire it.

The word "Mystery" was written on the gas tank in flowing gold script.

*That's my bike!*

"What the hell are you doing here?" Jeanette said aloud. The Harley had been her pet, her one

self-indulgence when she'd gone to work for Threshold and there'd been good legal money coming in for the first time. She'd lost it somewhere in Flyover, West Virginia, when Elkanah had kidnapped her, and never known what had happened to it. Stolen by someone, undoubtedly.

So what was Mystery doing here? This wasn't *her* fantasy world.

She automatically groped in her jacket pocket, not surprised to find that she had the keys.

If she just took her bike and rode away, where would she get to?

Was it any place she wanted to be?

She looked toward the gates of the Faire, then back at her bike. But she was supposed to be looking for Eric Banyon, and if Eric was anywhere, he was probably in there.

And it might seem like paradise—someone's paradise, anyway—but there was probably a nasty surprise waiting somewhere around here the moment she let her guard down.

She sighed, and turned away from Mystery. Maybe she'd see her best girl again in Heaven, in the unlikely event she ever qualified for that particular destination.

Hunching her shoulders, she strode toward the gate.

\* \* \*

A Renaissance Faire, Jeanette quickly discovered, was a bizarre place full of annoying losers dressed in weird costumes who simply *lived* to make fun of people by talking like Shakespeare.

Full of people—where had they all come from? Most of them were tourists, and she didn't think Eric would be one of them. But there were a lot of people dressed in costumes. Some of them were wandering around playing instruments, or juggling, or giving impromptu puppet shows. Others were selling things in booths.

Unfortunately, she suspected that shooting them with the gun she discovered that she'd brought with her wouldn't help things along.

She hadn't thought she'd have *total* talk to people to find Eric. Jeanette hadn't had very good social skills while she was alive, and death really hadn't improved them. And finding herself in someplace that looked so . . . *real* . . .

Was this some kind of spell? An actual *place*, like Underhill? A disused part of Eric's mind? Did it, in fact, actually matter, so long as she found him and got him back out and up those stairs again before Kayla got bored standing around?

Probably not.

What would happen if the link with Kayla *did* get interrupted for any reason was something Jeanette preferred not to think about. Would she just vanish? Or would she be permanently stuck here in La La Land's version of Shakespeare in the Park?

No, that was too much to hope for. What happened would probably be whatever was most horrible.



Not that she didn't deserve it, she supposed, after what she'd done in life, but that didn't mean she was going to go racing toward her karma with open arms.

She wandered through the crowds, hoping to spot Eric. He had to be here somewhere, didn't he? Or why was she here?

Finally she spotted a booth that looked promising. It had a large sign over it that said Information—lost and found.

Well, Eric was lost. And she was trying to find him.

"I'm looking for a guy," she said, coming up to the booth.

"What's his name?" the woman behind the counter said. Despite the fact she was dressed like something you'd see on PBS, she seemed to be efficient enough.

"His name's Eric Banyon. I was supposed to meet him here," Jeanette said, stretching the truth only a little.

"Is he a traveler or a player?" the woman asked.

Jeanette stared at her. Riddles? Next she'll be asking me, "What has it got in its pocketses?"

The woman smiled. "Does he work at the Faire, or is he just visiting?"

"Oh." "I hate people. Even people who don't exist." "He's a player. He's got a flute."

"Oh, sure an' ye'll be meanin' O'Banyon the Irish Rogue! Friend of his?" For some reason the woman suddenly had a thick Irish accent, but to Jeanette's relief, she quickly dropped it.

"Kayla said he'd show me around the Faire," Jeanette said, unable to think of anything else to say but a version of the truth. Apparently this made sense to the bimbo in crushed velvet, because she pulled a sheet of paper out from somewhere Jeanette couldn't see, and made some marks on it, talking all the time.

"He's on the Main Stage right now, but the show's about over. You should be able to catch him when he comes off. Here's a map. I've marked the Main Stage. Good luck!" the woman said, smiling cheerfully.

She handed Jeanette a sheet of paper with a map of the Fairesite on it, with the Main Stage circled in yellow Magic Marker. Jeanette took it and walked off.

She found the Main Stage without much difficulty. The woman said there was a show, so Jeanette followed the map until she heard music, then followed the music.

The Main Stage was a raised platform with a curtained backdrop, facing enough benches to seat maybe seventy very friendly people. Up on the stage, what looked like a cross between the cast of *Robin Hood* and the cast of *Riverdance* with a few walk-ons from *Braveheart* thrown in were making an almighty Celtic racket. It was a lovely sound. Jeanette stopped, so enchanted by the music that she forgot for a moment to look for Eric.

*I miss the music most. Why couldn't Hosea play a guitar or something sensible instead of that*

*damned banjo?*

Then the sound of a flute soared up through the opening notes of "Banish Misfortune," and Eric Banyon stepped to the front of the stage.

Yes, that was him. He'd looked different the last time she'd actually been able to see him—and she'd been in too much pain, then, to really care—but that was definitely him. Younger, she thought. Longer hair. But him.

She stood and watched for a few minutes. She'd heard Eric play often, of course, whenever he played with Hosea, but this was different. Better. Sure, the costumes were dorky, but the music. . . .

Couldn't we just stay? Jeanette thought wistfully. What's out there that's so important, compared to the music?

But she knew they couldn't. It would be wrong. Eric was needed back in the Real World. She was here to bring him back. That was all.

Besides—

It occurred to her that if this was Banyon's dream, there was absolutely nothing keeping it from becoming his nightmare. And she'd be trapped here with him.

She blinked, as the thought settled into place with a sense of solid *rightness*. Yes. *That was* the nasty surprise just waiting to spring up out of the ground and bite her in the ass. And she did not want to see what Eric Banyon's worst nightmare could be like. She already knew he'd faced down a Dark elf-Prince as well as assorted unpleasant things and people associated with the Threshold Lab, and those were by no means the only horrors he'd dealt with, according to Hosea. So if his worst nightmare incorporated any of that—

No. She very definitely did not want to be trapped here when the pretty dream turned into a nightmare.

Going wasn't only right, it was necessary. And the journey had brought enough rewards.

*I got to see my bike again, and hear this. More than I deserve, I guess.*

*I know I haven't come anywhere near to paying what I owe. Not nearly. Hosea'd better plan on having kids to pass me on to. But when I do . . . will I know?*

There was no point in wondering about something that might never happen. What Hosea did wasn't all that safe. It was far more likely she—or more precisely, the banjo that held her—would be destroyed before she could complete her atonement.

*Or maybe we'll all get careless, the Healer kid'll blink, and it'll be over tonight.* She shrugged the thought aside irritably. Worrying about things you couldn't affect was a quick ticket to the boneyard, whatever that meant for someone like her.

When it seemed like the show was winding up, Jeanette started moving around the edge of the crowd, toward the back of the stage, where the performers would come out when the set was finished.

\* \* \*

It had been a good show—one of the best. The audience had been right with them, and everything had gone off without a hitch. Eric was feeling really good about everything, right up to the moment that the strange traveler walked up and called him by name.

"Eric."

He turned toward her. She was nobody he'd ever seen before, but it wasn't like he was exactly anonymous. He gave her his best bow and a charming smile.

"O'Banyon the Irish Rogue at your service, milady. And what is it that I can do for you this foigne Faire day?"

She stared at him as if she'd never heard anyone speak Faire cant before.

"I'm Jeanette Campbell. You don't recognize me. Kayla sent me."

Now it was Eric's turn to stare.

She frowned, clearly annoyed. He couldn't imagine why. "Don't give me that doe-eyed gaze! You've got to remember them! Kayla, and Hosea, and all those other people you left hanging back in New York—"

That was all Eric needed to hear. "New York" meant only one thing to him. Juilliard. His parents. The people who wanted to drag him back to a life he'd sworn he was never going to have anything to do with ever again.

He pushed through the crowd of players around him and took off running.

\* \* \*

After a stunned instant Jeanette followed. *What the hell—?* He'd gone pale as chalk the moment she'd mentioned New York. Damn, damn, damn. And she absolutely guaranteed he knew this dreamworld better than she did.

She was keeping him in sight—just barely—as he fled up the hill and toward what her map told her was the edge of the Faire. In a tiny part of her mind, she wondered if she could corner him, or if they'd both run forever.

"Where do you think *you're* going?"

A woman dressed in furs and armor stepped out of a would-be tavern right into Jeanette's path. Jeanette tried to dodge around her, but the woman grabbed her by the arm, dragging her to a stop.

Jeanette kicked out expertly—not that engineer boots could do much against iron shin protectors—but the damage had been done. Eric had gotten away, and two more Babes in Armor had shown up. All three of them looked like they ate weights for breakfast, not just lifted them.

"I need to talk to Eric," she said sullenly.

The first woman grinned nastily, not letting go. "Well, if it was Eric I just saw lightfooting by, I'd say Eric doesn't want to talk to *you*, Traveler."

"And you make all his decisions for him, do you, Big Chunk?" Jeanette snarled. "He's needed back in New York. I was sent to tell him so."

"And who could *possibly* need Eric in New York?" the woman sneered. "You?"

"I want to talk to Eric," Jeanette repeated, with what passed, in her, for patience. "It's important. Eric will agree that it's important. I came a long way to talk to him, and if I don't get to talk to him, people are going to die who shouldn't have to die, okay? People who are sitting in a hospital in New York right now."

"Oh, wow," said one of the other Babes, "you mean you want to talk to him about, like, donating a kidney or something? My cousin donated a kidney last year. But he might not be a good match."

"I need to talk to him," Jeanette repeated, wondering if this might be Hell already, instead of Heaven. "I've come a long way to talk to him. Now we can do this the easy way, or I can go and find whoever's running this insane asylum and rope them in. Your call."

"Come inside then," the woman who'd originally grabbed her said, letting go reluctantly. "Someone will go look for him. And no funny stuff."

*Funnier than sending a dead drug dealer to go looking for the soul of a Bard in a coma? Hard to beat that.*

But Jeanette allowed herself to be led into the back of the tavern, and sat down at one of the benches. Jeanette waited nervously. How long could she spend here? What if she couldn't manage to convince Eric to be reasonable?

Finally, an idea occurred to her, straight out of one of those old *Twilight Zoner* reruns she'd used to watch. But it was the only thing that occurred to her. She had to break through, get him out of this reality and into the—ah—"real" reality. He didn't want to go, and she guessed she could see why—but maybe if she could lead him back to the door she'd come through—if it was still there, and visible—it would jolt him enough to make his memories come back.

Eventually Eric arrived, flanked by two guys in kilts. He looked as wary as someone arriving at his own execution. He scanned the room until he saw the Babe, and came over and hugged her.

"Thanks, Karen," he said. He looked at Jeanette, his expression hostile.

"She says she just wants to talk to you," Babe Karen said.

"Privately?" Jeanette said.

"I guess," Eric said reluctantly. "Don't go too far, okay?"

"We could just throw her out," Karen said hopefully. "Accosting one of the players?"

Eric sighed, shaking his head. "They'd just send somebody else. Might as well get it over with."

He stood across the table from Jeanette, not bothering to sit down. "Well, go ahead."

Jeanette hesitated, but she'd played to tougher audiences while she was alive. "Nothing about this seems at all odd to you? And you don't remember Kayla, or Hosea, or Ria? Being a Bard? Your brother, Magnus?"

"I don't have a brother," Eric said. But he sounded doubtful, and he'd started, just a little, when she'd said Magnus's name.

"Okay, here's one: tell me your home address."

A stricken look crossed Eric's face, quickly masked. "Look, are we done here?"

She shook her head, and decided to give her crazy idea its best shot. "No. I could give you the whole explanation, but if none of those names mean anything to you, the explanation won't help either. But I know one thing: you really want me to go away and never have to see me again."

"You got that right," Eric said feelingly.

"Okay, here's the deal. You walk out of the Faire with me, across the parking lot. There will be a doorway. If it's there, you walk through it with me. You can bring anyone with you that you like as far as the doorway, but only you and I go through. Deal?" Jeanette said.

Eric had a strange expression on his face. "Um . . . Jeanette, right? There isn't a doorway out in the parking lot. And we're not supposed to leave the Faire during working hours."

She hardened her expression. "This is the deal, Eric. You want me to leave. Do this with me and I will. Look, down inside you know you aren't supposed to be here. You know there's something wrong. It won't hurt to go look. I can't wait until the Faire shuts down for the night. We don't have that long. And don't give me the official party line. You know they won't miss a couple of you for a half hour or so."

"Why should I trust you?" Eric demanded.

*What are you, deaf as well as paranoid?* "I'm not asking you to trust me," Jeanette pointed out in exasperation. "I'm asking you to walk across the parking lot with me and trust the evidence of your own eyes."

"And if the door isn't there?" Eric said cannily.

*Then I'm in big trouble.*

"Then I leave. You go back to the Faire. You'll never see me again." "Because if the door isn't still there, I'm going to take Mystery and ride as far as I can before whatever's going to happen catches up with me."

"And this . . . Kayla? How do I know she won't just show up next?" Eric asked.

Jeanette was losing the small amount of patience she'd started out with. Her voice was curt as she answered. "She sent me because she couldn't come. Stop wasting time. Do we take a walk?" *Or do I have to see if I have a hope in hell of getting you out of here at gunpoint?* It was something she didn't want to try. It would definitely put a hole in his reality—but it might be the kind of hole that would turn dream into nightmare.

"What the hell," Eric said, shrugging. He turned away and went over to talk to Karen for a moment. She

looked puzzled as he spoke, and kept glancing over at Jeanette, shaking her head vigorously.

Jeanette got to her feet. "Come on, Eric. You think I've got a van with the A-Team in it waiting for you outside the gate? Get real. If you see anything like that, run. We're just going for a walk. And I guarantee: whoever you think sent me, didn't."

"You do anything to hurt Eric, and I will break every bone in your body," Karen hissed, walking over to Jeanette and leaning in close.

"Fine," Jeanette said. Just try it, and we see how well guns work in the Faire. "Can we go now?"

\* \* \*

Karen and her two girlfriends went with Eric and Jeanette. All three of them were armed with knives, swords, and axes: Jeanette had no idea of how well they knew how to use any of those things, but she did know that all three women were bigger and stronger than she was, and their furs and armor would get in the way of some of her better bar-fight moves, and maybe even stop a bullet.

She really hoped it wouldn't come to that.

They didn't go out through the Main Gate. Eric said that would attract too much attention, and Jeanette supposed he cared about that, still thinking this place was real. He took them around through the Faire and then out through a side gate that led through what looked like a campground. There were tents in all shapes and sizes.

"This is where we stay when the Faire shuts down for the day," Eric said.

"You don't have to talk to her, Eric," Karen said edgily.

Jeanette looked around, wondering if all this ever had been real, some where-and-when. It actually looked like it might have been fun, she thought grudgingly.

They passed through the camping area and worked their way through the players' parking and out into the main parking lot.

"Where's this 'door' of yours?" Karen demanded. "I don't see it."

*Fine talk from a figment of somebody's imagination.*

"It's on the other side of the parking lot," Jeanette said, not slowing down. *I hope.*

She spared a longing glance for Mystery as they passed the bike again. *Maybe someday, girl.*

The door was right where she'd left it, an impossible hole in reality.

Eric stopped as soon as he saw it.

"Come on, Eric," Karen said nervously. "It's time to go back."

"There's the door, Eric," Jeanette said harshly. "Right where I said it would be. The door back to the real world. Where you have people who love you, and a brother who needs you. This is a fantasy. It isn't

real."

Eric took a hesitant step forward.

"*Eric!*" Karen wailed.

"Is this a dream, Karen?" Eric asked, turning to face her. "Is that why everything here is so perfect? Why the Faire never ends? Why the sun is never too hot, why it never rains, why the travelers never get drunk and ugly, and there's always a good take in the hat? Is this Neverland without Captain Hook? Am I a Lost Boy?"

"You're happy here," Karen said pleadingly, not answering him directly.

"It isn't real," Jeanette said. "You know it, down deep inside. Face the truth."

"*I am* happy here," Eric said slowly. "But—" his face twisted, and if it hadn't been so sad, it would have been funny. "But *it isn't* real. So I guess . . . I have to see what's on the other side of that door."

"*No*," Karen said, a pleading note in her voice.

Suddenly the air seemed charged, as if a storm was brewing, though the sun shone down pure and changeless.

"Don't make *me* get real, bitch," Jeanette said, stepping between Karen and Eric. She slipped her hand into her pocket, closing her fingers over the pistol. "Get going, Eric."

But suddenly Karen's face crumpled into tears, and she turned away. Her two friends put their arms around her, soothing and patting as they led her back toward the Faire.

When she was sure Karen was going to keep going, Jeanette turned back. Eric had walked away. He'd almost reached the door, and Jeanette didn't know what would happen if he went through it without her. She ran until she caught up with him.

"Tell me . . . what happened?" he asked, hesitating on the threshold of the open doorway. "What made me come here, I mean?"

His brown eyes were wide and troubled, searching her face for some hint of hope or reassurance.

Jeanette felt something twist inside her. He looked so vulnerable, so young and lost. No wonder Karen had wanted to keep him! She had to tell herself that this Eric wasn't real, any more than the Faire that she'd dragged him out of was real. He was a shadow of his true self, a shadow inhabiting a shadow world.

"You got mugged. You're in a coma. But you'll be okay. Through the door, up the stairs, and you're home," she said gruffly. *And you'll never be as happy again as you were here, I bet.*

And if they'd met in real life, someone like Eric would never have looked twice at someone like her.

"You're sure about this?" Eric said dubiously. "Because I don't—"

Losing the last of her patience—with herself and him—Jeanette shoved with all her strength, pushing him

through the door, and followed him through.

\* \* \*

Kayla's fingers were icy cold in his. Her face was white and drawn. Beads of sweat trickled down her face, and shudders of chill wracked her body, but she never moved. A faint halo of blue light, difficult to see in the fluorescent illumination of the hospital room, played over her fingers and Eric's face. Her breathing was deep and raspy, but at least she was still breathing, thank the Good Lord.

Hosea kept glancing from her face to the banks of machines monitoring Eric. One green line for heartbeat—a steady jagged pulse—another for brain activity, flat and ominous. The steady thump of the ventilator, breathing when Eric could not.

Suddenly Kayla began to cough and twitch, like a hound chasing rabbits in his sleep. Her fingers jerked and twitched in his grasp. At the same moment, Hosea felt a wave of freezing chill wash into him.

Jeanette was coming home.

The EEG monitor *peped* and began to mutter to itself, its display showing spiky patterns. At the same time, the blue glow in Kayla's hands expanded and brightened, covering Eric's entire body. Hosea felt the last of the cold pass from her fingers, through him, settling safely back into the banjo again.

"Kayla!" Hosea said sharply.

Kayla's eyes fluttered open. "Not . . . done," she said, in thick ragged tones. Her voice sounded slurred, and he wasn't entirely sure she knew where she was.

"Stop now," Hosea commanded firmly. "*Now.*"

"But—" Kayla sounded plaintive.

"Stop," Hosea repeated, putting all the authority he could muster into that one word.

Kayla lifted her hand from Eric. The azure glow around his body faded and died away. Her eyes rolled back in her head and her knees buckled. Hosea barely caught her in time.

He picked her up and deposited her in the chair, though—if truth were told—his own knees weren't as steady as he'd like. Gently he felt her wrist, scanning her face apprehensively. She was breathing normally and her pulse was strong. She'd just overextended herself, or so he hoped.

Once Kayla was settled in the chair, he ran his fingers over the strings of the banjo. "You okay, Sweetheart?"

*:Leave me alone!:* Jeanette snarled furiously.

Hosea smiled faintly and began detuning the banjo. By the time he had the instrument locked away safely in its case again, he felt better, and Kayla was sitting up.

"Don't you move, now," Hosea warned her. "You keeled over, and Ah don't want you doing it again."

"Hah," Kayla said a bit groggily. "Eric?"



"According to the medical equipment, Mr. Banyon is doing much better," Paul said, coming over to inspect the readouts. "Brain function is well within normal parameters."

"Then how come he ain't awake?" Kayla demanded, trying to get up.

Hosea pushed her back down into the chair without effort. He pointed over his shoulder at some of the bags dangling beside the bed. "Ah'd say that the mess o' painkillers they've stuck him with might have a little bit to do with that. Now you just rest here for a few minutes and have some more to drink. Then we're goin' home."

Kayla opened her mouth to argue. Hosea held up a finger.

"You're in no shape to finish Healin' him up tonight, and that's the plain and simple truth. And even if you did, it'd be sure to cause more'n a bit o' talk. They can explain away him comin' out of a coma to their satisfaction, but not broken bones that heal overnight."

"I guess," Kayla muttered sullenly.

"Now drink up," Hosea said, handing her another bottle of juice. "You're just tetchy from doing all that work."

\* \* \*

A few minutes later, Kayla felt strong enough to stand up, though she was pretty sure she wasn't going to feel really *warm* many time soon. *I bet I've got ghost prints on my liver.* She stood up carefully, leaning on Hosea for support.

"Ready to go then? All right," Paul said briskly, unlocking the door and pulling it open.

Kayla cast a last longing glance back at Eric.

"Later," Hosea said firmly. "Now walk—or be carried."

"Bully," Kayla muttered, heading slowly toward the door.

Eric's night nurse was just coming back up the corridor as they walked out into the hall.

She walked into the room. A moment passed as the other three watched and listened, invisible, in the hall.

The call light went on over the door.

An aide came over to the door and stepped inside.

"Get the doctor on call *now*. Mr. Banyon's come out of his coma."

\* \* \*

Hosea got Kayla home and made sure she ate something before letting her go to bed. He saw that she was tucked up warmly before letting himself out of her apartment and taking the stairs up to Eric's.

Just as well Miz Llewellyn wasn't around. She'd have his hide for a rug if she knew what he'd got up to with Little Bit tonight.

But there hadn't been any way to test Jeanette's idea. Only to try it.

And it seemed to have worked. Eric was back in one piece—or back in one place, anyway. And Little Bit could take care of the rest, over time.

Now Beth and Kory would be wanting to know the good news, and Hosea owed it to them to let them know as soon as possible. It was already late. A few more minutes before he got to bed wouldn't make any difference.

He let himself into Eric's apartment and switched on the computer. Hosea's own finances didn't quite stretch to one yet, but he borrowed Eric's from time to time, or used one of the many public Internet connections available in the city.

He dug around in his backpack until he found the scrap of paper on which he'd written Beth's e-mail address, and logged in to his Hotmail account. Typing her address into the "To" field, he began composing his message.

\* \* \*

"I want to go back to New York," Ria said, pacing back and forth restlessly in the living room of her suite. Her two bodyguards watched her incuriously. There was another one on the outside door. Ria ignored them. They were a fact of life under the current circumstances.

"It isn't that easy, Ria," Zachary Standish said patiently.

He was a well-groomed and formidably efficient legal shark; she'd wooed him away from private practice to walk point for LlewelCo in the wake of the Threshold debacle, and had able to keep him busy ever since. Her competitors had been astonished—Standish had made his name by suing corporations, not working for them—but Ria had dangled an irresistible bait.

"Fair dealing, Mr. Standish. No compromises. Ethics and responsibility. I can always use another still small voice of conscience on my staff. And with what I'm going to pay you, you'll have the resources to go after a lot more pro bono work, I'd imagine."

"Even if it touches on a LlewelCo company, Ms. Llewellyn?" he'd asked.

"Threshold was a LlewelCo company, Mr. Standish," she'd answered implacably. "I'm cleaning house. Want to help?"

Neither of them had yet regretted the partnership.

Zachary had flown down from New York yesterday with his entire staff. They were occupying most of the rest of the floor, and a considerable amount of the resources of Gotham Security as well. Ria had no intention of seeing any of her people take a bullet for her.

"Zack, if it were easy, I wouldn't be paying you the enormous amount I do. I need to get back there. A friend of mine's in the hospital. I want to sit by his bedside and wring my hands. *Do something.*"

Though her words were light, they did little to conceal Ria's frustration. It had been almost a full day since she'd heard about Eric's condition, and everything she'd been able to do since then—for him and for herself—had done little to take the edge off her anxiety.

She'd changed hotels, and surrounded herself with round-the-clock security. She'd thrown up a thornbush of law around herself, including Zachary Standish.

She'd put Anita on the case back in New York to take the heat off Kayla, and arranged for Eric's transfer (as soon as circumstances would permit) to a small private hospital that she used frequently. The staff there was very discreet. She was also having a room in her apartment outfitted as a fully functional sickroom, in case it would be possible to have him transferred directly there. The report on his condition that she'd gotten from Anita wasn't good, but it didn't particularly worry Ria; she'd seen Kayla work miracles before. None of Eric's physical injuries were a real problem—hell, all of them could be fixed mundanely with enough time and money.

Except for one . . .

"Get me out of this city, Zack," she repeated, stopping and staring down at him imperiously. "You're my legal counsel. Do something legal."

"I am. I'm advising you to stay put. You're in a very tenuous position here. Breaking and entering—"

"You've seen my statement. I was in the car the whole time."

"Kidnapping—"

"I assisted in the rescue of a kidnap victim."

"Assault with a deadly weapon—"

"Exactly who am I supposed to have assaulted—and with what? All my entirely legal handguns are still locked up in my safe in New York. Where are you coming up with this nonsense?"

"From a counter-brief Parker Wheatley filed with the Justice Department this morning, accusing you personally of murder, pillage, arson, impersonating a Federal Marshal, and a few things I actually had to look up. My specialty is corporate law. You need a criminal lawyer, Ria."

"He's blowing smoke," Ria snapped. Whether Wheatley's accusations were true or not didn't actually matter as much as whether he could drum up political support for them. Did he still have friends in high places—or not?

"Maybe. But it's going to take time for the smoke to clear away," Zack said.

"Oh, I don't think so. Either the smoke goes away, and I go home . . . or I go public. I'm sure the Great American Public would really like to hear that the U.S. Government is spending tax dollars kidnapping and torturing harmless bookstore owners and planning to put tea-leaf readers into concentration camps because it's taking the UFO menace so seriously." She smiled coldly.

Zack winced. "I really don't think you should do that, Ria. If . . . there's a possibility you might find yourself detained as a material witness," he said carefully.

"Sent to jail for shooting my mouth off, you mean?" Ria began to pace again. "I don't have to be available to break this story, and I'd be a fool to make a threat they could neutralize by just locking me up. I came to them, Zack. If I hadn't, Wheatley would still be going his merry way. I don't expect either gratitude or a long memory for past favors, not in this town. I just expect special treatment now. Tomorrow can take care of itself."

She sat down on the couch, suddenly tired.

"I need to get back to New York—which was still, last I heard, a part of the U.S. I'm not going any farther than that. They'll have my full cooperation—including my silence, if that's what they want. Or my testimony. Their choice. I'm not a flight risk, because I'm not a criminal. Just a concerned citizen and campaign contributor. *But I have to get home.* Now for God's sake, Zack, go find someone to explain that to before I have to renew acquaintance with my friends over at the *Washington Post*."

Zack got to his feet, closing his briefcase. "If you're sure that's the way you want to play it?"

"Yes, Zack, that's the way I want to play it," Ria answered, her voice flat.

\* \* \*

The ringing of the telephone jarred Kayla awake sometime—not long enough—after she'd gotten to bed. She opened her eyes. Daylight. Must be morning, then.

The phone continued its annoyingly cheery chirping, until Kayla finally located it—she'd gone to sleep clutching it, for some reason. She fumbled at it until she hit the "On" button.

"Hello? Kayla?"

"Ria? What's wrong?" she croaked.

"Things are going right for a change, not that I need to tell you. Anita called a few hours ago, but I thought I'd let you get some sleep before I touched base; it sounds like you had a busy night. The official story at the hospital is that Eric has made a miraculous recovery from his coma and is doing much better. They should be willing to transfer him to my private clinic day after tomorrow instead of the end of the week, and then you can really get to work on him," Ria said.

"Yeah. We did all right." Kayla sat up and ran a hand through her hair, still groggy. And ravenous. She wondered what there was in the fridge that didn't need cooking. Maybe she'd go out. "I wasn't there for most of it."

"Weren't there? Where were you?" Ria sounded confused.

"I was sort of there. But he was stuck off someplace I couldn't get at, so we had to send Jeanette in after him."

"You sent *Jeanette Campbell* in to find Eric?" Ria was almost sputtering suddenly, and Kayla would have thought it was funny if she still hadn't been so tired.

"Yeah. Trust me. It was the only way. I still don't have all the details. It was kinda late when we finished up." *And linking up with a ghost really takes it out of you.* "Ria . . . where are you?"

"Still in Washington. I've got a few more things to straighten out here—unfortunately—but I'll be home as soon as possible. If I'd known this was going to take this long—and what was going to happen up there while I was gone—I might not have come, but it turns out it was a good thing I did."

"Yeah, go all cryptic on me," Kayla said, and Ria laughed harshly.

"How's the other matter coming?" Ria asked.

*Magnus, she means.*

"I'm going to go up and see Eric," Kayla said, "then I guess I better go check out that place Hosea mentioned and give them some money. Then tonight I'm going to go back up to The Place and see if I can't get the three of them to go over there." She was just as sure as Eric had been that Magnus wouldn't move without Ace, and neither one would stir a step without Jaycie. So it looked like all or nothing.

"It sounds like a good idea," Ria said. "Don't overwork yourself."

"Like I could, with all the yentas I've got looking over my shoulder here," Kayla said, only half joking. And sometime before the end of my so-called vacation, I've got to make some time to hit the books. I've got a couple of papers due." "Don't worry, Ria. I'll be fine."

"I'm counting on it," Ria said. "Take care."

"You too," Kayla said.

\* \* \*

Looking at her watch after she closed the phone again, Kayla discovered it was already 2:00 p.m. Better get moving, then. Respectable for her to visit to the hospital and Somerset House, then back here to grubby up to go back to The Place. Kayla wasn't really looking forward to another night spent on unheated bare floors, but the way she felt now, she could sleep on a bed of nails, and she really couldn't afford to spend another night away. She'd manage.

\* \* \*

She still had her visitor's pass from her previous day's visit to Gotham General. You were supposed to turn them in when you left each day, but she'd kept hers. It was a lot faster that way than having to wait in line at the Admissions Desk.

But when she got up to Eric's room, it was empty.

Not empty as in "he was temporarily somewhere else and would be right back." The bed had been made up, the life support machines were gone, the room was obviously waiting for a new occupant.

Kayla headed for the Nurses' Station at a dead run.

"Hey! You!"

The nurse behind the desk looked up from her paperwork with a frown. "Can I help you?"

"The patient in 2418. Eric Banyon. Where is he?"

"2418?" The woman consulted her charts. "I'm sorry, there's no one in that room."

*I know that!* "Was he moved?"

"What was the name again?"

"Eric Banyon."

The woman consulted her charts with maddening slowness, then checked the computer. "I'm sorry. There isn't an Eric Banyon in this wing."

*But he was here yesterday! And last night!*

Seeing Kayla's stricken expression, the nurse smiled gently. "This is a big hospital, and a lot of the floors do look alike. And patients do get moved, and sometimes it takes a little while for the system to catch up with them. Why don't you check with the front desk? I'm sure they'll be able to find him for you."

*I don't think so.*

But because she couldn't think of anything else to try—other than checking every room on the floor, and she knew she wouldn't get very far with that—Kayla went back down to the front desk.

"I'm here to see a patient," she said.

"His name?" the woman behind the desk said.

"Eric Banyon. Room 2418," Kayla repeated.

She waited, hoping against hope that the woman would say that Eric had been moved, would say it had all been a mistake, a computer error. But instead, after frowning at the computer for several minutes, what she said was: "I'm sorry. We have no patient by that name here. Are you sure you're in the right hospital?"

\* \* \*

*This is bad.* She wasn't quite sure how bad, or in what direction, but she knew it was bad. Kayla found herself out on the sidewalk, walking aimlessly away from the hospital. She didn't know where she was going. It hardly mattered now.

\* \* \*

She wanted to cry. She wanted to hit something. She settled for finding a diner and calling Ria.

"Hello?" Thank all the Gods, real and unreal, that Ria answered her phone. If she hadn't, it would have been the very last straw.

"Ria? This is Kayla. What time did the hospital call you to say that Eric was better?"

"What's wrong?" Ria demanded, instantly suspicious.

"I'll tell you in a minute."

"Let's see. Anita called them this morning about nine-fifteen and talked to Dr. Rodriguez. She talked to him for about ten minutes and called me just after that."

So Eric had been at Gotham General—had *existed*—at nine-fifteen this morning. At least Ria still remembered he'd been there. Kayla felt a faint sense of relief at that. At least she wasn't the only one in the world who remembered that Eric was supposed to be in the hospital.

"Well, I was up there around three. He wasn't there. Furthermore, they said he never had been there. No such patient."

"I'll take care of it." There was a tone in Ria's voice Kayla had never heard before.

"Ria?" She'd been scared a moment ago. Now she was *really* scared.

"Listen to me, Kayla. It doesn't take magic to produce effects like that. Computer records can be changed. People can be bribed. I'm involved with . . . some rather annoying people just now. Anybody backchecking me might turn up Eric and decide to get to me through him. Call Anita. Tell her to look into it. And . . . it might be a good idea for you to drop out of sight until I get home. That, or go on up to my apartment and let me call in a security team for you."

"Just what are you *doing* down there?" Kayla demanded.

"Opening a nastier can of worms than I expected to, apparently," Ria answered, her voice distant and cold. "But if they've harmed Eric, I guarantee that when I'm through with them, they'll think Lord Aerune was one of the Backstreet Boys."

"Now you're scaring me," Kayla said nervously.

"Good. Then you'll be careful. Now call Anita. Warn Hosea, just in case. Will you go to my apartment?"

Kayla thought about it. But that would mean staying out of sight until Ria showed up again, and she'd already been out of touch with Magnus and his friends for too long. A day was a lifetime when you were on the street. Anything could happen. Anything might already have happened.

"No. There's things I gotta do that can't wait."

Ria sighed, acknowledging defeat. "Then play least-in-sight for another twenty-four hours or so."

"Are you sure about this?" Kayla demanded.

"Better safe," Ria said cryptically, and hung up.

*My life has just become a John Grisham novel,* Kayla thought, staring at the silent phone. Who were these people that Ria thought were after Eric and might be after her? What can of worms?

What the hell was going on?

It was a safe bet that nobody here on Sixth Avenue was going to have any answers for her. She stirred

more sugar into her coffee.

Dutifully, Kayla called Anita, telling her that Eric had disappeared from the hospital and, as far as anyone at Gotham General was willing to say, had never been there in the first place. Anita promised to check into it. Kayla told her to call Ria if she found out anything—much as she wanted to hear the answers herself, it wouldn't do her street cred any good to have her phone ring while she was playing Homeless Street Kid.

After that she called Hosea, who didn't carry (or for that matter, *own*) a cell phone. She thought it over, and left a message on his answering machine, stressing the fact that she was safe, that Ria thought Eric's disappearance from the hospital might be related to her problems in Washington and not really to do with Eric at all, and that because of that, Ria wanted everyone connected with her to keep a low profile until she could get back.

Kayla was pretty sure she'd covered everything in the phone message. But it would be just as well to see Hosea and give him the message in person. She knew his schedule varied, but he might be down at the homeless center. It was worth a shot, anyway.

But she was closer to Somerset House than she was to Jacob Riis, and if she was going to try to talk Magnus and the others into going there, she'd better go and drop off one of Ria's checks. She dug through her backpack, looking for the notebook in which she'd written the address.

\* \* \*

Somerset House was on the Upper West Side. It looked like a perfectly ordinary apartment building, except for the fact that there was a desk in the lobby with a book for signing in and out, and a woman with a name tag sitting behind the desk.

"Can I help you?" the woman asked, as Kayla approached.

*People keep askin' that lately, and the answer always seems to be "No."*

"Um . . . a friend of mine down at Jacob Riis referred me here. He said you might have vacancies?"

The woman pressed a button under her desk. In a moment, another woman entered the lobby. "If you'd come this way. . . ?"

Kayla followed her into a bright and cheerful office that had once, obviously, been a ground-floor apartment.

"I'm Miranda Sherwood. I'm in charge of Admissions here. What do you know about our program?"

"That it's private, that it costs money, that you don't send kids back to their parents or tell their parents that they're here, that they have to be clean and sober and follow the rules. It's not for me. I'm here to pay for three other kids to come in."

Miranda raised her eyebrows. "I thought I'd heard everything. Where are they?"

Kayla hesitated.

"Please don't lie, Ms. . . ."



"Smith." Abruptly, Kayla realized how that must sound. "No, really. Kayla Smith. It's my real name. I can show you ID."

"Maybe that would be a good idea," Miranda Sherwood said consideringly.

Kayla hesitated, but everything she could sense from this woman told her that Miranda Sherwood could be trusted. And she was going to have to trust somebody, sooner or later, even if only a little. She dug around and pulled out her Columbia student ID. Miranda studied it for a moment and handed it back.

"So, Kayla Smith, what's your interest in these 'three other kids'?"

"I want to get them off the street before they die," Kayla said bluntly. "There's no possibility they'll go home. I think I can get them to come here." She hesitated. "Not if they know I had anything to do with paying for it."

"Ms. Smith, it costs us over a thousand dollars a month per child to keep this place going. You don't think the kids come in with that kind of money, do you? As soon as they have jobs, they contribute to their upkeep, but—"

"Actually, LlewellynCo's paying for it," Kayla said.

"Ria Llewellyn?" Miranda said, sounding surprised and dubious. Kayla nodded. She wasn't surprised that Miranda Sherwood wasn't buying it. She didn't exactly look like the kind of person who hung with Ria Llewellyn.

"Is this some kind of a joke?" Miranda said, starting to become angry. "Because if it is—"

"Fifty thousand dollars," Kayla said quickly.

"I beg your pardon?" Miranda said.

"You've got openings right now, don't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"I'll give you a check from Ria Llewellyn for fifty thousand dollars," Kayla said. "You take the kids. Call her bank. Better yet, call her personal assistant. I've got her number right here. Her name's Anita Sheldrake."

"Could you wait outside for a moment? There are chairs in the lobby."

"Yeah, right."

Kayla went outside and sat down. Miranda was probably calling the police right now. They'd come and arrest Kayla on suspicion of making an eccentric charitable contribution.

She rested her head on her knees, wishing she were still asleep in her bed. She wished Eric was here. She wished Ria was here. Either one of them could have finessed this operation a whole lot better than Kayla just had.

But if either one of them'd been around, she wouldn't've been in this situation in the first place.

Eventually she sighed and sat up. Feeling sorry for herself wouldn't get her anywhere. She couldn't do anything for Eric right now, but Magnus, Ace, and Jaycie still needed her help. If Miranda Sherwood would just cooperate, maybe there was something she could do for them.

While she waited, she saw a number of kids coming in and out, singly and in groups. All of them stopped at the desk to sign in or out, showing their IDs as they did.

Kayla bit her lip. Could she talk the kids into coming to this place? Would they think the street was better and safer? Kayla knew it wasn't, but she had the benefit of a couple of years and a lot of experience.

And you had to get clean and stay clean to be here. She knew Ace and Magnus qualified. But Jaycie?

Kayla could clean out his system; sweep out whatever junk was in there. But she couldn't repair the emotional damage that had led him to choose that form of escape.

"Ms. Smith?"

Miranda was back. She was smiling, and her aura read puzzled.

Kayla followed her back into the office.

"I just spoke to Ms. Sheldrake. She described you in detail. We had a . . . very interesting conversation."

*I just bet.*

"Apparently Ms. Llewellyn's offer is on the level," Miranda said. "And Ms. Sheldrake indicated that LlewellynCo would not be averse to providing additional funding to our program beyond your initial contribution."

"Yeah. That's the kind of thing Ria does a lot of. So you'll take them?" Kayla said with relief.

"We'll be happy to. But they won't receive any special treatment. We don't force anyone to stay here, and if they break the rules, they have to leave. So: no drugs, no drinking, no tobacco, nothing illegal—and that includes sex."

"Sex is illegal?" Kayla asked, surprised. Not that casual sex was a big item in the future of an Empath. But she always liked to know when she was breaking the law.

Miranda smiled. "If you're under eighteen it is, and almost all of our residents are, except for a few special cases. Here, let me give you a couple of brochures. They've got our address on them, in case your friends want to come in on their own."

"And you'll keep my name out of things?" Kayla said quickly.

"We have a policy of not lying to our clients, because it's very important to us to build a trust relationship with them, but as far as I'm concerned, Ria Llewellyn has made a generous donation to our facility that has made it possible for us to accept your friends. I can't say I won't ever tell them, but I certainly won't

volunteer the information, and I don't really think it will come up immediately. Now, I believe you have a check for us?"

\* \* \*

A few minutes later Kayla was back out on the street, having signed over the contents of what Anita had called Ria's "slush account" to Somerset House.

She hoped she'd done the right thing. But now, this way, at least Magnus and the others would have a safe place to go, and could stay as long as they wanted or needed to. And if they didn't come here, Miranda Sherwood could certainly put the money to good use helping a lot of other kids.

She was exhausted, thinking longingly of her apartment and her bed. She stopped on the street to phone Hosea's apartment, but he still didn't answer. She supposed she'd better head on down to the shelter. At least they'd give her coffee.

She walked over to the A train and caught it all the way downtown. It was getting into rush hour now, so the trains were running more frequently, and she made good time. The trek across town woke her up a bit; it was already dark when she got back up onto street level, and getting colder. And she was hungry again. Well, she'd taken a lot out of herself in the last twenty-four; had to pay it back one way or another, calories or sleep. She bought some dried apricots from a street vendor and ate them as she walked across town, toward the shelter.

*Gotta feed the beast.*

She was a block away from the shelter when she saw the last person she would have expected to see.

\* \* \*

It had been risky—she'd been scared to death the entire time—but it'd been worth it, even with having to get down here at noon to be sure of having a place in line, the long wait, and then being afraid her things would be stolen. But if she'd left the important stuff back at The Place, she could be almost sure it wouldn't be there when she got back, the way things were there these days. So with much hesitation, Ace had brought the money along. There was quite a bit of it, even with Jaycie not bringing in as much as before, and the other kids holding out because they knew she'd pay for food and things.

But being able to take a shower . . . ! To be clean, really clean, all over, and *warm*, even if it was only for a little while, and wash her hair. Even though she'd had to get right back into the same dirty clothes she'd come in, she still felt better. And she was sure she smelled better, too.

And Hosea Songmaker hadn't lied. Nobody had given her any trouble. And everything had been right where she'd left it.

She'd better hurry now. She'd had to wait a long time in line to get in. It was already dark, and she didn't like being on the streets after dark. She didn't like leaving Jaycie alone for very long these days, either. Magnus was there, but sometimes he didn't see things quite the way she did. He still thought Jaycie was doing okay, when Ace knew he wasn't. And whether Magnus was willing to see it or not, things were getting worse all around up at The Place.

The three of them had to get out of there. That fight with Chinaka and Shimene and the others last week had been bad—and when Eric had just disappeared, and then Kayla, they'd accused Ace of going

behind their backs and getting the two of them to leave. Now Chinaka wanted the two of *them* to leave—they'd want to keep Jaycie of course, but they had another think coming there. But where were the three of them going *togo*?

She was walking back toward the subway when she saw a familiar figure walking toward her.

"Kayla!"

\* \* \*

Kayla stopped. It was Ace.

*Busted.*

She glanced down at herself. Same jacket she'd been wearing the last time Ace had seen her, and she supposed the rest of her outfit would pass muster if someone weren't too suspicious.

Only she knew "suspicious" was Ace's middle name. And last, probably.

"Hi," Kayla said resignedly.

"You're too late to get a shower. All the slots're filled," Ace said.

Kayla shrugged. Shower? "Next time, I guess."

"So," Ace said, a little too casually, "are you and Eric coming back?"

*Shewantsus back*, Kayla realized with surprise.

"Can't find him," Kayla said honestly. "Been looking all over for him. Guess he took off without me."

"Too bad," Ace said sympathetically. She seemed sincerely disappointed, which puzzled Kayla. "Guess it's just you, then. We kept your stuff."

"Sure," Kayla said, falling in beside her and turning away from the shelter. *What does she want?*

She hated the thought of missing the chance of talking to Hosea, but he might not even be there anyway. The message on his answering machine would have to do. And hooking up with Ace was more important.

\* \* \*

Hosea returned home around seven, having played for the subway crowds. He could shower and change, go up and see Eric during evening visiting hours, then maybe head back down to the shelter and see if he could do a little eavesdropping on the children to try to pick up the last missing pieces of the Secret Stories.

Bloody Mary's True Name was the key—he was sure of it. But what could it be? What sort of demon could a four-year-old child imagine that was terrible enough to frighten God Himself?

The answering machine message light was flashing spastically when he got in. He hurried over to it to

play back his messages, thinking that perhaps Caity had called.

But no. It was Kayla. She'd had to call several times to leave her full message, because the machine kept cutting her off.

Eric had vanished from Gotham General sometime this morning, and no one there remembered he'd even been there. Miz Llewellyn thought it was connected to her problems in Washington. Kayla intended to disappear until Ria got back. Hosea might be in danger himself.

"What . . . a . . . mess," Hosea said, at a loss for words. "Greystone?"

After a few moments there was a scrabbling on the fire escape, and Hosea's bedroom window opened. Greystone came clumping into the living room, his carved simian face grave.

"Trouble, boyo?" he asked.

"In every size and shape you care to name," Hosea said grimly. "Listen to this." He played back Kayla's messages.

"Well," Greystone said, "the lass sounds half-demented, and who's going to blame her, with Eric gone missing again." The gargoyle sighed. "And things were going so well, too."

"What am Ah goin' to do?" Hosea said. "Ah don't have much to worry about—it's not likely anybody'd be comin' after me, and Ah can take care o' myself, what with bein' a Guardian and all. But Little Bit's got more confidence than common sense, sometimes. An' Ah don't know where she's gotten herself to. But you do," he said, fixing Greystone with a level blue-eyed stare.

"Ah, now, laddie, sure an' you wouldn't be askin' me to trespass on the sacred bound of confidentiality," Greystone said, taking a step backward.

"If somethin' bad happens to Kayla because Ah don't know where she is, Miz Llewellyn is going to turn you into driveway gravel—and Ah might be persuaded to help her," Hosea said meaningfully. "Right now Little Bit's the only one who knows where Eric's brother is. That don't do anybody any good."

"You're right." Greystone sighed. His wings drooped. After a long pause, the gargoyle spoke. "The kids are holed up in a condemned tenement up near Harlem—hold still and I'll show you where it is."

Greystone concentrated, his features contorting in a grimace of concentration. A picture formed in Hosea's mind, and suddenly *heknew* where The Place was, and exactly how to find it.

"You aren't planning on making any bull moves, are you, laddiebuck?" Greystone asked anxiously.

"Ah guess not," Hosea said slowly. He felt better knowing where Kayla was. Not the best neighborhood in Manhattan, but her empathic abilities should give her the ability to avoid trouble if she could. And *somebody* had to keep an eye on Magnus. "Ah just wish Ah knew where the devil Eric was."

"Aye, don't we all?" Greystone agreed somberly.

Chapter Fourteen:  
Gravelwalk

In a typical New York example of bad luck, Ace and Kayla's subway train went out of service at 34th Street, dumping several hundred irritated commuters out onto the platform. The train then closed its doors and sat there sullenly, blocking the tracks, with no relief in sight.

"C'mon," Kayla said. "Let's walk up a couple of stops. Maybe they'll route around it or something. And at least we won't be stuck down here."

Though she didn't have a lot of choice about taking the subway to get around the city, Kayla didn't like it much, especially at rush hour. With all those bodies packed in like sardines, you couldn't help touching people, and that meant she got to know a lot of people a lot better than she really wanted to sometimes. In an hour or so, not only would the blockage on the line clear up, the trains would clear out, too.

So they walked uptown for a while.

When they reached Times Square, they found that a street preacher had set up shop on the traffic island in the center of the square. He had an amplifier with him on a wheeled cart, and was shouting into a cordless microphone. His grossly amplified words echoed through the space around him.

"Yea! And the Sabeans fell upon them and took them away! Yea! They have slain the servants with the edge of the sword, and only I am escaped alone to tell thee!"

"Job 1:15," Ace muttered in disgust. "And he hasn't even got it right." She put a hand on Kayla's arm, trying to pull her past the crowd that had gathered around the man.

Kayla looked at her in surprise. Ace hadn't struck her as particularly religious, let alone someone who could quote the Bible, chapter and verse, on the fly. But suddenly her attention was riveted by the god-shouter's next words.

"Brothers and sisters, on that terrible day, I was there upon the Field of Blood, and God Himself reached out His Mighty Hand to shield me from the terrible destruction from the Towers. Daily I praise Jesus for giving me this miracle, and preserving me to bear witness to all of you that His Glory endureth, yea! Though the Sabeans fell upon them and took them away! Though they have slain the servants of God with their fiery sword, I am proof of Christ's miraculous love—"

Kayla pulled away from Ace and started elbowing her way through the crowd, pushing to the front. The preacher was a white-haired old man in a long black coat and clerical collar that she bet he wasn't entitled to. There was a folding table beside him, with a jar for contributions, and taped to it were photographs of the Towers in flames, with a sorrowing Jesus crudely Photoshopped over them.

It had not been an easy year for an Empath in New York. She *knew*, better than anyone other than the sufferers themselves, just what thoughts occurred in the panic of the moment, in the dark of the night, in the lonely times, in the times when even family said, "It's time for closure, get on with your life."

Sure, as many people as had died that day died in car accidents every month . . . but *not all at once*. Not sacrificed to hatred, dying in terror, some of them knowing their fate for hours or minutes beforehand . . . and with the tragedy leaving a gaping unhealed wound in the very flesh of the city, visible for all to see.

And not in a way that left survivors feeling guilty, so guilty, for being one of the ones that got out—or who hadn't been there at all. Wondering, "Why did I live?" or "Why didn't they?" Leaving the survivors—all the survivors—wondering if it was punishment, somehow . . . and wondering just who was being punished. Feeling angry, so angry, that a loved one hadn't survived that day. Bearing scars, visible and invisible. Wanting revenge, wanting to punish the people responsible, and knowing that would never, ever happen.

What had happened that day was and would be inescapable: like other tragedies, needing only its name to invoke its memory in all the years to come. Dallas. Challenger. Oklahoma City. September 11th. It had been horrible. It was still horrible, though the shock and the rawness of the grief, if not the magnitude of the tragedy, diminished with time.

And then—this.

"You!" Kayla shouted, interrupting him. "Just who do you think you are?"

The preacher stopped dead, and stared at her.

"Hey!" Ace hissed, tugging at her elbow. Kayla ignored her.

"Even if you *aren't* lying through your teeth, which I *doubt*," Kayla continued savagely. "Just what makes you think *you're* so especially holy and deserving of a miracle? Are you trying to say that those people in the Towers and the planes and at the Pentagon *weren't*? That they *deserved* to die, and you and you alone *deserved* a miracle?"

The preacher's mouth worked, but no sound came out. Ace stared at Kayla in horrified fascination, but Kayla had just gotten started.

"What about all the babies that died?" she snarled into the bubble of silence that had formed around them. "Do you think you're so much more pure than a baby that you deserved a miracle more than they did? Do you go around saying to everybody who lost someone that day that their loved ones were so horrible that they *deserved* to die and you're so wonderful that you *deserved* to live? Is this the way you show people that God *loves* them?"

The preacher's eyes were blank and expressionless. She shouted at him in frustration. "Am I even getting through to you? Are you thinking at all? If God could have made that kind of a miracle, don't you think He would have kept the whole thing from happening at all? Does it even occur to you how much you're hurting people every time you open your mouth to claim that *you're* a better person than someone who was just in the worst place at the wrong time? Or are you just thinking of how much money you can get out of it? Dammit, how does doing something like this make you any better than the people who flew those planes into the Towers in the first place?"

She turned to the crowd. "We're better than this! We have to be! Or else— Or else—" Her eyes filled with tears, and she couldn't continue.

The crowd began to applaud, shouting derisively at the preacher as he tried to resume his harangue.

Ace was beside her, putting an arm around Kayla's shoulders.

"Or else it was all for nothing," she said quietly. "All those deaths, and all the good everybody's tried to

do since."

\* \* \*

They went down into the subway again to wait for a train. Kayla could tell that Ace wanted to say something. For herself, she was still shaking all over with anger. People like that "Reverend"—people who took other people's pain and turned it into a cash cow for themselves—they were the lowest of the low.

"What you did back there," Ace said, "that was good. I wish I'd had the nerve to do that. A long time ago."

"I hate people like that," Kayla said feelingly.

"So do I," Ace said. "C'mon. Let's go home."

"If you—" Kayla began. If you had someplace else to go—someplace better—would you go there?

But just then a train pulled into the station, and the opportunity for that conversation was lost.

\* \* \*

When they got back up to The Place, the tension in the atmosphere hit Kayla like a slap. Chinaka hurried over as soon as she saw them.

"Kayla! Thought we wouldn't see *you* again!" she said, giving Ace a poisonous look. "Doin' all right," she said, giving Kayla's clothes an appreciative glance. "Where's Eric?"

"Been lookin' all over for him," Kayla said. "Guess he's moved on."

"Wouldn't be surprised—with how welcome *some* people made him feel," Chinaka said. "You wanna hang with us? We got smoke."

Kayla slid her eyes sideways. Ace had drifted off, unwilling to provoke a further confrontation.

This must be why Ace had been so relieved to see Kayla again. Feuds as well as friendships developed quickly on the street, and Kayla and Eric coming in had been enough to tip the balance. And those spells Eric had cast to make Chinaka and the other girls like him probably hadn't helped matters any . . .

"Catch you later," Kayla said. "I got some stuff to do."

She went over and sat down next to Ace, who was sitting with Magnus over in their corner. Something had happened here, too, though Kayla wasn't quite sure what it was. Magnus seemed tense, and Ace was unhappy.

Looking at the room, even though everyone was spread out all over it, Kayla could almost see the invisible dividing line: Ace and Magnus and Jaycie, and everyone else.

"You sure you want to be here?" Ace said, a little bitterly, though she made room for Kayla to sit down.

"I couldn't stop them," Magnus said, resuming the conversation he'd been having with Ace before



Kayla'd come over. "I was afraid they'd go for Jaycie if I did. They didn't take much."

Looking around, Kayla could see that Ace's makeshift bookshelf was gone, and the tidy orderly piles of things were all scrambled.

"Just my books. And most of our food," Ace said wearily. She turned to Kayla. "You hang with us, you aren't going to be real popular."

"I choose my own friends," Kayla said. "And you look like you could use some."

Ace let that pass without comment. "But Jaycie's okay?" she asked.

"Sure," Magnus said, shrugging. "He didn't even wake up."

Kayla winced, feeling the sudden flare of fear and anger. But Ace had a good tight rein on her temper—outwardly at least. She just got very quickly up off the sleeping bag and hurried over to the corner where Jaycie was sleeping.

"Hey," Magnus said. "You better not wake him up. Ace! Remember what happened the last time—"

But Ace wasn't listening. She knelt down beside Jaycie.

"Jaycie, honey, wake up. It's Ace. It's time to wake up now."

Jaycie didn't move.

Ace reached out and shook him, ignoring Magnus' protests. Still no response.

Kayla came over, Magnus following her a little warily.

"You'd better not get too close," he told Kayla. "He can get really upset when you wake him up suddenly."

"Can't you see he isn't going to wake up?" Ace burst out angrily. "I told you he was sick, but you wouldn't listen!"

"He sick?"

Shimene had wandered over to what Kayla thought of as "their" side of the room. Two of the other girls stood behind her—Graz and another girl whose name Kayla couldn't remember. Shimene gazed down at the four of them, her expression simultaneously smug and frightened. "He gonna die?"

"Go away," Ace said, not looking up.

"You don't tell me what to do, white girl," Shimene said angrily. Behind her, her two girlfriends muttered encouragement.

"If he's got something horribly contagious, I'd sure hate for you to catch it—and die," Kayla said sweetly. "You haven't touched him or anything, have you?"

"Yeah, you aren't looking so good, Rent-a-Butt," Magnus chimed in. "Better back off."

Shimene took a step backward. "He sick, you better get him outta here," she said, retreating hastily to the other side of the room.

"He won't wake up," Ace groaned, sounding truly terrified.

"Look," Kayla said, "I don't think he's sick, exactly. And I think I can help. But I don't want to do it with all those other kids here. The way things look like they're going right now, there might be a riot. And the three of us can't take all of them on."

"You're right," Ace said. She stroked Jaycie's forehead. The boy didn't stir at all. Except for his slow steady breathing, he might have been dead. "He feels all right. There isn't any fever . . . and Shimene's *always* been trouble. Some of the others, well, they won't start trouble, but they won't stop it, either. Oh, *Jaycie* . . ."

All at once she seemed to come to a decision. She turned away from the sleeping boy and faced the other two, smiling a dangerous smile.

"You want them gone so you can help Jaycie? I'll get rid of them. Here," Ace said, holding out her hands to the other two. "You hold my hands, both of you. It gentles it some. And whatever you do, don't let go."

Kayla took Ace's hand reluctantly. She was wearing gloves, and so was Ace, which provided some insulation, but it was still an intimate thing. She tightened her shields as much as she could, but as soon as she took Ace's hand she still felt the younger girl's anger and despair flood into her, swamping her own emotions until she could no longer tell which were her own feelings and which were Ace's. And with the emotions, a stray scrap of thought.

*I swore I'd never do this again—but it's for Jaycie—*

Ace took a deep breath and began to sing.

At first she sang very softly, almost in a whisper, but slowly the volume of her song grew, drowning out the rap music from the various CD players in the room.

"Ladybug, Ladybug, fly away home . . . your house is on fire; your children will burn—"

A nursery rhyme or a folk-song; Kayla couldn't remember which. Ace had a strong trained voice; it filled the room with ease. And Kayla felt the uprush of Power from the other young Talent—and more. She felt absolute terror, a primal need to get *out* of this place, to be somewhere, *anywhere* else.

She watched in amazement as the effects of the song struck the other teenagers in The Place. If, as Ace said, holding her hands "gentled it some," they had no such defense. Suddenly every one of them—even those who had been asleep when Ace began to sing—was consumed with the single desire to be *gone*.

Kayla looked on as they hastily grabbed anything that they could, just as if The Place really were on fire.

*Ladybug, ladybug—*

And rising up from somewhere, *Bardic* power. Young, unawakened, unaware. But there, waiting to be roused. Suddenly it flooded into her as well.

And with that, Kayla's shields crumbled. She felt like a penny in a fusebox, barely able to retain her identity beneath the uprush of a power she'd never been meant to carry. She resonated to the terror Ace was projecting like a tuning fork, her own Empathic power turning itself somehow inside-out, projecting itself as Ace's did, projecting raw fear; broadcasting emotion instead of receiving it.

That which can heal can also harm.

*Ladybug, ladybug—*

\* \* \*

It had started out as a rotten day and was now going on to be a weird one. A few hours after Ace had left, some of the others had come over and started rooting through her things, saying they just wanted to "borrow" some stuff.

Yeah, right.

Just as Magnus had told Ace, he'd tried to stop them, but then a couple of them had gone for Jaycie, starting to pull him out of his sleeping bag. Jaycie hadn't even stirred, and that had scared Magnus even more. It had been pretty clear to Magnus that he could either protect Jaycie, or his and Ace's things. Not both.

He knew they'd been laughing at him for not fighting back. But he'd had no particular desire to get knifed or razored. Or shot, for that matter.

Then when Ace finally showed up with Kayla, she went ballistic—not (as Magnus had expected) over her stuff getting trashed, but because Jaycie slept through it all. Shouldn't that be a good thing?

Next, this Kayla person went all over psychic healer on them, saying she could help Jaycie—weird thing number two—and—weird thing number three—Ace went for it. And when Kayla said she needed privacy, Ace offered to clear The Place out.

By . . . singing?

By now the weird things were piling up too fast to count. Ace never sang, and didn't much like music, as far as Magnus had been able to tell. He guessed he was willing to hold hands with her, because she'd had a rough day.

But after that . . .

He wondered if he'd gotten hit on the head by one of the other kids and just managed to forget about it, because when Ace started singing, he started hallucinating.

Heat flowed from her hand into his, just as if she'd plunged his arm into a tub of hot water. He tried to pull his hand away, but her grip was too strong. And even though she was just singing some stupid nursery rhyme, over and over, he could hear *music* behind it: a full orchestra.

And he was afraid.

Of course he was afraid. He was losing his mind. He was so hot all over now that he was sweating, just

as if it was summer, not winter.

And the other kids . . .

They were scrambling to get out of The Place, grabbing everything they could in a hurry, throwing on coats and shoes and grabbing for backpacks and stashes.

*If it's my hallucination, I wonder if I can affect it?*

He tried thinking the orchestra louder. *Wagner* louder.

It cooperated.

He could feel the floorboards tremble under him, just as if the music were real, but Magnus didn't care. This was just a hallucination. Somebody'd probably slipped him some drugs. So he'd deafen them in return. Fair was fair. Magnus cranked an imaginary amplifier up a few more notches.

He could feel the whole building vibrating now—with the invisible orchestra that loud, he shouldn't have still been able to hear Ace singing, but somehow he could. That contributed to the comforting feeling that none of this was actually happening, and made him a little less afraid.

\* \* \*

Jachiel ap Gabrevys had finally lost himself in the shadowlands. This time, at last, he knew he would not waken. He did not know if this was what humankind called sleep, this condition he could only reach through the foods of mortal lands; he only knew that this dark oblivion was a sweet thing that he courted desperately.

He would be very sorry to leave his human friends. If he only had their mortality, there would be no need to slip into Dreaming. Were he only mortal, there would be no need for any of this.

But he was what he was. Every day of his life he had dreaded the thought that the day would come when he must begin to learn the arts and disciplines of magic, the day when he would begin to be of some use to the Prince, his Father. He could not bear the thought. He dreaded it, all of it: the magic he felt ripening in his very bones, the uses he would be forced to put it to, the politics and necessities of the Court.

And so he had run away, to a place he had only heard of in Bards' legends. The World Above. A place without magic, without elves. A place where the Dreaming was possible.

And now—at last—he had what he sought.

But something was pulling him back. Something that wasn't supposed to be here at all.

Magic.

Hot silver threads of magic. Not as strong as in Underhill, but far stronger than they ought to be here in the World Above. They cleansed his blood, roused him toward life once more.

\* \* \*

The Hound lunged through the Mirror of Air, dancing and capering to gain its master's attention, but Gabriel Horn didn't need that additional warning. The silver ring on his finger burned hot and true.

*The wench had used her Gift.*

Quickly he reached out his hand and touched it to the mirror.

Nothing happened.

It was as he had thought. She had gone to ground in one of the blighted places. But that would not save her now.

"Go to her," he told the Hound. "Seek her out. Hunt her tirelessly, and harry her back to me. . . ."

The Hound leapt through the mirror again, and vanished.

With a gesture, Gabriel banished the Mirror of Air.

Now the game began. True, he could follow the Hunt himself directly, but he had gone into the Accursed Lands once, after the Bard, and knew they were dangerous to his kind.

Besides, his plan was to break the girl's spirit, render her subservient to his will. What better way than to harry her a hundred leagues with creatures of nightmare following always at her heels, driving her inexorably homeward? In a day or two at most he would be able to See her directly, and able to decide whether to drive her to her own doorstep under her own power, or to let her be found by his agents.

But there was one thing he knew for certain.

Soon he would have the lost lamb back in the fold once more, and after what he would do to her then, it would be a very long time before she *eventhought* of straying again. . . .

\* \* \*

"—*fly away home*," Ace finished, and stopped. Tears of self-reproach glistened in her eyes. She pulled her hands free of Kayla's and Magnus'.

The Place was completely empty.

"What . . . was that?" Kayla asked raggedly, drawing a deep breath.

"What I do," Ace said harshly. "Why I left. Only . . . it never worked quite like that before," she said, sounding puzzled. "Guess maybe because I haven't done it for a while."

*Or maybe because you never did it while linked up to a Healer and a Baby Bard*, Kayla thought, still shaken. She wondered if any of those kids *wasever* going to come back.

"Hey," Magnus said, sounding pleased. "You can do things like that? That's cool."

Ace rounded on him furiously. "No, it isn't! It's wicked and dishonest! It's like stealing from people—only it's stealing their right to make up their own minds what they want to feel! And they don't even get a chance to defend themselves against it, because there's no way a normal person can defend

themselves from a freak like me—no, I just sneak up on them with a song, and before they know it, they—"  
Ace shut her mouth abruptly, refusing to finish her sentence.

"You're not a freak," Kayla said gently. "You're just different. Some people are born different, that's all. I'm different too. I can Heal people."

Ace stared at her, eyes glittering dangerously. For some reason, that had been the wrong thing to say.

"Not like faith healing," Kayla said, feeling her way carefully. "You don't have to believe anything. I mean if you had a bullet in you—or you had a broken leg—and I touched you—I could Heal it. That's my Talent, like singing that way is yours."

"Boy, your folks must have loved that," Ace said, relaxing her wariness just a little.

"My mother loved it so much she abandoned me when she found out," Kayla said bluntly. Let Ace think it had happened a little more recently than it had. It wasn't quite a lie.

Ace winced. "Sorry. I just . . . but does that mean you can Heal Jaycie?"

"I think so." Kayla didn't say that she thought Jaycie was the one making himself sick. Once she'd Healed him, she'd know for sure, and she could say something then. "And I know a place the three of you can go. A place that's better than this, that won't send you back to your parents, or tell them where you are, either."

"Huh." Ace was noncommittal, refusing to believe it. "Jaycie first."

"Hey," Magnus said, sounding pleased, though still a little rattled both by what had just happened and Ace's furious outburst. "He's awake."

"Jaycie!"

Ace jumped to her feet and hurried back to him, dropping to her knees again at his side. His eyes were open, but he seemed disoriented, and when he spoke it wasn't in any language the three of them knew.

"Sounds like Gaelic," Magnus said dubiously. "A little."

"Jaycie, honey, wake up," Ace pleaded. "Kayla's here. She's going to make you better."

"Nay . . . no." Jaycie's eyes opened wide. He was awake enough to speak English now. He stared at Kayla in horror.

"She won't hurt you," Ace said. "She wants to help."

Jaycie struggled up onto his elbows, and now even Magnus could see how terribly weak he was. "But she lied to you, Ace," he said. Though the words obviously cost him great effort, he smiled triumphantly as he spoke. "She and the Bard both. Lied to make you trust them." He took a deep breath, summoning the strength to say more. "I don't need help. All I need is sleep."

He fell back against the sleeping bag, exhausted.

Oh, shit, Kayla thought. He knows Eric's a Bard. But how the hell . . . ?

"Looks the picture of health, don't he?" she said aloud.

"What Bard?" Ace said. Her voice shook with fear. Kayla could feel how desperately Ace wanted to trust her, and how terrified she was of doing so.

"I guess he means Eric," Kayla said, fudging desperately. "Look. I haven't told you any lies. And I'm willing to swear on anything you want that whatever happens, it isn't going to end up with either of you being taken back to your parents. Not because of me or anybody I know, anyway."

"Funny you should mention that," Magnus said.

"You want to tell me you're living here for your health?" Kayla shot back angrily. "I don't know about you, dude, but I'd guess a few people know what Ace can do. And I'm betting they want her back so she'll keep doing it. So they're looking for her. Now, you guys can't stay here—"

"I bet you got a place all picked out for us, right?" Magnus sneered.

Kayla dug in her pocket for the flyers from Somerset House. She pulled them out and threw them at him. They fluttered to the floor. "Read 'em an' weep, moron. It's legit, it's been around for a while, and it's got nothing to do with me. It takes runaways in off the street and protects them. It'll take the three of you. But Jaycie'd better be able to walk to get there."

Hesitantly, Magnus stooped down and picked up the flyers. Ace, still looking confused, came over and took one of them from him.

"It's a real place," Ace said slowly. "But there's a waiting list. And I don't believe they wouldn't tell your folks if . . . if they knew who you really were."

Now that Kayla knew what Ace could do, her paranoia made a lot more sense. A Talent like that—to make her hearers experience any emotion she chose—would be worth millions to whoever controlled her. No wonder she'd run away. But why hadn't Kayla ever heard of her? With an ability like that, Ace's face—if not the name Kayla knew her by—ought to be on billboards all over the country.

"It's got vacancies now. I checked today," Kayla said. "Just go and talk to them. If you don't like it, you can leave. They won't stop you. Now, let me work on Jaycie, okay?"

"Don't let her," Magnus urged.

"Yes!" Ace said. "I believe her. I don't think she's told us the whole truth, but I believe her when she says she hasn't told us any flat lies. And he's *sick*, Magnus. I don't know what's wrong with him, but he's awful sick—and whoever his folks are, they've got to be worse than yours and mine put together, the way he cries at night. We've got to help him. *You've* got to help him, Kayla," she said urgently.

"I'll do what I can," Kayla said. "Now, when I touch him, there's going to be a kind of light. Don't touch me or him while I'm working, okay? That could mess things up."

Magnus grinned without humor. "Just be careful. He could start struggling—he does that sometimes if you startle him—and he's *alot* stronger than he looks. Knocked me all the way across the floor once."

*Oh, this just keeps getting better and better,* Kayla thought. She nodded, and went back to where

Jaycie was sleeping. Though they'd been talking—and arguing—in normal voices, the boy was sleeping soundly again.

Kayla crouched on her heels, preparing to spring out of the way at the first sign of movement from Jaycie. She unzipped the sleeping bag and peeled it back, revealing Jaycie in a parka and gloves. That was no good. She needed to touch exposed skin for the best results, and all she could see was a bit of his cheekbone at the moment. She sighed and pulled off his watch cap.

Long silky black hair tumbled free.

*Huh. I wonder how he keeps it so clean?*

He didn't move, and she relaxed a little.

Very cautiously now, she brushed it away from his face, but he still didn't stir. His eyes were closed, long black lashes stark against his milky skin. *I'd have to use two tubes of Max Factor to get the same effect. It isn't fair.*

*Showtime.*

She glanced up. Ace and Magnus were standing several feet away. Apparently they hadn't been kidding about how violently Jaycie reacted to being awakened, though she doubted he could be as strong as Magnus said, not now. Well, at least her health insurance was paid up.

Kayla pulled off one of her gloves, flexed her fingers—it was cold in here—and reached for his cheek.

A spark of blue fire leapt from her fingers to his skin. She touched him, and the glow raced over his body.

*He isn't human.*

He was—

He was *Sidhe*.

But elves don't sleep —

Suddenly Kayla thought of every time she'd seen Jaycie with a can of Coke in his hand, of all the pound bars of Baker's chocolate she'd seen him wolf down.

*It's the caffeine.*

She'd known Jaycie was an addict just from watching him, and hadn't been able to figure out what he was using. Now she knew. Coca-Cola. Chocolate. Caffeine was deadly to the Sidhe. And he'd come here to poison himself with it.

*Focus!*

He was Sidhe, so caffeine was a poison—a drug—like any other. She concentrated on sweeping it out of his system, repairing the damage. She knew the way that the Sidhe "were" now, familiarly, intimately. Once you knew that, every system was alike to a Healer: it wanted to be well and whole.



But Jaycie didn't.

The stronger she made his body, the stronger she made *him*. He began to fight her.

Where's the off switch on this thing?

Normally she could simply send an unruly patient to sleep. But a healthy Sidhe didn't sleep. And he was getting healthier by the minute. He began to struggle, trying to push her away.

She reached up his spine and cut off the nerve impulses to his muscles—tricky, that, and she couldn't leave the block in place for long. Dimly, she sensed his body going limp again.

But that left his mind—awake, aware, and fighting.

*Will you chill out? I'm trying to save your life!*

A wordless response: fury, grief, despair . . . and terror, as if life was something to be fled from at all costs. Kayla soothed him as much as possible, but Healing the mind was a delicate thing, and she couldn't afford to split off too much of her attention from Healing his body.

At last she'd taken care of the worst of the damage—as much as she could in the time she had before she had to remove that spinal block, anyway. She pulled the block, releasing control of his body—

A blow from Jaycie sent her sprawling, breaking the link.

"How dare you?" he shouted, standing over her and glaring down at her, fists clenched. His eyes flared green in the dim light of The Place. "How dare you meddle in my life, you foolish mortal wench?"

Kayla stared up at him, mouth quirked in a half smile. He'd knocked her sprawling, she was dizzy from the abrupt breaking of the link, and her stomach hurt where he'd punched her, but whether because of the Healing or because she'd gotten him well and truly wound up, he'd dropped his *glamourie*. She could see his pointed ears plainly. And if she could, so could Magnus and Ace.

"You've got an audience, elf-boy," she said breathlessly.

"Oh." Jaycie looked truly appalled. He turned around.

"Magnus—Ace—I did not mean—"

"What did you do to him?" Ace cried.

*Gee, thanks a bunch.* "I didn't do anything to him," Kayla said, taking a deep breath and getting to her feet with a wince. "This is what he actually looks like. Your friend Jaycie is an elf—a Sidhe. And he's a junkie. Elves can't handle caffeine in any form. It poisons them. Coffee—chocolate—Coke—they've all got caffeine in them. And he's hooked on it."

Jaycie took a step toward them. Ace hesitated.

"Elf?" she said blankly, stunned. "Like in my books?"

"There's no such things as elves," Magnus said flatly.

"Yeah?" Kayla said. "Tell that to him."

"Magnus? Ace?" Jaycie repeated uncertainly. "I didn't want to lie, but—"

"Oh, you damned fool!" Ace cried, and threw herself into his arms. "You can be an elf if you want—I don't care—but how could you do something like that to yourself?"

"It isn't true," Jaycie said quickly, putting his arms around Ace. "She's lying."

He reached out a hand to Magnus. Hesitantly, Magnus took it, grinning in relief.

"I'm not lying," Kayla said. "And I'll tell you something else that's true. Elves do just fine a lot of places in our world, but not in New York City. There's too much iron in the air here, or all around them, or something like that. If Jaycie stays here very much longer, even without caffeine, he'll get even sicker. And die, maybe. I dunno for sure; no Sidhe I know of ever stayed around long enough to find out."

"Die?" Magnus said, looking past Jaycie to Kayla, his grin fading. "But you did that thing. We saw you."

"I fixed most of the damage that's already been done. Not the damage that hasn't been done yet," Kayla said patiently, walking over to the three of them. "Every time he takes a breath, he's hurting himself again. He needs to go home."

"Home!" Ace said cynically, stepping back from Jaycie and looking at Kayla. "None of us needs to go home."

"Jaycie does," Kayla said. "Because if he stays here in this world he's going to die. He doesn't need to go back to his own folks. Just to . . . Underhill."

"No," Jaycie said quickly. All of a sudden he looked human again, though just as stunningly beautiful as Kory had looked. Apparently the elves didn't know how to cast *aglamourieto* to make themselves look ordinary. "I won't go back. And if this is the only place in the World Above that the Sidhe don't go, then this is the only place I can be."

"You *did* lie to us," Magnus said accusingly to Kayla. "Maybe you weren't looking for me or Ace—but you were looking for *him*, weren't you? How else would you know so much about elves? How else would you know they even existed?"

She could feel the three of them drawing together, drawing away from her. Jaycie didn't want them to trust her, and he had a lot more influence over them than she did. All Kayla could do was tell the truth, and hope that Ace and Magnus cared enough about Jaycie to try to keep him alive.

"I've met elves before," Kayla said. "Lots of times. There's more of them around than you'd think. Just not here. Look—" she said desperately. "It doesn't matter what trouble you're in, any of you. Here or in Underhill. Just let me and my friends help."

"No one can help—" Jaycie began. And stopped.

It was getting darker.

Kayla stared around The Place. All the candles and lamps were still lit and burning just as brightly as they had been a moment before, but somehow it didn't seem to matter. The Place was filling with shadows. And it was getting colder. Lots colder.

"No!" Jaycie cried, sounding suddenly terrified. "Run! Run now!"

He grabbed the hands of the other two and began dragging them toward the stairs. Kayla followed.

The stairwell was absolutely black. Maybe Jaycie could see in the dark, but the other three couldn't. Ace and Magnus stumbled and cried out as he dragged them all the way to the bottom, slipping and skidding across the trash and garbage.

"Hey! Wait—" Magnus said as they passed the half-open window.

"There is no time!" Jaycie shouted out of the darkness. "If the shadows touch you they will take your will, and you will be nothing but mindless prey!"

They ran down the last flight in the dark. There was a wrenching, ripping sound, and Jaycie tore the chained and locked street door open. Light from the street shone in across the filthy lobby.

The four of them ran.

Eric drifted in an aimless, healing sleep. Something exceptionally bad had just happened—or almost happened. He was aware of that, dimly. And also that he'd been in pain, terrible pain, and had fled from it with all the power at his command.

But now that was over.

It was okay to wake up.

So he did.

Eric opened his eyes. He felt good. In fact, he felt much, much better than good.

He was lying in a bed in a room he'd never seen before. It was . . . he was somewhere Underhill.

What was he doing Underhill?

He tried to think back. His memories were jumbled and discordant. He remembered going to see his parents—Magnus—The Place—

And after that . . .

He'd been back at the SoCal Faire. But he *couldn't* have been! The Fairesite had been bulldozed years ago.

He remembered seeing Karen.

But . . . hadn't he heard that Karen had died in a bombing overseas? And Beth had said that Ian had

died in a car crash a few years back.

Had everyone he'd seen there be *dead*?

But *he'd* been there. Only . . . not as he was now. He'd been Eric Banyon at 20: feckless, irresponsible, with no particular thought for the future, living from party to party.

And there'd been a lot of parties.

He grimaced, sitting up. He supposed it had been . . . nice, in a way. But the clearer those memories became, the less he liked them, and the less he liked that Eric, the one who ran like hell from anything that looked even remotely like a commitment. He knew where he'd been, now.

*TirNaOg. The Land of Eternal Youth.*

A fine place—if you were an Irish warrior whose idea of Heaven was somewhere that held all of your other friends, and where you were all young and strong and in the prime of life forever. A lovely place, if your choice was never having to grow up. He hadn't been that far off the mark when he'd asked Karen if he was one of the Lost Boys.

But I've done a lot of growing up since then. It's all been hard, and some of it's been painful, but I wouldn't trade the life I have now for the life I had then—even an idealized version of it. I like being a grown-up.

"Ah, Bard Eric, you have awakened."

An ancient Sidhe entered the room, obviously one of those who had repaired the damage done in a catastrophe the details of which he still couldn't quite remember. Its face was androgynously beautiful; between the long flowing robes, and the Sidhe's great age, it was difficult to tell the Healer's gender—and some Sidhe just liked to keep you guessing, anyway. Eric could feel the nimbus of Power around—him? her?—without any effort.

"Yes. I, ah . . ."

"I am Healer Avalnate of Elfhame Misthold. When young Korendil told Master Dharniel of your plight, he begged of me and my sisters that we travel to the World Above to succor you in your distress. We sought and found you there, yet it was thought unwise to attempt any work of Healing in such a polluted place. So we returned with you here." Avalnate smiled coolly. "Perhaps you would have died there."

"Perhaps," Eric said, just as formally. "And so I thank you for your great care of me, and for your work on my Master's behalf."

If there was one thing Master Dharniel had managed to beat into Eric's head along with his Bardic training, it was a basic understanding of Elven protocol. If Dharniel had actually unbent so far as to ask a favor on his behalf—and it looked like it had been a very big favor—it would absolutely not do to be anything less than very formally polite.

"You will wish to dress and to see your friends. They have been as impatient as mortalkin, both young Korendil and the *lennan sidhe*."

*Lennan sidhe*, Eric knew, was the old term the elves used for a mortal who left human lands to live

Underhill with one of the Sidhe. At the moment it didn't seem to be particularly complimentary, at least not as Healer Avalnate used it.

But he kept his face smooth, simply bowing again as well as he could from a sitting position. Avalnate turned and left.

Eric threw back the covers, only to grab them again as Beth came rushing into the room, closely followed by Kory. It almost seemed silly—she'd seen him a great deal more than naked, plenty of times—but before he could sort out the impulse, she'd flung herself on him, toppling him back into the bed, weeping and covering his face with kisses.

"Eric—oh, Eric—I thought you were going to die—oh, God—when Kayla sent that e-mail—when I saw you in that hospital bed—if I ever get my hands on those punks from the park—"

"Hey— wait a minute— slow down—" Eric gasped, arms suddenly full of the both of them. "What hospital? What punks?"

Beth drew back and stared at him in disbelief. "Don't you remember?"

Eric thought hard. "I remember going up to Central Park . . . Tuesday? Yeah. Tuesday morning." But why had he been going there? *That* he couldn't remember.

"Don't worry about it," Beth said, hugging him so fiercely Eric gasped for air. "You're alive and whole, and that's all that matters!"

"Yeah—but *whathappened?*" Eric demanded plaintively.

"You were set upon by ruffians," Kory said somberly. "And did not defend yourself. They beat you until you were driven from yourself."

"Some trick," Eric said, puzzled. But a head injury would account for the scrambled memories, he guessed. He hoped he hadn't forgotten anything important.

"Kayla went looking for you—you'd lost your link to Lady Day, and she went ballistic," Beth said. "She's here, by the way; she followed you Underhill and showed up a little while after you arrived; she's down in the stables now. Anyway, Kayla *finally* got around to letting us know, and Kory was able to cast a spell that let us see what happened to you. So then we checked the hospitals until we found your body—"

"I was dead?" Eric interrupted, alarmed.

"No, just in an irreversible coma," Beth said, finally able to make jokes now that it was all over. "And in traction. You looked like Frankenstein's Mummy. So. They were just about to shut down your respirator—"

"*What?*"

"Do not tease the Bard, my heart," Kory said. "You were grievously injured, Eric, that much is true. But the worst hurt was to your mind; when Kayla attempted to touch your consciousness, she found it absent, and the Healer Elizabet counseled her not to attempt to restore your body until your mind was within it once more. So she sent us from the World Above, all being in good hands, since Ria Llewellyn

was able to stand as your worldly kinsman once she was aware of your plight—"

"Ria!" Eric said. "Where's Ria now?"

"Tied up with some business thing," Beth said, shrugging. "She didn't come to the hospital, anyway. But boy, did everyone start jumping once her personal assistant started name-dropping. You should have been there," Beth said with malicious satisfaction.

*I was. Sort of.*

"Kayla and Hosea assured us that they would do all they might to bring you back to yourself, and when the message arrived of their success though saying how much more work yet remained, I thought we might spare them that necessity. So I petitioned Prince Arvin to send Healers—though of course it was Master Dharniel who asked, since the Sisters bow not to the command of any, and Dharniel is your Master," Kory said, taking up the tale again.

And would be until the end of Time—at least technically, and for the terms of Elven protocol—Eric knew. Well, at least now he knew what sex Avalnate was.

"And the Sisters brought me down here and magicked me up good as new," Eric said, piecing it all together. "Did they tell anybody?"

Both Kory and Beth looked blank.

"Hosea, Kayla, Ria? The hospital?"

"I think they used a spell of Forgetting on the hospital," Kory said hesitantly. "So no one would see them, or remark on their presence, or that of their elvensteeds. It would have been a very strong spell," he added reassuringly.

*Maybe strong enough to wipe all memory of me out of the minds of everybody in the hospital. Or not. Magic works in freaky ways in New York.*

"How long have I been here?" Eric said, climbing out of bed and looking for his clothes. *And how long has it been since Tuesday?*

"It's just been a day, really," Beth said. "I can go e-mail Hosea and Kayla right now, Eric. Surely you can stay for just a little while? At least see Maeve before you go."

"No," Kory said, surprisingly. "Eric must go, and as quickly as may be. He has responsibilities in the World Above that will not wait. He will return as soon as he can, I know. And we will visit him, and soon."

*Because this can be TirNaOg too. Sorry, Bethie. I've got to get Magnus safe . . . and there might be something else going on I can't quite remember.*

He looked at Kory; Kory nodded, as if he had heard all those thoughts. Then Kory kissed Beth upon the forehead, got to his feet, and helped Eric find his clothes.

\* \* \*

By the time they reached Broadway, Jaycie felt safe enough to slow down a little. Kayla looked back. No shadows in sight, other than the normal ones.

"What was that?" Kayla demanded.

"Magic," Jaycie said bitterly. "Elven magic. Hunters that make their prey run in terror before them so that the huntsman may slay it." He turned away, hunching his shoulders against the cold, his long hair streaming in the wind.

"You said elves couldn't come here!" Ace said to Kayla accusingly.

"I said it wasn't safe for long," Kayla said. "*He's*here," she pointed out inarguably. And Kory came to visit Eric, too, though he was careful not to stay more than a few days.

Where could they go that was safe? The barriers at Guardian House would keep the shadow things out, she was pretty sure, but Ria'd said that might not be a safe place for her to go. And if there was going to be trouble—men-with-guns kind of trouble—Kayla didn't want to drag a bunch of innocent bystanders into it.

But Ria's apartment was shielded and warded too—well enough to keep a bunch of nasty elvish nightmares out. She hoped. And Ria had suggested she go there in the first place. So that meant it must be a place trouble wouldn't be looking for her.

"How long are they going to follow us?" Magnus asked edgily.

Jaycie didn't say anything, but his expression said everything it needed to. *Forever*.

"I know a place where we can go," Kayla said cautiously.

"Where?" Ace said.

"Don't trust her," Magnus urged.

"It's a trap," Jaycie chimed in helpfully.

Kayla could cheerfully have strangled both of them on the spot. She was pretty sure Ace would trust her, if the boys would just *shut up*.

"Okay," she said. "*Don't* trust me. So where are *you* going to go to get away from those things?"

Both of the others looked at Jaycie.

He looked scared—and fresh out of ideas. "There is nowhere. Once they have the scent of their prey, they are tireless. Not quick, but sure. And *you* must sleep." He said the last word longingly.

"We could take a train—or a bus," Ace said desperately. "Outrun them."

"Where?" Kayla said brutally. "And what's to say that you won't run into someone *else* looking for one of you?"

Magnus looked guilty and worried. Ace looked just plain scared. Neither of them said anything.

"Look. A friend of mine has a place uptown. I know this is a lot to take in right now, but it's got magical wards around it—defenses—and I don't think those shadow-things will be able to see through them. She isn't there right now, but it's okay if we use it."

For a long moment nobody said anything. Kayla could feel their suspicion, their resistance.

"Please don't trick us," Ace said softly.

"I won't," Kayla said. "I promise. It'll be a shock, but I promise. No tricks."

\* \* \*

Hosea wrestled with his conscience for almost two hours before giving in and getting his jacket.

He was going to find Kayla and Magnus.

With Eric gone, Ria incommunicado—he'd tried both her numbers and gotten no answer at either one—and Kayla in danger, there was only one thing for him to do. Little Bit was doing the best she knew how, but she'd never stopped to think that if the people Ria was worried about *were* after her, they might already be following her.

And she might have led them right back to Magnus and a bunch of scared, helpless, defenseless street kids.

There wasn't much he could do for the lot of them—but he *could* get his hands on Kayla and Magnus and bring them back here, if he had to drag them back to Guardian House kicking and screaming. And he'd keep Magnus here if he had to tie the boy to a chair to do it.

He owed it to Eric.

He looked regretfully toward Jeanette, but he couldn't take her with him this time. Still, there were a few tricks he could manage to pull off without her. Enough to make Magnus come along quietly, he imagined.

\* \* \*

But when he reached the abandoned tenement, trouble had already come calling.

The front door was hanging open, half ripped off its hinges. Ignoring the crowd of people gathered out front, Hosea summoned up his shine and walked past them and into the building. No one had gone in yet, which meant that whatever it was, it hadn't happened that long ago.

None of them noticed him. It wasn't invisibility. More like *unnoticeability*. People could see him if they looked at him. They just preferred to look elsewhere.

He went up the stairs, treading carefully in the dimness. When he'd gone up a couple of flights, he could see a glow coming from above, and the sound of hip-hop music playing.

But when he reached the place where it was, there was nobody there.

There were sleeping bags and piles of blankets scattered all over the floor, and dozens of candles left



burning all around the room. Someone—a lot of someones—had been living here very recently. But there was nobody here now. And in a few hours, when people came up and looked around, none of this stuff would be here, either.

He walked to the middle of the room, looking around. Clothes—food—CDs and music players. Nobody—especially the homeless—left that kind of stuff unattended, especially with the downstairs door hanging open like that.

Something bad had happened here.

As he stood there, not moving, something familiar caught his eye.

Kayla's backpack. She'd been here.

He hurried over to it and picked it up, tearing it open and rummaging through it. Her phone and PDA were both there. So was her wallet. She'd never leave that behind.

Not if she had a choice.

He slung it over his shoulder.

The mage-sight that Eric was trying to teach him didn't come easily yet, but after a struggle he managed to call it up and use it now, checking for clues. His vision seemed to blur and shift, and suddenly the world appeared in colors it wasn't meant to.

And he could See . . . something.

Traces of magic burned red on the walls, like spatters of blood. There were pools of dull silver near where he'd found the backpack—a different kind of magic, a better magic—but there were only a few of those, in a small area, and the red magic was everywhere, as if it had flooded the place and then seeped away. The stains seemed to pulse with a malignant life.

He turned around. The bad magic had flowed down the stairs behind him, trickling out onto the city street.

Follow the magic? He wasn't sure he could. Once it reached the street, its faint traces would be lost amid the pedestrians, the lights, and the traffic. Concentrate too hard on following the trail, and he could end up in the hospital just the way Eric had, and for much the same reason.

Suddenly Hosea froze, blinking away the mage-sight.

Someone was coming up the stairs.

\* \* \*

Eric pulled into the parking lot at Guardian House and swung his leg over Lady Day's seat. The elvensteed purred smugly, having enjoyed the run back from the Everforest Gate, especially because it had been taken at top speed under a cloak of invisibility.

Eric hurried inside, his thoughts fixed on finding out—first—*what day it was*, and then getting back up to The Place to resume his masquerade. Or . . . forget that. He was going to level with Magnus tonight and

get him somewhere safe—hell, all three of them—Ace, Magnus, Jaycie. He didn't care what they were running from. He'd protect them from it. That's what grown-ups did. They protected kids. Kids were the future.

A faint confused feeling momentarily distracted him. There was something he'd forgotten. Something important. He knew it.

But whatever it was, it would have to wait. Even with the best Elven Healing in the world, he'd taken a major knock to the head. Scattered memories took time to resurface.

He went inside.

Hosea wasn't home, and neither was Kayla. Eric went up to his own apartment.

Greystone was waiting for him there.

"You're back," the gargoyle said, sounding guilty and unhappy. "Oh, laddybuck, I wish I'd known you'd be coming a few hours ago."

"What? Why? What's wrong?" Eric demanded sharply.

"Well," Greystone said, "maybe I'd better start at the beginning."

"Talk while I change," Eric said. He was still wearing High Court finery, and needed to get into something a little more Earthly before putting in an appearance Uptown. He walked into the bedroom, pulling off his cloak and tunic as he went.

"Well, Kayla was that upset when you vanished from the hospital this morning, and everyone there was sayin' you'd never been there in the first place," Greystone began slowly.

"This morning?" Eric said, not paying a lot of attention. That's good. "What day is it?"

"Wednesday," Greystone told him.

"I've been gone a week?" Eric yelped, suddenly focusing on Greystone's words.

"Been a helluva week, boyo," Greystone said. "You were missing for most of it, and that scooter of yours was raising the roof."

Eric grinned faintly in spite of himself. Kory and Beth had told him that part. "So what happened then?" He pulled on a pair of jeans and a sweater, the closest analogues in his wardrobe for his missing "street person" garb.

"So Miss Ria thought you goin' missing might have something to do with her problems down in Washington with the hardboys, and told Kayla to hide out with the kids. So she does, and then Hosea comes around and—I couldn't help it, Boss—none of us knew where you were, or what had happened, and when—or if—you was comin' back!"

Eric turned around to face him, a black leather duster in one hand, a pair of boots in the other.

"What did you do?" he said slowly.

The gargoyle hung its head.

"I told him where The Place was. And now he's gone up there to bring Kayla and Magnus back."

Eric sighed, and shook his head. No wonder Greystone was upset. He'd told Hosea something he could only have known from reading Eric's thoughts. Eric guessed that for Greystone to do something like that was almost like a priest violating the sanctity of the confessional.

But what if he hadn't come back? What if he *had* been kidnapped by enemies, and not taken Underhill by friends—or allies at least? What if he hadn't gotten back from Underhill as quickly as he had? Hosea was his friend and his student, and Eric trusted him to do the best he could.

"Don't worry about it," Eric said gently, setting down the boots and putting a hand on Greystone's shoulder. "I would have done the same thing in your place. It'll work out." *It's going to have to.*

He stomped into his boots hastily and swung his duster around his shoulders. He'd been planning to cast an illusion over them to make them look like the clothes he'd worn before, but there was no point to it now. "How long ago did he leave?"

"About an hour ago," Greystone said with a sigh.

Eric patted the gargoyle on the shoulder. Well, whatever was going to happen had already happened by now. "Look—would you tell everybody I'm back, and fine? Everybody who knew I was gone? Kory just called in a couple of favors, and some friends of his took me Underhill to finish healing me up. Only they weren't too careful about letting anyone know I was gone." *Or covering their tracks. Or maybe the word there istoocareful, if nobody at the hospital remembers I was there in the first place. Never mind.*

"I'll do that," Greystone promised. "And you bring the kids back safe."

"The kids, Hosea, anybody who doesn't run away too fast," Eric said, forcing cheer into his voice. "You'd better put a new wing on this place, my friend."

## Chapter Fifteen: Beardance

Eric ascended the stairs of The Place slowly, having left Lady Day well down the block—and invisible—when he saw the people gathered in front of the building. The sight of the open door disturbed him, and he could sense the residue of baneful magic in the air, but that was no reason to go rushing blindly into a trap.

He got to the top of the stairs. The room inside looked empty, but he could *senses* someone waiting just inside the doorway.

Someone familiar . . .

"Hosea?" he called. "It's me. Eric."

"*Eric!*" The big man appeared in the doorway and enveloped him in a crushing bear hug, lifting him off his feet. "Boy, am Ah glad to see you! Where've you *been?*"

"Underhill," Eric said briefly. "It wasn't exactly my idea."

Hosea set him down and studied him critically. "Well, you're looking a sight better'n you did the last time Ah saw you. Got your hair back, too."

Eric put his hand up to his head, feeling his hair. It was all shoulder-length again; he'd wondered about that, but he hadn't gotten around to asking anybody about it before he'd left Elfhame Misthold.

*Oh. Brain injury. They must have shaved my head at the hospital.*

"We've got trouble here," Hosea said gravely. "Kayla was here. An' she left in too much of a hurry to take her backpack. The place was like this when Ah got here."

Eric looked around at the deserted flop. It was *never* empty this early in the evening, as he remembered—and Jaycie, Magnus, and Ace didn't go out at night at all.

"And something was chasing her—or them—or someone that was here," Eric said, piecing things together. There it was again, the sense that he was forgetting something vitally important. "I wonder what it was?"

Now that he looked—really looked—at the traces of magic on the walls, he could almost make out the thing that had left them. He whistled a few bars of "The Rising of the Moon," calling up his Power, and suddenly the traces burned bright and clear again.

Elven magic.

Unseleighe magic.

Shadow Hounds. They were a magical creature specifically adapted for use in the World Above. Not much use Underhill, where the least breath of magic could sweep them away, but here, in the human world, they were deadly.

And Jaycie—

"*That's* what I was doing in the Park that day!" Eric burst out in alarm, remembering at last. "Jaycie's a Sidhe—I was trying to summon his Protector to take him home, but I called up Bloody Mary instead! I was so worn out from my battle with her that I walked right into that wolfpack of kids without noticing them until it was too late! *That's* what happened!"

"What—whoa—slow down—" Hosea said. "What does Bloody Mary have to do with these kids?"

"I don't know," Eric said. "I thought at the time I just dialed the wrong number, so to speak, but now I'm not so sure. What if Bloody Mary's Jaycie's Protector?"

Hosea shook his head, obviously thinking that Eric hadn't quite gotten over his knock to the head. "Then

why ain't she Protecting him?" he asked, reasonably enough.

"I don't know. Maybe she's lost. *He's* sure lost. And slugging back Coke like there's no tomorrow—that's going to kill him—or send him into Dreaming at least, and I don't know what that would do to a Sidhe this far from a Node Grove. And now the Dark Court's looking for him, too—that's got to be it. We've got to find them—all of them!" Eric said urgently.

It was all coming together at last, and the picture it made wasn't a pretty one.

"If Kayla's with Magnus, and Magnus's with Jaycie, and Ace is with the lot of them, then find one, you'll find 'em all," Hosea said pragmatically. "Only how're you going to do that?"

"Now that I've been around them—and if Kayla's with them—maybe a Finding spell," Eric said hopefully.

Eric summoned up his magic again, but no matter how hard he tried—and even with Hosea lending his own Power to the Finding spell—he could gain no clear idea of their location.

After a few minutes, he gave up.

"No go. My guess is Jaycie's shielding them somehow, which means the four of them are together at least, but I have no idea where." He hesitated for a moment. "Look, Kayla probably has at least some idea of what that thing was that came after them. Where do you think she'd try to take them?"

"Maybe back to Guardian House," Hosea said, after a moment. "Nothing unchancy's going to be able to get inside. She'd know that."

"Or maybe Ria's apartment," Eric said. "That's got shields too, and Kayla's got the entry codes to get in even if Ria isn't there. We'll have to split up. You take Guardian House. See if they've made it back there. If they have, *sit on them*. And whatever you do, don't let Jaycie out of your sight. I don't know how much magic he's got, but what I do know is, if the Dark Court is hunting a Sidhe child, there's going to be *big* trouble.

"I'll take Ria's place. It's right on the Park, so I'm going to try calling up his Protector again. He or she has *got* to be here somewhere—or dead. Whatever shows up, I'll at least try to talk to it and explain about Jaycie."

"Risky," Hosea said consideringly.

"We've got to get him back Underhill before anything worse happens to him," Eric said. "And preferably without starting a war. If I can't find his Protector, I'll have to take him back through the Everforest Gate and dump a huge political hot potato right in Prince Arvin's lap, and that could be really awkward." *In fact* awkward *doesn't even begin to describe it*. . . .

"Let's get a move on, then," Hosea said.

\* \* \*

"Here?" Magnus said in disbelief.

The four of them stood outside the lobby of Ria's building on Central Park South. Kayla sighed. Now

came the tough part—not that getting them here had been easy.

"Your friend lives here," Ace said tonelessly. "And you were sleeping up at The Place."

"I said it would be a shock," Kayla said, keeping her tone deliberately neutral. "But those things can't get into her apartment. They shouldn't even be able to track you once you're inside. It's safe."

"Just tell us which one of us you were after, and we'll go in," Magnus said, smirking at her nastily.

Kayla felt a sinking feeling in her stomach. It was the question she'd have asked in his place. The three of them were terrified, and finding out about Jaycie and then being chased out of The Place by demonic shadows had been a real shock, but none of them was stupid.

"Is that a promise?" Kayla said coldly.

"You said there's nobody there?" Ace asked, hedging.

"I'll ask before we go up, okay?" Kayla said.

"That's fair," Ace agreed, nervously.

"So," Magnus said.

"Do you promise?" Kayla repeated.

"Yes," Ace said, looking as if she was going to be sick.

"All three of you?" Kayla insisted.

"Let's go away," Jaycie said.

"Where?" Ace demanded. "With those *things* after you? Where can we go? We left all our stuff back at The Place, and I'm sure not going back for mine."

Finally—with Ace glaring at them—the other two grudgingly promised to go inside.

"I was looking for Magnus—but *not* because of his parents. For someone who's about as fond of his parents as he is. Someone who wants to keep him away from them at all costs. So Eric was trying to find you before that hotshot PI they hired did," Kayla said, speaking half to Ace and half to Magnus.

"Eric?" Magnus said blankly.

"Yeah," Kayla said. *Might as well tell him the whole thing.* "You've got an older brother, moron. He ran away from home before you were born—your 'rents tried to make a musical prodigy out of him, too, and he didn't like it either. So he finally goes back to see them, and finds out about you, and that you've bailed too, only you aren't eighteen like he was, and they're going to drag you back."

"So what— How come— Why—" Magnus stammered, flustered.

"Because he found out they hadn't told you about him, and he didn't think you'd believe him if *he* told you, and he was afraid you'd just run off again and get your ass in a sling. And now he's disappeared, and

nobody knows where he is. And now these things are after us, and we're standing in the street where they can get at us. So will you come on?" Kayla snarled.

They went inside.

"Good evening, Ms. Smith," the security man said.

"Hi, Ramon," Kayla said, sighing inwardly. "Is Ria back yet?"

"No," Ramon said cheerfully. "But you can go right on up."

"Thanks," Kayla said. "They're with me," she added, waving in the direction of the other three. *I hope.*

She ushered the other three over to the penthouse elevator at the far end of the lobby and punched in Ria's code. The doors opened.

The kids hesitated, unwilling to get in.

"Come on, guys," Kayla pleaded, "I've been straight with you."

But she could tell that seeing the elevator—the *penthouse* elevator—and hearing Ramon greet her by name had been too much. She was losing them, losing even the fragile trust she'd been able to build.

Jaycie reached out—

A flash of light exploded in her face, and Kayla fell back, stunned.

\* \* \*

Hosea got back to Guardian House in record time. The place was quiet. Kayla's apartment was empty—he still had her spare set of keys, so he checked it, just to be sure.

Eric's place was similarly deserted—he knew Kayla had the code to Eric's apartment—the upstairs apartments all had key-code pads instead of key locks—so she might have gone there.

Last of all he checked his own apartment. Maybe she'd called from a street phone.

She hadn't. But someone else had.

"Hosea? It's me. Caity. Oh, I wish you were there! Listen. Julie just called. There's something tonight—in a hour—up at Neil's place. Something big. And . . . I don't think I like it much. Hosea . . . Sarah's daughter Amanda's going to be there. She's only four. I just thought . . . I think . . . That can't be *right*, can it? Anyway, I just thought . . . But there isn't anything you can do. I wish—"

The answering machine cut off, and Hosea never did find out just what it was that Caity wished.

He knew, though. Clear and plain, in the silences and unfinished sentences of the answering machine message was one simple plea: *Hosea—help me!*

At last he had the freedom to interfere with Master Fafnir's group.

And it had come at the worst possible time.

He grabbed Jeanette and slung the strap of her carrying case over his shoulder, and ran downstairs to Toni's apartment.

\* \* \*

Fortunately Toni was there. She opened the door at Hosea's frantic pounding, took one look at his face, and ushered him into the bedroom where they could be private. He could hear the television going in her living room, and knew that Raoul and Paquito, Toni's two young sons, were probably firmly ensconced in front of it at this hour.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Caity's called for help," Hosea said shortly. "Apparently this cult she's gotten tangled up in is throwing a big party tonight, and she says that they're bringing the four-year-old daughter of one of the members to it."

"That's bad," Toni said, making a face. "You know where?"

Hosea nodded. "And nothin' Ah can't handle. But Eric an' me are tangled up in another matter right up to our eyes too, an' Ah'd appreciate a little help there." Quickly, he laid out the details of what he and Eric had discovered earlier that evening up at The Place, plus what Eric had told him about what had happened up at Central Park a week before.

"Wait a minute," Toni said. "Eric thinks that Bloody Mary and this Elven Protector are *thesame thing*? And he *cancall it up*?"

"Ah don't credit it myself," Hosea said. "The first part, anyhow. But that he can call it up somehow, or that it's drawn to him somewise—that Ah believe."

"Well, then, at least we have a place to start. Finally," Toni said. "When the rest of this is over, we'll have to ask him for a demonstration, and get rid of her once and for all. Meanwhile—go. If Kayla and the other kids show up here, we'll grab them. I'll have Greystone keep a special eye out. And if any shadow-things show up, we'll be prepared."

\* \* \*

Eric, riding Lady Day this time, returned to the place he'd originally cast his first spell. Lady Day's magical senses were a lot keener than his own, and the elvensteed would protect him from casual muggers—by Gating him to Underhill, if nothing else would serve. And if he actually was dealing with either a crazed Protector or something Unseleighe, he'd prefer not to risk any innocent bystanders being hurt when it showed up.

*If* it showed up.

This time, having some idea of what his Calling might summon, he took time to build defenses—serious defenses—around himself and Lady Day before he started. When he was done, the spell walls were almost visible to the unMagely eye, hanging in shimmering purple and green curtains around the two of them.



Eric summoned up his Flute of Air and began to play "God Bless The Child," wrapping his Calling spell around the melody—now *there* was an appropriate tune. He thought of Jaycie as he'd last seen him. Scared, and lost, and angry—and drugged on caffeine—surely somebody cared that he was missing? Surely somebody wanted him back?

Suddenly—just as before—the temperature dropped sharply and the dark night went darker. Just as before, Eric was surrounded by a howling storm of grief bordering on madness, but this time he'd come prepared, and his shields deflected the worst of it.

"I've seen him!" he shouted, hoping he was talking to the right person. "I've seen your charge! He's alive and well!" Not well exactly, not mainlining caffeine the way he was, but this was no time to equivocate or go into details.

Had he guessed right? Did the violence of the storm battering his shields seem to draw back, to lessen?

"He's somewhere in Manhattan!" Eric shouted. "The Dark Court has sent a Shadow Pack after him! You've got to find him before it's too late! I'll help you search, if you'll let me!"

And suddenly the storm was gone, without answering.

Cautiously Eric lowered his defenses, wary of further attack. But Jaycie's Protector—if *it had* been Jaycie's Protector—was truly gone.

Had he really accomplished anything, other than proving he could, indeed, summon the same being twice? Maybe. He wasn't quite sure—maybe he'd given hope where there'd been none before.

Or warned Jaycie's enemies that there was someone on their trail.

Though now that he came to think of it, a Shadow Pack was an odd weapon to send against one of the Sidhe. Even a very young Sidhe . . .

\* \* \*

"Are you all right, Ms. Smith?"

Ramon was standing over her.

She was lying on the floor. Her head hurt where she'd banged it against the wall.

Jaycie had done . . . something.

When I get my hands on that elf-boy, I'm gonna tie his pretty pointy ears in knots, Kayla vowed furiously.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. Slipped." Kayla struggled to her feet.

She looked around. The three of them were gone. Of course.

"Did you see . . . ?" she asked hopefully.

Raoul shrugged apologetically. "Just ran out of here like their tails were on fire. You sure you're all

right?"

"Yeah. Kickin'." Kayla walked stiffly to the door of the lobby and looked out.

Nothing.

She rubbed the back of her head. She leaned back against the doorway, closing her eyes for a moment. This day had gone onwaytoo long. Last night she'd been up at Gotham General, trying to put Eric back together. This afternoon she'd found out somebody'd stolen him. Then Ria told her that somebody might be after her. Tonight she found out Jaycie was an elf and somebody was afterhim. It'd been a busy day.

"Maybe you oughtta come over and sit down awhile," Ramon said, sounding anxious.

"I'm fine," Kayla said. "Really. Thanks." And I've got a killer headache. And I just realized I left my wallet up at The Place. Good-bye Visa card, cash, ID . . . My life is now officially perfect.

She still had her keys and her subway card, though. She could get back to Guardian House. Or she could go upstairs. Ria kept some cash there. She'd be a lot more mobile with that. She could call Hosea. Maybe her backpack was still up at The Place. Maybe—against all odds—they'd gone back there. He could check for her. And then she could take off after the kids.

She turned around and walked back into the building and called the elevator again.

Forget The Place. The shadow-things had scared them out of there and, like Ace had said, they wouldn't go back there. So where were theyreallylikely to go? They'd be too paranoid to try to get into any of the shelters, it was too cold to try to sleep in the open—they'd be risking arrest anyway—and they knew they had those shadows chasing them—what had Jaycie said about that? Slow but sure? So they wouldn't want to stop and hole up anywhere for fear the things would catch up with them, just for starters.

The elevator doors opened and Kayla walked out into Ria's penthouse.

She'd spent a certain amount of time here when Ria had been moving in—funny how Ria hadn't wanted to take any of her decorating hints—so she knew where everything was. Her first stop was the guest bathroom, where she grabbed a bottle of Excedrin and made for the kitchen. She opened the fridge and pulled out a bottle of orange juice, and slugged down six Excedrin along with half a quart of OJ straight from the bottle.

*Excedrin. Sixty mg. of caffeine per tablet. Another elf designer drug du jour.*

She rummaged around Ria's refrigerator further—fully stocked with the latest weekly delivery from Balducci's, all untouched because Ria hadn't been here—until she located a carton of something that looked good. She grabbed a spoon and wolfed it down cold, barely stopping to chew. She grudged the wasted time, but Healing Jaycie had taken a lot out of her, and she knew she needed to recharge. She finished the orange juice and then went in search of the play money.

It was in a drawer in a desk in Ria's study—what Ria called "pizza money"; only a couple of hundred dollars. Kayla took it all, stuffing it into her jeans pocket.

Then she called Hosea. No answer. She slammed the phone down in disgust, not bothering to leave a message.

*Looks like I'm on my own.*

But where was she going to go? Where would *they* go?

*They can't stop, not for more than a few minutes. So they have to keep moving. Subways won't work, because the trains always come back to the same place and the shadows might be smart enough to figure that out.*

*And they know—at least Ace and Magnus know—that New York isn't good for Jaycie. So they'll want to get him out of here.*

*So that leaves train or bus, to get out of the city. And bus is cheaper, and stops in more out of the way places.*

"Next stop, Port Authority Bus Terminal," Kayla said. *And hope I'm right.*

\* \* \*

"What did you do to her?" Ace demanded, when they finally stopped running.

"Nothing," Jaycie said. "Just . . . nothing. A little shove. But we had to get away. I don't trust her. She was lying."

"She *had* to be lying," Magnus said, sounding desperate. "I can't have a brother! And for it to be . . . Eric? It doesn't add up. He'd have to be, like, *old*, and that guy wasn't. Not *that* old, anyway."

"Well, we can't go back there now," Ace said pragmatically. "So where are we going to go? I've still got Jaycie's money." *At least we have that much.*

"And I can get more," Jaycie said positively.

Ace pulled them into the shelter of a doorway and dug out her wallet. It was thick with cash. She counted it quickly, and blinked at the total she arrived at. Almost a thousand dollars.

Where could they go? Big cities were best—nobody looked twice at you in a big city. But maybe all big cities would make Jaycie sick. And people were looking for all three of them, she knew that now. Whatever else Kayla had lied about, she didn't think she'd been lying when she'd said Magnus' parents were looking for him. And Magnus seemed to think they were, too.

*Move now. Think later.*

"Come on," Ace said wearily.

\* \* \*

Eric had gone to try to reach Jaycie's Protector first for two reasons—one, if it had worked, it would have simplified everything and given him a powerful ally. And two, it would have been much more difficult—and possibly dangerous—to cast the spell with the kids in tow, assuming he'd actually caught up with them at Ria's.

But now Eric wondered if he should have skipped that step. Even with Lady Day to get him around the city quickly, he'd lost valuable time. And the windows of Ria's penthouse were dark.

Still, checking to see if someone was there—or had been there—would only take a minute or two.

He parked Lady Day in the yellow "no stopping, standing or breathing" zone in front of the building and walked in.

"Hi, Ramon. Anybody home?"

"Hi, Eric. Good to see you again, sir." It had taken Eric weeks to get the staff of Ria's building to use his first name, because he loathed being called "Mr. Banyon." He still couldn't get rid of the "sirs," though. He supposed that was part of what most of the tenants in a place like this paid for.

"Ms. Llewellyn's still away, and you just missed Ms. Smith. She was here for a few minutes with some friends of hers. They didn't stay. And she left about half an hour ago," Raoul said helpfully.

There was something odd about the way he put it. *They didn't stay . . . she left . . .*

"Were they together when she left?" Eric asked, on a hunch.

"Oh, no, sir," Ramon said. "They left, and Ms. Smith went on up to the penthouse alone."

That didn't make any sense. Ramon had to mean that Kayla had been here with Magnus, Ace, and Jaycie. But if they'd split up, he ought at least to be able to locate Kayla now.

"Thanks, Ramon. Have a good evening."

He went back out to Lady Day and mounted, letting the elvensteed find her way out into traffic again.

"Let's find Kayla!" he shouted over the noise of her engine, and felt the elvensteed's eager assent.

\* \* \*

They caught up to the taxi at a light.

Kayla was sitting inside—alone—hunched forward on the seat, looking cross. Eric leaned over and knocked on the passenger window.

She glanced up—angry, startled, not recognizing him at all, even though he'd taken the obvious precaution of removing his helmet so she could see his face. Then her expression cleared into one of utter relief and delight, and she made a grab for the door.

At that moment, the light changed and the taxi pulled away.

Eric followed, watching the silent pantomime of Kayla arguing with the driver, but it was another several blocks before the man managed to find a hole in traffic and pull over. He pulled up just behind the cab and dismounted from Lady Day once more. She balanced, rather smugly, on her two wheels, but he didn't worry about anyone noticing, not right now. If anybody saw, they'd probably just think it was some new kind of motorcycle. New Yorkers were notoriously unflappable. They took pride in it. Unsinkable, unflappable New Yorkers.

Kayla flung herself at him and hugged him hard.

"Oh, Jesus, Banyon, where've you *been*?" She pulled back and punched him in the arm. Hard. "We were worried half *todeath*. I thought Ria was going to lose it big time. You better call her if you want to live. And . . . nice hair." She grinned, reaching out to flip his hair back over his shoulder.

"First things first," Eric said. "There's an Unseleighe Shadow Pack after Jaycie. He's—"

"An elf. Yeah, I got that part. I Healed him up earlier this evening an' he dropped the moonlight and roses long enough for Ace and Magnus to see what he really looked like. And then this dark stuff started boiling out of the walls and we ran like hell. That's the short version. I tried to get them to Ria's, on account of it's being shielded there, but they wouldn't go for it. Almost did. But at the last minute, the elf-boy knocked me on my ass with a light show and they bolted."

Eric winced. "Any idea where they're headed?"

"I'm guessing Port Authority. They know they gotta keep moving because of the Shadows, an' I told them the city's making Jaycie sick, and I think Ace believes me."

"Come on then," Eric said.

\* \* \*

Port Authority Bus Terminal, at Ninth Avenue and Forty-Second Street, on the western end of Times Square, was open 24 hours a day. It had been built in 1950, and gotten a multimillion dollar overhaul that had finished at the end of 2001. The terminal itself covered five stories, plus a three-floor car park on the top level, and on a typical day, 200,000 people used it. It was big, sprawling, and complicated, and over thirty bus lines called it home. Not an easy place to search, even at this time of night, with most of the place shut down.

Eric left Lady Day outside the main entrance, not bothering to park—the elvensteed could fend for herself, and move if she needed to.

They went inside.

"We'll check the ticket windows first," Eric decided, looking around. "They might still be buying their tickets. Then the gates."

"Sounds like a plan," Kayla said doubtfully.

"Best we've got," Eric said grimly. "I just hope they're here—or it's back to square one, and we're running out of time and choices."

\* \* \*

"Which one?" Magnus said, as they walked into the bus terminal. He'd been here once before—on his way down from Boston, but he hadn't been paying a lot of attention then.

"Greyhound," Ace said decisively. "It goes the most places, and we can get off at any of the stops if we see someplace we like. Come on."

She led the other two over to the ticket window and studied the list of destinations critically. Miami. That was good. Three one-way tickets would only be a little over three hundred dollars. Miami was a long way from New York. And at least it would be someplace warm.

She told the clerk her destination, hoping nothing would go wrong. It seemed to take a long time to print out the tickets. The clerk told her the gate number, and added: "You'd better hurry. It's a long way to the gate, and the last bus for tonight leaves in half an hour. Next one won't be until tomorrow morning."

"Thank you, ma'am," Ace said politely. She turned around to hand the tickets to the boys.

And stared.

Magnus was right there, looking bored and irritated.

But Jaycie was gone.

She grabbed Magnus by the arm and hustled him out of earshot of the ticket agent. By now Magnus had realized that Jaycie wasn't with them, and was looking around wildly.

"Where is he?" Ace hissed.

"I just—"

"Well *find him!*" As an afterthought, she thrust Magnus' ticket at him, precious little good it was going to do him now, since certainly neither of them was going to leave without Jaycie. She looked up and down the concourse. It looked like the world's largest shopping mall, even with half the places closed up for the night. Jaycie was nowhere in sight.

"You check down that way—I'll go this. We'll meet at the gate in half an hour. That's when the bus is supposed to leave. If we've got him, we can go. If not, we can keep looking for him together."

"What if he just . . ." Magnus said, and stopped. Neither of them wanted to be the first to say it. *What if he's just run out on us?*

"He wouldn't do that," Ace said, but there was no certainty in her voice. "He needs us." *We need him. Jaycie . . .*

She turned away, starting to run.

\* \* \*

His head hurt. He was sick. And everything was going wrong. He wanted chocolate. He wanted Coca-Cola. And most of all, he wanted it to be *yesterday*, before that Healer girl had come back and spoiled everything with her tales.

Jaycie wandered through the terminal, looking into the barred windows of the closed shops. What he wanted was in there, but he couldn't get in. Simple locks were no problem, and he could charm nearly anyone he met into giving him anything, but these doors were sealed with bars of steel, and there was no one about to charm.

All he wanted was a few cans of Coca-Cola. And some chocolate. He didn't feel at all well without it. And it would be hard to talk Ace and Magnus into letting him have them now. They might actually believe the Healer girl had been telling the truth. And he wasn't completely sure of his ability to convince them otherwise.

He'd go back to the others once he had what he needed. And maybe he could talk them out of leaving the city. The Healer girl—who knew far too much about Jaycie's kind—had said this was a safe place, a place the Sidhe didn't come. They should stay here.

But the Shadow Hunt was here. So that meant this place wasn't safe either. But who would send a Shadow Hunt after *him*? It made no sense.

Then he saw bright lights up ahead, and a familiar logo, and forgot all about the Shadow Hunt. He couldn't read the languages of the World Above, but he knew its symbols very well.

*Coca-Cola.*

\* \* \*

"*There he is.*" Kayla's voice was a low whisper. She nudged Eric and pointed.

She'd had the advantage—at least she'd known what the kids were wearing when they'd started running. That made Magnus easy for her to spot.

She and Eric slid over to him.

Knowing what he now knew—that it had been Jaycie's magic he and Ria had sensed in the beginning, not Magnus', Eric was free to cloak himself and Kayla in an invisibility spell, so they were able to approach Magnus unseen. He might not have noticed them anyway; he was alone, walking quickly through the Terminal, obviously searching desperately for something or someone.

"Miss me?" Kayla said, stopping in front of him just as Eric dropped the spell.

To Magnus, it must have seemed as if she'd appeared out of nowhere. He staggered backward, and bumped into Eric.

The boy had fast reflexes. He gathered himself to bolt just as Eric grabbed his arm, and between Jaycie's true appearance and the Shadow Hunt, he'd seen enough strange things tonight not to waste time boggling at inessentials. He struggled for a moment, but Eric was stronger than he was—and had the advantage of having been trained in swordplay Underhill besides. That put muscle on you.

When Magnus realized he couldn't break Eric's grip, he stopped fighting.

"I'll scream," Magnus threatened.

"Call the cops," Eric pointed out reasonably, "and you go straight back to Boston."

Magnus shut up as if he'd been gagged.

"Where are Ace and Jaycie?" Kayla demanded.

Magnus remained stubbornly silent.

"Look," Eric said. "I don't *want* to send you back to Boston. I want to help you."

"Yeah, she already told me you're my brother. I don't believe it," Magnus said flatly.

Stalemate.

\* \* \*

*Where would he go?* Ace wondered desperately, running through the half-empty terminal. Suddenly Kayla's words earlier came back to her—about Jaycie being a junkie, kind of, hooked on Coca-cola. She remembered how he'd drunk it practically every moment he was awake, back at The Place, going through two or three six-packs a day.

He hadn't had any all night.

She looked around for the nearest security guard and ran over to him, taking a deep breath and trying to look calm.

"'Scuse me, sir, could you tell me what's open to get something this time of night? Just candy bars or Cokes?"

He thought about it for what seemed a maddeningly long time.

"Well, not much this time of night. There's Hudson News—there's one up on Third Floor North, but I think that's closed this time of night. The one on Second should be open, though. There's a map right over there."

"Thank you!" Ace said. She hurried over to the map. There it was, smack in the middle of a bunch of other shops, as many as a mall. She got her bearings, and headed for it at a dead run.

\* \* \*

Jaycie stood in front of the cooler at the back of the newsstand, happily chugging down Coca-Colas. He drank three immediately, and felt much better. He tucked another six into the pockets of his parka for later, set the empty cans back into the cooler, and turned to walk out of the kiosk.

"Hey—you gonna pay for those?"

Jaycie smiled—it had always worked before—and *wished* very hard that the man would just let him walk away. But he was a little dizzy from the sudden rush of caffeine—his system wasn't as used to it after the Healing as it had been before—and the man only frowned.

"You gotta pay for those, you know," the man repeated. Not angry, but not letting Jaycie walk away, either.

Jaycie took an uncertain step backward. He didn't have any money. He'd given all of it to Ace. Should he run?

Slowly the lights began to dim.



\* \* \*

There was a sudden blast of light down the concourse.

Eric's first thought—everyone's first thought these days—was: *bomb!*

Eric flung Kayla and Magnus to the ground, throwing up as much of a shield over all of them as he could in that instant. But the seconds passed, and there was no shock wave, no fireball, no rain of debris. He looked up, abruptly sensing the currents of Sidhe magic.

There was an Elven Warrior in the Main Concourse of the Port Authority Bus Terminal.

She was tall, wearing full battle armor that gleamed bright silver, a long blue cloak hanging from her shoulders. With a gleaming two-handed broadsword she was swinging at shadow-things that boiled and snapped around her, half smoke, half dog. She'd already pretty much demolished the newsstand. Alarms were going off—Eric could hear them—and in moments police and security would arrive.

He hauled himself up off Magnus and Kayla and went running toward her.

\* \* \*

The Shadow Hunt had found them. Jaycie turned to run. There was no time to argue, to even try to cast *aglamourie*, or to try to sweep the Shadows back into the Overworld. He had to find the others and run before it was too late.

Then the world exploded in a flash of light, and *shewas* there. She'd found him and she'd take him back, to all the terrible things he'd fled from.

He ducked away from her and fled in the only direction left. The man behind the counter leaped out and began to pursue him, only to be knocked sprawling with one blow from his Protector's armored fist.

Suddenly the air was filled with bells. Mortal bells. Warning bells.

"Jaycie!"

Ace grabbed him. He struggled, but she clung to his jacket, and he could not throw her off without hurting her.

"She comes for me!" he cried in terror.

Ace turned to run, and found herself staring directly into the barrel of a security guard's gun.

\* \* \*

They all started gathering together at Neil's about ten o'clock. Fafnir had picked tonight because it was his night off, and he wasn't sure how long this would take, especially if something really dramatic happened. It would be nice to have a good solid payoff after putting up with all their crap for a whole year and more. Sure, September 11th had helped—after that, everybody had wanted to believe that there were Secret Good Guys out there working behind the scenes to make everything better. But it was over a year since then. He needed to hammer them a little. Make sure he got some really nice Christmas

presents.

With both the Inner and Outer Circles gathered, and no outsiders tonight—tonight he wasn't looking for new blood—there were almost two dozen people there. That number jammed Fafnir's own living room to the walls, but Neil's living room wasn't even really crowded. Fafnir felt the dull angry heat of resentment. Why should Neil live in a place like this just because he had that nice soft brokerage job, and Fafnir be crammed into that grubby downtown apartment, even if it was free? It wasn't fair. He deserved more. He was *better* than Neil, better than all of them. He was smarter. He had more imagination. He'd *made all of this up*. All the stuff about the False Guardians, and the True Guardian and the Secret Master, and the Inner Planes—he'd gotten some ideas from the comic books, and a little from what Andrew had told him, but most of it was his own idea. *He* was the one who deserved to be living like this, not a Wall Street drone like Neil!

Well, they'd see. After tonight, they would definitely see.

He saw Sarah come in with Amanda, and crossed the room to her, smiling warmly. Without little Amanda, he was pretty sure none of this would work. And *it had* to work.

"Sarah. Tonight will be a very special night—for all of us." He concentrated on turning up the charm. He needed Sarah to keep Amanda in line, if nothing else.

"Oh yes," Sarah said. She was carrying Amanda, and the girl's head lolled sleepily on her shoulder. Fafnir frowned.

"She was so fussy earlier," Sarah said apologetically. "I had to give her one of the pills her doctor prescribed. I didn't know what else to do. I would have gotten a sitter, but you said I really ought to bring her."

"It is necessary," Fafnir said austerely. Why couldn't the idiot bitch control her own daughter? Amanda wouldn't be any use to him at all if she was asleep! And he could hardly give her a couple of lines of blow to wake her up, even though he bet Neil had some stashed away around here somewhere.

"She'll wake up soon," Sarah said anxiously. "They're really mild."

"Of course," Fafnir said kindly. "Sarah, you know I do not like to interfere in the sacred bond between mother and child, but those of us with the Etheric Gifts are not quite as ordinary men and women, and drugs which are perfectly safe and even wholesome for others to take can have unfortunate consequences for us, shutting down—or even forcing open—senses that we try hard to discipline through constant effort. Forgive me for speaking, but Amanda and I have worked so long and hard together. . . ."

Sarah's blue eyes filled with tears. "Oh, Master, I'm so sorry! Forgive me—I didn't think—"

"It is Amanda whose forgiveness you should ask, Sarah, dear, not mine," he said gently, and moved on.

*There. That should book that brainless meatbag on a nice guilt trip.*

The last two to arrive were Caity and Juliana. Caity'd tried to say she couldn't come this evening, so Fafnir had sent Juliana down to pick her up. Caity was the fat little artist who'd come to the Open Party with that enormous hillbilly, and Fafnir had no intention of letting her get away. She was generous and—up until now—had been a fervent follower.

Why hadn't she wanted to come tonight? That was unusual, and he didn't like the sheep doing unusual things. It might mean they were trying to think for themselves. And he couldn't allow that, especially now.

Fafnir went over to the two of them, smiling beguilingly. Juliana—as usual—melted like a schoolgirl with her first crush. Usually Caity did too. But not tonight.

"Caity, dear girl. You look troubled." He took her hand and brought it to his lips. He would have kissed it, but she hadn't taken off her mittens yet. He settled for gazing commandingly into her eyes.

"I've been worried, Master Fafnir," she said softly.

"Child, you may always bring your deepest troubles to me. I will always hear them," he said. Finally he felt the last of her resistance dissolve, and suddenly he thought he could guess the reason behind her hesitation. "And after tonight, we will all be safe. That is why I wanted Amanda with us. If her mother is to be a target for the wrath of the False Guardians, how could I in good conscience leave her innocent daughter unprotected?"

Relief flooded Caity's face. "*Isthatwhy?*" she said. "I thought—"

"You thought I would use the child as a mere tool. Oh, Caity—that is the action of our enemies, not my work," he said chidingly.

Caity blushed a deep scarlet, and Fafnir knew he had guessed exactly right. Stupid cow.

"Now come. Remove your outer garments, and prepare to take your places, so that the Great Work can begin."

\* \* \*

In preparation for this evening, Neil had bought several cases of jar candles, and now he began setting them out around the edge of the room. Three large braziers—also bought new, to save the trouble of bringing the three up from Fafnir's apartment—were prepared and lit, and soon fragrant frankincense smoke began spiraling up toward the ceiling.

"It isn't going to stain anything, is it?" Neil asked anxiously.

"Shut up, Neil," Juliana said poisonously.

"Please," Fafnir said, raising his hand. "No anger now. We face enough anger from those who wish us harm."

His acolytes subsided, focusing all their attention on him, as was only right.

They were gathered in three concentric rings around him and Amanda. The two of them were in the center. Fafnir was seated in his favorite chair, his back to the window. The drapes were drawn. Amanda, still a little groggy, was seated on his lap.

On a small table before them stood the Eye of the Inner Planes, the only ritual item Fafnir *had* brought from his apartment. Around them were his acolytes, closely packed together, the knees of those behind against the backs of those in front of them.

"Now, Evan, turn out the lights, and we shall begin," he said.

One of the Outer Court acolytes in the outermost ring got to his feet and turned out the living room lights. Now the room was lit solely by the light of the ring of flickering candles. The crystal ball in the center of the circle seemed to draw that light to itself, glowing a lunar blue.

Fafnir sat there in silence for almost a minute, letting the months of conditioned response take effect. The darkness, the candles, the incense, the sight of the crystal ball, all had their effect. The room was absolutely silent, the closely packed group of people swaying slightly as they slipped into an entranced state.

"Concentrate, my young Guardians-to-be," Fafnir said. "Reach down into yourselves. Summon up the power that is within you. Call forth the Protector!"

"The Protector—the Protector—" they began to chant softly.

Amanda was drowsy enough that he hardly needed his pendulum to put her under this time.

"Look into the crystal ball, Amanda," Fafnir whispered in her ear, under cover of the soft chanting. "See the lady in the crystal ball? Remember the lady in the crystal ball? Call her. Bring her here."

And Amanda did.

## Chapter Sixteen: Battle Of Aughrim

"Stay here!"

Eric ran toward the Protector—hoping it *was* Jaycie's Protector, and not some new menace from Underhill. He needed to put a lid on this situation *now*.

He stopped a few feet away.

"Look. He's right there."

Eric pointed. Jaycie and Ace were standing staring at a very nervous security guard, who obviously couldn't make up his mind whether they were part of the problem or innocent victims.

Quickly Eric reached out with his magic, spreading a ring of Sleep around the immediate area. A little sloppy—Master Dharniel would criticize his performance—but it would keep anybody from getting shot. The guard—and all the rest of the emergency personnel arriving in answer to the alarms—quickly crumpled to the ground, deeply asleep.

"Jaycie!"

He heard Magnus shout from behind him, and heard Kayla yell in protest. Magnus ran past him, oblivious to the danger the Elven Knight presented, heading directly for Jaycie.

She lashed out at him with her sword, striking him with the flat of the blade and knocking him skidding across the floor, and advanced on Jaycie.

"Magnus!" Eric shouted, turning toward him, terrified. *If this is what parenthood feels like, I don't like it.*

"He's okay—he's okay!" Kayla said, kneeling over him, and yanking off her gloves. "Busted rib—that's all. I'm on it!"

Eric turned back to the Protector. "Now, look—" he said.

Suddenly she recoiled, dropping her sword and beginning to wail.

It was a horrible sound, a sound of death, and loss, and bereavement bordering on madness. He'd heard it before—in the Park, when he'd tried to call her. But Eric could sense no form of attack. Either it was a spell only she could sense . . . or prolonged exposure to New York had driven her mad.

As she howled she began to *change*, her armor shimmering and flowing like water, turning into long flowing robes. She clawed at her face—whatever was happening to her, the Elven Protector was obviously fighting it—and losing the fight.

"No, no, *no!*" Magnus screamed. "*Don't let her get me!*"

Kayla had finished her Healing, but the boy was obviously terrified half out of his wits, staring over her shoulder at Jaycie's Protector and trying to scabble away.

:Lady Day, come and get us out of here,:Eric thought to his 'steed.:Quietly.:

Abruptly the Protector vanished.

The wailing stopped.

It was suddenly very quiet. Jaycie started to back away.

"*Stop.*" Eric put all the force of a Command into that one word. Jaycie stopped where he was. Ace clung to his arm, staring at Eric.

They had to get out of here. Fast. Before more police showed up. And more to the point, they had to cover up the damage they'd done here tonight, starting with the kiosk.

A simple spell—like Elven *kenning*, but one that a Bard could perform—repaired the damage to the newsstand, as he asked the kiosk to "remember" its previous condition. Next, a spell of Forgetting on everyone here to cover kids, Shadows, and Elven Knights. It wouldn't take care of everything, but they'd come up with explanations of their own. Maybe they'd put it down to a malfunction in the alarm system. Eric knew he was going to pay for this later, but that was then, and this was now.

Lady Day rolled in down the Main Concourse.

"Come on," Eric said.

He gathered them all together, standing close around the elvensteed. Jaycie was still docile—thanks to

Eric's Command—but the spell wouldn't hold past the Gate.

"Take us home," Eric said.

\* \* \*

"Very funny," he said a moment later. "Now go in the bedroom. I'll figure out how to get you downstairs and out of the apartment tomorrow."

Lady Day, very meekly, wheeled herself down the hall, nudged open the door of Eric's bedroom, and slipped inside.

Eric looked at the four of them.

Magnus still looked terrified; so terrified, he barely noticed he'd been teleported into Eric's apartment. Kayla was holding onto him, just as she had been when she'd dragged him over to the 'steed back in the Port Authority.

"She— That's— If you see her, you'll die," Magnus said, almost stammering.

"Nobody's going to die," Eric said firmly. He went over and stood directly in front of Magnus, forcing the boy to look at him. "We're going to talk," Eric said firmly. "Which we should have done in the first place, except I guess I still had a little growing up to do. Magnus, I really am your brother Eric. I don't look as old as I should because I've spent quite a bit of time Underhill with the elves. Learning magic."

"There isn't any such thing as magic," Magnus said desperately, blinking hard to hold back tears.

Kayla moved away from Magnus over to Ace and Jaycie, putting her arm around the younger girl and speaking to her soothingly. Eric caught the words "Ria Llewellyn" and "lawyers." He wondered what Kayla was saying. He turned his attention back to Magnus.

"Yes, there is. I've got the talent for it. Since you're my brother, you probably do, too. If that's the case, you'll have to learn how to use it properly. Or keep from using it, if that's what you want. Either way, you're not going back to Boston. Our parents don't deserve to have custody of a houseplant, let alone a child."

"You can't stop them," Magnus said sullenly. "I'm only seventeen."

"Oh, yeah?" Eric said. "I'm of legal age, and I'm your brother. I'll sue for custody. And you aren't going to spend another minute beneath their roof. I promise you that."

"I hate classical music!" Magnus burst out desperately. "I want to be a drummer like Neil Peart! I never want to play the piano again!"

"Fine," Eric said. "Just let me help."

"And Jaycie? And Ace? Them too?" Magnus asked.

"Yes," Eric promised. He already knew he had to help Jaycie somehow—whether by reuniting him with his Protector, or by taking him Underhill—and as for Ace, if Ria and all her lawyers couldn't do something there, Ace could simply disappear Underhill as well. There were certain advantages to having

the Sidhe for friends.

At that moment, the window opened and Greystone poked his head in, looking around. "Och, laddie, ye fair deafened me with that last blast. Is this the wee bairn, then? Faith, bucko, you've given us all a good bit o' trouble! Greystone, at your service." He bowed.

"It's a talking mon—stat—mut—*thing*," Magnus said faintly.

"No such thing as magic, huh?" Ace said scornfully. She was holding up pretty well, all things considered—but then, from what Kayla had told him on the way to the bus terminal, from using her Talent, Ace already had a certain amount of experience with what she considered "magic." She looked at Eric.

"Greystone is a gargoyle," Eric said. "And he's my friend."

Suddenly there was a hammering on the door.

"Ah, that'll be Ms. Hernandez," Greystone said.

"I'm on it." Kayla went over to open the door.

Toni burst in breathlessly, stopping to stare at the room full of people.

"Eric—you're back," she said. "Good to see you. First you set off a depth charge at Port Authority—at least Greystone said it was you—and then you rattle the windows here. Gotta say, you know how to make an entrance."

"Good to be seen. This is my brother Magnus—" how odd it felt to be saying that simple sentence!  
"—and this is Ace, and Jaycie—"

"Jaycie?" Toni asked, puzzled, looking around.

"Jaycie!" Ace yelled, staring around the room wildly.

The Sidhe boy was gone.

Eric swore. He'd only taken his eyes off him for a second, and Kayla or one of the others would have been watching.

But all the Sidhe possessed the *glamouries* of illusion, of trickery, of misdirection; hard to catch, harder to hold. As Jaycie had just proven.

"Should have tied him up when I had the chance," Eric muttered.

"Where did he go?" Ace demanded frantically.

"Can't you find him with this magic stuff?" Magnus pleaded.

"It's not that easy. But it might be possible. I bespelled him once," Eric said, thinking fast. "That might give me enough of a link to follow. Toni, you'd better get Paul and the others and follow me. I think there's something wrong with Jaycie's Protector, and if she finds him again, I might need backup."

Quickly he sketched out for Toni's benefit what had happened at the Port Authority, when Jaycie's Protector had appeared.

"I don't understand it," Eric finished. "She *ought* to have just taken him and gone home, but something stopped her. I don't know what. *Nothing* is supposed to come between a Protector and the welfare of their charge. They'll defy everything Underhill and in the World Above for them—and they're within their rights. It's the most sacred bond the elves know. Nothing is allowed to come before it for a Protector—not their honor, not even their life. But something's hurting her."

"Something's hurting a lot of people," Toni said dryly. "She's killed almost a dozen people looking for this kid—if it was her."

"And that doesn't even answer the question of why she's turning into a fairy tale," Eric said. While it was true that the Sidhe took a positive delight in shaping themselves in the forms dictated by human myths and legends—and cartoons and comic books, for that matter—generally the transformations were entirely voluntary.

"Killed?" Ace said in a small voice.

Abruptly Toni realized who else was in the room.

"I'm afraid so—Ace, is it? So we'd kind of like her to stop," Toni said gently.

"But Jaycie *can't* go home!" Ace said. "His folks hate him!"

"If that's really true . . ." and Eric doubted that it was; *all* elves valued children, any children, and Elven children were especially precious and rare, " . . . then his Protector will guard him even from his own parents. He knows that's true—or he should. And if she can't, I will."

Magnus looked at him doubtfully.

"He can do that," Kayla said firmly. "And I'm coming with you. If there's trouble, you'll need a medic."

"We're coming too," Ace added. "We can talk sense into him."

"There isn't time to argue—not if your runaway elf-boy is on a collision course with Bloody Mary," Toni said briskly. "Get going, Eric. Take your phone. Call me and give me your position."

"Right." He went into the bedroom.

"Come on, girl."

He wheeled the elvensteed out into the living room again and glanced at the others before heading toward the door. It was a hell of an introduction for Magnus to the Eric Banyon life-style, but Magnus would manage. His brother was a good kid.

\* \* \*

Hosea had no trouble getting into Neil's apartment building. Doorman building or not, they wouldn't stop what they didn't see, and Hosea very much didn't want them to see him. And fortunately he remembered



the address from last time.

The other Guardians had swords for occasions like this. Jimmie's sword was his now, he guessed—it still hung, in its scabbard, on his bedroom wall. Paul said that swords were strong and important weapons, both exoterically—that meant in the real world—and magically, but somehow Hosea had never felt comfortable with a sword in his hand, even though both Paul and Toni had told him it was first and foremost a symbol of his Will, his intent, and need never be used to draw blood.

"What are you going to use, Hosea? A banjo? Bard or not, I've never met the demon yet you could exorcise with a banjo—even a haunted one," Toni had said to him once.

Even so, Hosea just didn't feel comfortable facing down the Dark Folk with a sword instead of music. Maybe that might change after he'd been a Guardian a while longer. But for now, he simply preferred Jeanette. Besides, he'd look mighty silly hauling a sword—no matter how well disguised—all over New York. Not to mention how much it would upset people.

He made his way to the proper floor, and hesitated. What now? He didn't have any sense of anything being *wrong*, though he could smell the faint scent of frankincense creeping out from under the door, so he knew Fafnir was in there and up to his nonsense.

But nothing was actually happening.

*Just in case.*

Hosea set down the banjo case and got out Jeanette, slinging her strap over his shoulder and beginning, very quietly, to tighten her pegs.

Suddenly he heard—faintly, through the door—a young child's high scream of terror. Hard upon its heels, drowning it out, came the sound of breaking glass.

\* \* \*

He needed to find Rionne. Everything was all wrong here in the World Above, and somehow he'd hurt Rionne. He'd never meant to do that. She was the only person who cared about *him*—not his father's rank, not the politics of the Court of Elfhome Bete Noir. When he'd seen her again in Port Authority, he'd been afraid at first, thinking she might be angry with him, but that was wrong. Rionne was never angry with him, no matter what he did.

Why had he run from her? He'd been afraid. He'd thought she wouldn't understand. But when he'd heard her scream, seen her fighting the Shadow Pack—he'd realized that the Prince his father's wrath must have fallen upon her.

He had to find her. He had to fix things. He had to make things right. *For her.*

He'd gone back to the Port Authority. The trail there was easy to follow, thick and foul with the evil alien magic that had claimed her will and forced her from his side—more proof, not that he'd needed it, that magic was a terrible and frightening thing, to be avoided at all costs.

He hid in the shadows—the place was filled with police, all talking about the mysterious malfunctioning of the security system less than half an hour before. He didn't linger. Now that he'd found Rionne's trail, Jachiel didn't need to. He knew where he was going.

Rionne had saved him many times.

Now he had to save her.

He pulled a can of Coke from his pocket and drank it quickly as he hurried from the bus terminal. It was warm by now, but he didn't care. It made him feel better.

He would go, he would find Rionne, and he would tell her that neither of them ever had to go back Underhill.

\* \* \*

Once Eric was away from the apartment, he tried summoning Jaycie's Protector back again. It was risky, here on the Upper West Side, but with Lady Day's help, he thought he had a good chance of stopping her before she did more harm.

But this time she wouldn't—or couldn't—come when he called.

Next he sent a Seeking spell after Jaycie. It homed in on the residue of his previous Command spell and found the boy easily. He was heading Uptown, moving fast enough that he had to be in a cab or a bus. Elves hated the subway system—all that iron—and he doubted Jaycie was an exception to that rule.

He sent Lady Day in pursuit—linked to his mind, she could follow the spell trace as easily as he could—and pulled out his phone.

For a moment he hesitated about making the call. Kayla had looked exhausted when he'd caught up to her, and he hated the thought of dragging Ace and Magnus into more danger.

But he needed Toni and the other Guardians for backup. And Ace was right; Jaycie *might* listen to her and Magnus.

He made the call.

"Toni? I've picked up the trail. Jaycie's heading north. He might be going into Central Park—I found his Protector twice there before. I'm heading over to Sixth—I think he's in a cab. If I can spot it, maybe I can catch him before he gets where he's going."

"Right, Eric. Stay on the line. Give us landmarks," Toni said.

"Gotcha." Fortunately, he didn't need to hold on to the handlebars—or really drive Lady Day in any sense of the word. The elvensteed did all the work. All Eric needed to do was follow Jaycie's trail.

But though he followed the trace as fast as he could without overrunning it, the few minutes' head start Jaycie had gotten was enough to keep him ahead of Eric.

Suddenly a thunderclap of magic—Elven magic—rocked the night. Eric clutched at Lady Day's handlebars, nearly dropping the phone. Something *big* had just happened.

"I've got to go," he said tersely.

"Never mind," Toni said, sounding shaken. "We can follow *that*."

Eric shoved the phone into his pocket. Without any urging, Lady Day stretched herself to the utmost.

He didn't know who—or what—had just caused that enormous magical disruption he'd felt, but there was no way he could ignore it.

\* \* \*

A few moments later he was outside one of the luxury high-rise apartment buildings that dotted the Upper West Side. Magic radiated from one of the upper floors, as though a meteor had struck it. Eric flung himself off the elvensteed and ran inside.

A quick encouragement to Sleep took care of the doorman and the security guard.

Which floor was the disturbance coming from? He could tell approximately, but to search several floors would take too long.

No sign of Jaycie in the foyer—but to Eric's dismay, he realized that the Sidhe boy had in fact come this way, and only minutes before. Whatever disaster lay ahead, Jaycie must be in the thick of it.

Mage-sight told Eric which elevator he'd used. Once inside the car, Eric was able to tell which button Jaycie had pressed. That gave him the floor he needed.

The ascent of the elevator to 20 seemed to take forever.

When the doors opened, even his ordinary senses could tell Eric there was trouble. The whole hallway smelled faintly of incense, and he could hear screams.

Eric ran.

\* \* \*

Though she fought it desperately, the foul sorcery of this place had its way with her yet again. In the moment that should have been her triumph, when Rionne ferch Rianten gazed upon her Jachiel's face once more, saw him sick and terrified—but alive, *alive!*—she felt the demon call reach out to her, enfolding her with the evil magic she was powerless to resist.

Somewhere, there was a child in danger.

*But not my child! Not Jachiel!*

In vain she fought against it. She was too weak. Her battles against the Seelighe Court Bard and the Shadow Hunt had both drained her, and she had no energy left with which to resist this call. The magic to which her kind was particularly vulnerable—that of imagination, of will—enfolded her, drawing her away, reshaping her in the image of its own desire.

And she came as she had been called.

\* \* \*

Fafnir hadn't been expecting much. Maybe for the room to go cold, or the candles to blow out. Maybe for some glowing lights to appear and some of his more suggestible sheep to throw some nice hysterical fits. Maybe.

Not this.

Amanda began to scream and cry. It was embarrassing, but Fafnir didn't have long to be embarrassed. Seconds later, Neil's big picture window exploded inward in a shower of glass. It was safety glass, so all of it that wasn't caught in the curtain starred the floor like diamonds. The curtain had come down with it as well, lying on the floor in a puddle of dark fabric. Immediately, the icy winter wind began whipping into the room, blowing out most of the candles.

There was a woman there as well. A monster. The woman he'd seen—he'd thought he'd seen—just for a moment—in the crystal. She wasn't shadowy or insubstantial at all. She was as real as anyone else in the room.

She was tall—at least six feet—and wearing some kind of long flowing blue draperies that fluttered in the icy wind. And her *face* . . .

Where her eyes should have been, there were nothing but dark gaping holes. Bloody tears streamed down her face.

"We're under attack!" If he hadn't memorized the line, and been thinking about it all along, he never would have managed to say it. What he was thinking was: *Jesus, this is REAL.*

Even without eyes, she somehow seemed to be able to see. Her face turned toward him. She took a step toward him.

Reflexively, he clutched Amanda even tighter. The kid was screaming like a siren now, but so were a lot of other people. He got to his feet, still holding the screaming, struggling child by the arm.

Should he command the woman to stop? Would it do any good? Why was she just *standing* there? He wished everyone else wasn't making so much noise. It made it really hard to think.

*:Freddie. Freddie Warwick.:*

Oh, god. She'd said his name. His *real* name. Had everyone heard her? He didn't dare look around to see. Everyone else had scrambled back out of the way, huddling in the corner of the room—except Sarah, who was cowering at his feet, too scared to either grab Amanda or retreat.

*:Come to me, despoiler of children.:*

"Wait. No. You've got it wrong." He didn't care any more what he sounded like to the others. He didn't even care that he was talking in his Freddie voice, not his Fafnir voice. He didn't care about anything but keeping that *thing* away from him. He'd never been so scared in his life.

He held out his hands, trying to show her that he was harmless, to push her away. To do that he had to let go of Amanda. As if the blue woman had been waiting only for that, she took a step forward, smiling.

Her smile was the most terrible thing Freddie had ever seen. His heart hammered painfully in his chest. He would have given anything to be able to run away, but somehow he could do nothing but gaze into

her ruined face, unable to think, unable *to breathe*, as the pain became numbing agony, radiating down his arm and up into his brain.

He tried to scream, and could not.

He dropped to his knees.

\* \* \*

Bloody Mary gazed at the room full of cowering acolytes.

*:All of you. Despoilers and endangerers of children.:*

\* \* \*

Hosea burst into the room just in time to see Master Fafnir fall to the floor at the feet of an apparition that matched the shelter children's description of Bloody Mary exactly. The floor was covered with glittering glass and shards of mirror, and the picture window had been completely shattered. A few feet away a woman knelt clutching a screaming child. Bloody Mary turned toward her.

*She's going to kill everyone here unless you can stop her.*

*You've got one chance. If you've guessed right.*

If he had, he knew her Secret Name, the one that would turn her from Bloody Mary into the Blue Lady, protector and defender of all children instead of their murderous avenger.

If he'd guessed wrong, they were all going to die.

He swept his hand down over the banjo's silver strings and began to sing, putting everything he knew of magic into the words.

"When Joseph was an old man—An old man was he—He married Virgin Mary—The Queen of Galilee . . . He married Virgin Mary, The Queen of Galilee—"

He felt the power of the good holy words of the old song sweep outward, clashing with the power that held the creature in thrall through the terror of the people gathered here in the room and the spell Fafnir had cast. Poor demon—as much a victim as anyone here, if the Secret Stories were anything to go by.

The Virgin Mary—who else could it be? She who had lost Her child—a loss which God had not prevented, and who was Queen of Heaven—who else?

As the first notes of music sounded, the woman stopped, as if spellbound by the music. That was right. The old story-songs spoke of how you could enthrall—even trap—one of the Good Folk with a song if you played well enough. And some old tales said that fallen angels and the Good Folk were one and the same.

But Hosea wasn't here to trap anyone tonight. He was here to set someone free.

Bloody Mary stopped in the act of reaching for the mother and child huddled together on the floor and straightened up, staring straight at Hosea as if listening intently. He swept into the second verse:

"As Joseph and Mary walked through an orchard green, There were berries and cherries as thick as may be seen— There were berries and cherries, as thick as may be seen—"

Now she took a step backward, raising her hands to her face. Her hair paled from red to blonde, the terrible wounds on her face healed. She became a beautiful young woman surrounded by a pale blue glow. Her fluttering draperies stilled, became less tattered, became a simple blue robe only blown as much by the wind as the clothes of anyone else in the room, not whipped by an eldritch gale.

"Amanda!"

The little girl tore herself free from her mother's arms and ran to the glowing stranger, who knelt to take her in her arms.

"Rionne!"

A boy came tearing into the room, through the door Hosea had left open. The boy ran through the huddled mob of terrified acolytes, straight to the robed woman, too fast for Hosea to stop him.

And the woman began to change again.

Where an image of the Virgin Mary had stood a moment before now stood a fully armed and armored Elven Knight—as dangerous in her own way as Bloody Mary had been. She thrust both the children behind her and raised her sword.

Hosea stared for a moment in shock. This was no part of the Secret Stories. He'd been expecting one transformation—not two.

But this was no time to sight-see. The Elven Knight raised her sword, and Hosea lunged forward. He reached Sarah—from Caity's descriptions, it must be her—just in time to drag her to safety as the sword flashed down where she'd been. From the look of her, the Elven Knight was as willing as Bloody Mary had been to slaughter all of them. It was a good thing Hosea *didn't* have a sword. That would mark him as an immediate enemy.

"Oh, *shit*. . ." Eric said very softly, at his shoulder. "Jaycie, tell her to let the little girl go."

"Oh, my baby," Sarah whimpered, clinging to Hosea's arm. "Oh, please, don't hurt her!"

"She would harm the child," the Protector said grimly, speaking aloud at last.

"No," Eric said desperately. "She's been very foolish, but she won't do anything like this ever again. She didn't mean to do anything that would hurt Amanda. Truly. I tell you this—" Hosea heard Eric's voice strengthen, and the Elven Knight blinked and straightened from her fighting crouch, "*—Iswearyou* this, by my name as Bard. She was led astray by sweet words, but never thought harm would come to her child from them."

"Let her go," the boy—who must be Jaycie—said, tugging at the Elven Knight's cloak. "Rionne, please. It was you they wanted to hurt, not some Earthborn babe. All because of me! I never meant to hurt you!"

\* \* \*

Eric walked cautiously forward toward the Protector, putting himself between her and everyone else in the room. The whole room was a soup of conflicting currents of magic—both the spell Hosea had cast and the one Fafnir's circle had accidentally cast, and all around him the people that Fafnir had gathered were starting to react to it—badly. He could hear moans and sounds of retching, and forced himself to ignore them. He could not afford to be distracted now.

Somehow Jaycie's Protector had provided the power for whatever spell Fafnir had been trying to cast, becoming the focus for the toxic imago the shelter children had created and becoming tangled in it, and then being bound to Fafnir's circle in turn. Ill as Jaycie was, he was probably the picture of health next to his Protector—Eric wasn't sure how much she understood about where she was or what was going on, but he did know that she'd do anything to protect Jaycie—and the other little girl—from anything she saw as a threat. Things could turn deadly in a heartbeat.

Jaycie was clinging to her, weeping, talking to her in a voice too low for Eric to hear. And finally, after what seemed like forever but what was actually only a minute or two, she released the little girl. The child ran past Eric to her mother. Hosea quickly swept them both out of harm's way.

Eric looked directly at Jaycie, knowing that he, at least, would understand what Eric was saying. "I am Eric Banyon, Bard of Overhill and Elfhome Misthold, and I offer you both the protection of Elfhome Misthold in Prince Arvin's name."

"The Bright Court!" Jaycie drew back in horror.

Eric stared at him in shock. Jaycie was an *Unseleighe Sidhe*? Then his own people had been hunting him

...

This was worse than he'd thought.

"Even so," Eric said gently, bowing slightly. "I give you my word as a Bard. The sanctuary of Elfhome Misthold. For both of you."

"Why did you run from me, my heart?" Rionne said sadly, sheathing her sword and putting her arms around Jaycie. She ignored Eric completely.

Jaycie simply shook his head, clinging to her.

\* \* \*

Toni had wanted the kids to stay in the car, but nothing short of handcuffs was going to keep them there. At least Eric had a head start on them.

And to her relief, by the time they got there, the shooting part of things seemed to be over.

"You want to stay out here, *querida*?" she asked Kayla. The young Empath's face had gone white as they reached the half-open apartment door, and she swayed on her feet.

"I'm just peachy," Kayla said, gritting her teeth.

"Then stay behind me, at least," Toni said, easing the door open and walking in carefully, sword in hand.

She was no Empath, and her psychic senses were the result of Guardian Powers rather than inborn Gift,

but even she could feel the sludge of unexpended magics that filled the living room and foyer of the apartment. The room was dark, lit only by the light of a few flickering candles in jars, and the city light coming in through the hole in the far wall that had once been a nice picture window.

The room was icy cold.

Silhouetted against the shattered window was a tall armored figure with her arms around a boy in street clothes. Eric was standing in front of them, his hands spread. Between Eric and the knight was a body—no doubt of that—and the rest of the room was filled with almost two dozen people in various stages of backlash shock. Besides Eric, the knight, and the boy, Hosea was the only one on his feet. She realized Hosea was playing softly, spreading the equivalent of a psychic Band-Aid over the scene. It wouldn't hold for long, but it did explain why there wasn't a full-scale riot going on now.

"Shut the door," Toni said in a low voice. *Contain the scene.* That was what Jimmie had always said; the first rule of crime scenes, magical and otherwise. They had to keep all these people from going anywhere until they could get this sorted out. At least things were quiet right now, and Paul and José would be here soon to provide as much backup as she needed.

Behind her, she heard Kayla close the door.

"Jaycie," Ace whispered.

As if he'd heard her, the boy looked up. His eyes glowed green in the dim light of the room. If that was Jaycie, then he was the Sidhe-child Eric had spoken of, and the armored knight must be both his Protector, and the specter the Guardians had been tracking.

At that moment, Eric beckoned the others forward.

Hesitantly, Toni walked into the darkened living room, bringing the children with her. She kept her sword down, doing her best to make it look like a tool, not a threat. She put her free arm around Magnus—of the two kids, he was the more skittish, and she could tell that the whole scene had him pretty spooked.

They reached Eric's side.

\* \* \*

"This is Rionne ferch Rianten, Jaycie's Protector," Eric said quietly. "She comes from Underhill." He thought it was just as well to leave out the Unseleighe part of things. It didn't matter at Jaycie's age, and Rionne's loyalties were to Jaycie, not to either Court.

"Is she going to take him back?" Ace said harshly.

"I have to go," Jaycie said, still clinging to Rionne. He wore no *glamour* now, and appeared fully Elven. He gazed past Eric, at Ace and Magnus, willing them to understand.

"I never should have come here. I never should have . . . loved you both. But I was afraid of my magic, of what I would learn to do with it—of what my father would want me to do with it. So I ran away. But that just made things worse."

Rionne held him tightly. "Nothing you could ever do would be wrong in my eyes, my heart," she said to



him fondly.

Jaycie closed his eyes for a moment. "I know. I should have thought of that. But I was scared. And now . . ."

"And now we will go, on the Bard's promise, to the Bright Court and Elfhome Misthold, where we shall cry 'Sanctuary' and you may be healed of the ills the mortal world has dealt you. And when we have had time to consider matters further, the Bard will speak to the Prince, your father," Rionne said firmly.

*I will?* But Eric guessed he'd volunteered for the job, in a way. And serving as envoys between Courts was one of the traditional jobs of Bards.

But . . . an elf who didn't want to learn magic?

"So you're just going to *leave*? And we're never going to see you again?" Ace asked.

She sounded utterly lost. Romances were common between the Sidhe and humankind; the elves found humans just as fascinating as humans found elves enchanting. But such romances were commonly brief. And usually, when they were over, the Elven partner clouded the human's memories to spare them the pain of bereavement.

Not this time.

Eric could see the moment when Jaycie realized just how badly he'd hurt his mortal friends. By the time he was mature enough by Sidhe standards to leave Underhill again, many years would have passed in the World Above. Ace and Magnus would be very old, if not dead.

"Perhaps you will be allowed to come and visit me Underhill," he said softly, taking a step away from Rionne. "I am sorry, my friends. I never meant to hurt you."

"Eric," Magnus said urgently. "Can't you stop her? Can't you keep him here?"

Eric turned to his brother. Magnus' face was white and strained, with the panicky expression of someone very much afraid he's about to cry.

"They have to go, Magnus," Eric said, very gently. "If they don't go, they'll both die. There are places that elves can live in the World Above, but New York isn't one of them. And Jaycie needs help that he can't get here."

"He'll be safe? And happy?" Magnus said desperately.

"Yes. That much I can promise. Maybe—" He thought quickly. "Look, I have friends Underhill with e-mail. It'll take some time, but I'll fix it so you can e-mail each other. More than that, I can't promise." He turned back to Rionne. "I'll loan you my elvensteed, Lady Day—you'll find her below." He spared a bit of magic to take his promise to the elvensteed, who was taken a bit aback for a moment, but then agreed. "She awaits you; she can take the two of you through the Everforest Gate to Elfhome Misthold. You'll find Sanctuary there."

Lady Rionne bowed her head in acknowledgement. "That makes good hearing, Bard. And perhaps—when the child is grown—I shall return to your world. From what I have seen here, your children need a Protector also."

For just a moment, the Elven Knight vanished, and the form of the radiant Blue Lady appeared in her place, then Rionne stood before them once again.

"Child, it is time to go."

"One moment, Rionne, please," Jaycie said.

He walked over to Ace, and stared down at her for a long moment. "I lied to you before, because I was afraid. The Healer and the Bard both told you the truth. About everything. You should trust them. They'll protect you."

"I know," Ace said, her voice thick with tears.

"I wish I could stay," Jaycie said. "But it isn't right for me to." He put his arms around her and held her very tightly. "You humans have so very many wonderful things, and you never appreciate half of them!"

Then he let her go and turned to Magnus.

"I'm sorry I hit you—more than once, I guess. You were a good friend to me, one I didn't deserve. Let your brother help you, or, or—or I shall send Rionne to make you heed him!"

"Yeah, right," Magnus said raggedly, as Jaycie hugged him very hard.

"Now," Jaycie whispered, stepping away from Magnus, toward his Protector.

Rionne stepped forward—

—and suddenly the humans were alone in the room.

"Elves know how to make an exit, gotta give 'em that," Kayla said into the silence.

"That's all very well," Hosea said, "but just now we've got more than a little housekeeping to do here." He nodded his head at the room full of bespelled people.

"Right," Eric said, thinking hard. "I think the best thing is for everybody to forget that tonight ever happened. The whole thing will just fall apart without Fafnir, anyway."

Hosea nodded. "A little healin', a power o' forgettin', and let their own minds do the rest. Sounds good."

Having set the terms of the spell, Eric summoned up his Flute of Air, and let the Bardic magic spill out in a skirl of notes.

First music to cleanse and heal, sweeping away the last of Fafnir's toxic and baneful influences from the area. In a way, it was like jazz improvisation, the flute and the banjo winding around each other, each taking its turn to lead the melody. Eric could see Kayla's face relax as the last of the psychic and magical mess was swept away, and even Eric felt better once it was done.

But all that was like cleaning up a kitchen before you were going to cook in it. Now they were going to cook. And once they were done, all of Fafnir's former disciples would go home, forgetting all about tonight—and particularly about Fafnir's death. Over the next several days, they'd forget all about Fafnir

and the whole True and False Guardians scenario, retaining only as much information about their Fafnir-related activities as they needed to make sense of their day-to-day lives. But none of the things relating to Fafnir would seem very important, or very real, and in a year or so they'd forget about him, and what they'd done in the "Guardian" cult entirely.

His intent lodged firmly in his mind, Eric began to play.

He chose an old Gospel song—it seemed fitting, somehow: "On The Wings of a Dove." He knew Hosea would know it.

But to his surprise, on the second repeat of the melody, Ace joined in as well, singing the words.

Her voice was high and true and pure, filled not with Bardic magic, but with the power of her Talent. The song's words spoke of love, of endless forgiveness and healing, and as Ace sang, everyone in the room felt those things, blending into the magic, soothing the frightened panicky people, making it easier for the spell to do its work. She drew all of them together: Healer and Guardian, Bards and Bard-to-be, drawing their Powers and Talents gently together into a whole.

And as the spell worked its way over them, Fafnir's people slowly got to their feet. They looked confused and distracted, but no longer frightened. Moving as if they did not see anything out of place—Eric, Hosea, Toni, the kids; Fafnir's body; the broken candles or shattered glass—they moved through the apartment like sleepwalkers, retrieving coats and hats and purses. In a few minutes all of them—including, presumably, the apartment's rightful tenant—were gone, and the others were alone.

Eric brought the song to an end and released the spell, knowing the magic would follow them out into the world to finish its work.

The living room went silent, and suddenly Eric could really feel the cold for the first time. It was a lot colder twenty stories up than it was at street level, but when he'd walked in and seen Rionne standing there, he'd been too focused to pay much attention to it, and things had been moving too fast since then.

Ace shook herself as if she were rousing from a dream, and glared at Eric and Hosea with confused suspicion.

"Who *are* you people?" she demanded, taking Magnus' hand protectively. "You—I saw you down at the shelter," she said to Hosea.

Hosea nodded.

"Ah guess we might ask you the same thing," Hosea said with a smile. "You surely gave us a goodly bit of help there. Made the helpin' we did for those poor folks go down a might easier."

Ace made a wry face. "It's what I do," she said bitterly. "I can make anybody believe any kind of lie."

"But you weren't lyin'," Hosea said. "You were helpin' them see the truth. Girl, ain't it true that there's love, an' love forgives? Ain't it true that God—whatever name you want to call Him by—don't want nothin' for us but what's right and good for us? It's a powerful Gift, if you use it rightly. Have you ever thought that if you were given a goodly gift, you could choose to do goodly things with it?"

Ace stared at him for a moment and began to cry. It wasn't the kind of crying of someone who was hopeless. It was the kind of weeping that came from someone who had just been offered hope,

unforeseen, unexpected.

"Oh. Oh,*jeez*," Magnus said, sounding horrified, angry, and disgusted all at once.

"Have we come at a bad time?" Paul Kern asked, walking in to the living room, closely followed by José. "My, what a mess."

"You don't know the half of it," Kayla said fervently.

She walked over and tried the light switch—there wasn't any reason to leave the lights off now, and she wanted to see if they still worked. They did. The sudden tasteful brightness further reduced the scene to ordinariness.

"I'll go see what's in the kitchen," Toni said briskly. "I think our host owes us a few refreshments."

Hosea had led Ace over to the couch—far away from the body—and gotten her to sit down, sitting down beside her and offering her a large white handkerchief. José came out of a back room with a bedspread and draped it over Fafnir's body. Even though everybody knew what was under the lump, it was better not having to look at it.

"I turned the heat up to 'high'," Kayla said, coming and perching on the couch next to Ace and Hosea. "Not that it'll make much difference with that honking big hole in the wall."

Paul followed Toni into the kitchen, presumably to get her version of the night's events.

Magnus looked at Eric.

"Things always this much fun around here?" the boy suggested, in tones that indicated it had been anything but.

"No," Eric said. "Usually it's quiet for, oh, months at a time."

"You meant it about not sending me back to Boston, right?" Magnus said aggressively. Eric nodded.

"I'm not a musical prodigy," the boy continued.

"I know you're not," Eric said.

The boy looked startled and a little annoyed. Well, having been told from the time he could walk that he was a musical genius, it was probably a little offputting to have his talent so casually dismissed.

"You're undoubtedly a very good musician. That much certainly runs in the family. You might be a Bard—or Talented in some other way. I'm not in any hurry to find out," Eric said, with a gesture of indifference. "All I want is to get you some space to find out for yourself what you want and what you're good at." Eric said.

Magnus shrugged. "Fine with me. What's a Bard?"

Just then Toni and Paul returned, carrying bottles of juice and a bag of paper cups. "Our host has an amazing collection of liquor, and quite a wine cellar, but I managed to find some juice," Toni said.

She passed around cups, making particularly sure that the young Talents—Ace and Kayla—had some. Ace had gotten herself back under control now, but still looked rather strained. As would anyone whose greatest secret had been dragged out into the open for everyone to see.

"It doesn't matter *who* your folks are," Eric heard Kayla tell her. "Ria Llewellyn'll eat 'em for breakfast."

"Oh, I do believe she could," Ace said. "If she wanted to."

"She'll want to," Eric said.

"But right now we have another problem," Toni said. She pointed toward the corpse on the floor.

"Looked like he died of a heart attack," Eric said.

"He did," Hosea said quietly.

Eric smiled. "Well, I don't see why this guy shouldn't have a heart attack in his own apartment and be found there, for one thing. Greystone?"

A moment later, the gargoyle—who had landed on the roof about the same time Paul and José had come in the door—flew in through the open window and waddled over to the body on the floor. He peeled back the cover and regarded it critically.

"Nasty piece o' work this," he said. "Troublin' poor Miss Caity and all those others the way he did. Some people do improve life by the leavin' of it. Just leave this to me, folks; there isn't an apartment in the five boroughs I can't get into when I'm of a mind to. I'll even make the 911 call from his apartment so they find him before too long. How's that?"

"Perfect," Eric said.

Greystone slung the body over his shoulder and climbed to the windowsill again. He sprang out into the night, falling like a, well, rock. Ace gave a small squeak of alarm, but a few moments later they saw a dark speck silhouetted against the moon: the gargoyle with its burden.

"That takes care o' everything but Mr. Neil Grandison's window," Hosea observed a moment later.

"I'd just as soon leave it, rather than repair it by magic," Eric said, after a moment's thought. "He'll need some reason why he went out tonight. And big birds do fly into them and shatter them from time to time."

"Ayah," Hosea said approvingly. "Probably that's jest what happened here."

"It's been a long night," Toni said, looking around. "Let's go home."

"That means you guys, too," Eric said to Ace and Magnus. "You're with me."

For a moment the two runaways looked at each other.

"Hey, Ace," Magnus said. "I bet Eric's got a television with all the channels—"

*What?* The non sequitur made no sense to Eric. But tired as she was, Ace's face lit up with secret mischief.

"Internet access—?"

"A refrigerator and a stove," Magnus said.

"Coffee—" Ace said next, with the air of one playing out an old game.

"*A bathroom and a door that locks,*" the two of them finished in chorus, before dissolving into helpless, and slightly hysterical laughter.

## Chapter Seventeen: Boys Of The Lough

This Thanksgiving Eric had even more than usual to be thankful for.

He'd found Magnus alive and well.

Having a "baby" brother was still a whole new world for Eric, and one that was going to take a lot of getting used to, for both of them. For one thing, he was going to need a larger apartment. Toni had promised to give him the first two-bedroom that she could manage to free up, but that would take a while. For now, Magnus was sleeping on the couch in the living room, and Eric had spent the past week shopping for clothes for him, and trying to decide what to do about school and other such mundane necessities.

The two of them arrived at Ria's apartment around two, having spent the morning down at Macy's, watching the parade with the rest of the New York crowds. They'd had beautiful—if ice-cold—weather for it, and a good view of all the performances. Christmas decorations were already up on most of the buildings, which Eric thought was hardly fair—Christmas was weeks away, wasn't it? And it looked like it was going to be a white one.

Ria had argued, logically enough, that as she had the largest apartment and the biggest dining room table, Thanksgiving should be held at her place, and Eric could see no reason to disagree with this plan. She had the biggest kitchen, too, even if (he suspected) everything was going to be shipped in from an upscale caterer.

But when the private elevator opened into the foyer, Eric's nostrils were assailed by the smells of . . . cooking?

"Hey," Magnus said appreciatively. "Smells like*food*."

"You can't be hungry," Eric protested. Magnus had eaten three hot dogs during the parade, assuring Eric they wouldn't spoil his appetite for dinner at all.

"Can," Magnus said simply, heading off in the direction of the food smells without bothering to take off his jacket.

\* \* \*

Ace waved as they appeared in the doorway.

"Boy, when I said I wanted a kitchen, I wasn't expecting something like this," she said, grinning.

"Hey . . . wow," Magnus said, and for once Eric knew he wasn't thinking about food.

A week—and a shopping spree—had worked radical changes on the young teenager. Her pale blonde hair had been cut so that it haloed her face in a trendy mop of curls. Small gold hoops glittered in her ears. Expert makeup made her blue eyes seem enormous, and mascara darkened her lashes. And tight blue jeans and a form-fitting sweater didn't hurt matters either.

She looked, in fact, like a normal, healthy, teenage girl. Pretty, too.

*Accent on the teenage, Banyon. Mind your manners.* "You look great," Eric said, as his brother had apparently just been struck dumb. "But what's all this?"

"It's dinner," Ace said. "When Ria said she was going to get a bunch of store-bought stuff, I said I'd cook. She's done so much for me—and I like to cook."

"You can cook?" Magnus said, drifting toward a platter of devilled eggs.

"Out!" Ace turned, quick as a flash, to intercept him. "You haven't even taken off your coats yet. You go take off your coat, Magnus Banyon, and wash your hands, and then—maybe—you can come back into my kitchen and I'll give you something to keep body and soul together until dinner. Which won't be for a couple of hours, because Ria called and she's running late, and—as you can plainly see—Hosea and Kayla aren't here yet. And the turkey isn't ready anyway. So scat."

"Come on," Eric said to Magnus, taking his brother's arm and leading him out of the kitchen. Once Ace was sure her devilled eggs weren't in immediate danger, she turned back to the stove, picking up a wooden spoon and giving one of the pots a stir.

\* \* \*

It looked like Ace was settling in with Ria just fine, Eric thought with a grin, as he led Magnus back to the foyer and a closet where they could hang up their coats. Fortunately, Ria had finally been able to get out of Washington a day or two after the final blowup, so Ace had been able to move in with her. Otherwise things *atchez* Banyon would have been even more crowded than they were right now.

When Ace had finally unbent enough to tell the others her entire story, Eric and Hosea had no difficulty understanding just why it was she'd been hiding so desperately.

They'd already had ample evidence of her Gift—to influence people's thoughts and emotions through her singing, and more, to draw on the Power of those around her to intensify her Gift. When she'd told them about her past, the others had learned that she'd been born to a revivalist preacher, and that Billy Fairchild had not been in the least shy about exploiting his daughter's ability.

But even with Ace's help, Billy Fairchild had been strictly small-time, until a man named Gabriel Horn had come on the scene about two years ago. He'd frightened Ace—whose real name was Heavenly Grace, and Eric could see why she didn't want to go by it—so much that she'd run away from home, and she'd been hiding ever since. It hadn't been hard to track down information about Billy Fairchild Ministries on the 'net, and verify every bit of it. Including the ongoing deception that "little" Heavenly

Grace was supposed to be attending a strict Bible college at this very moment.

"Well, that's over and done with," Ria had said firmly, once Ace had finished her explanation. "You don't have to go back there, and you certainly won't be using your abilities that way ever again."

Ace had looked at her skeptically. Ria had only laughed. "My dear girl! There are half-a-dozen ways to keep him from coming after you! Blackmail is the easiest; I imagine Mr. Fairchild has any number of secrets besides your abilities that he'd prefer not to have made public knowledge—or the subject of an IRS audit?"

"I suppose," Ace had said uncertainly.

"Besides," Ria had said briskly, "We'll just file a petition for emancipated minor status for you. Your family won't contest it if they know what's good for them. And that's that."

"'Emancipated minor'?" Ace had said, confused.

"Giving you the privileges of adulthood a few years early, assuming the court grants your petition. And they will," Ria'd said, with no doubt in her voice.

"But what will *Ido*?" Ace had said, sounding flustered and doubtful. "I don't know how to do anything but sing."

"Stay here in New York with me," Ria had answered. "Go to school, at least for the next few years. And help me with a certain project I have in mind."

Though Eric had asked Ria about her project, she'd just smiled and looked mysterious. Maybe he could get more details out of her today.

And if Ace did nothing else with her future, she could certainly get a job as Ria's full-time majordomo, Eric thought, as he followed Magnus back to the kitchen.

\* \* \*

Ria arrived, amazingly, only forty minutes later.

"Half day for you?" Eric gibed, when she joined the others in the kitchen.

"Hah," Ace said, lifting a tray of cornbread out of the baking oven to cool. "She lit out of here at six this morning. You get away from that!"

"I wasn't doing anything," Magnus protested—reasonably enough, as he was still seated on the far side of the kitchen.

"You were thinking," Ace said.

"I was not thinking," Magnus said virtuously.

Ria raised an eyebrow at Eric, and Eric grinned. She indicated the living room with an inclination of her head, and he followed her out. Behind them, they could hear an elaborate and amiable argument continuing about whether or not Magnus thought—or, in fact, *could* think.



"How are you doing?" Ria asked. "I'm glad you got your hair cut again, by the way. Those toy-boy tresses gave me quite a start."

"Courtesy of the Underhill M\*A\*S\*H Unit," Eric said, with a grin. "But kind of hard to explain when I went back to school. We're doing okay."

*We.*

It was odd to think of things in those terms, but for the next several years—and maybe longer—that was how things were going to be. Magnus was his responsibility now, someone even more dependent on him than an apprentice was. "A little cramped, though. Toni says she might be able to work something out in a few months, though."

"Something with soundproofing, I hope, if your brother is set on being a rock 'n' roll superstar. And what about the magic?" Ria walked over to the couch and sat down with a sigh.

"Too soon to tell. And I'm not going to push it. He's been pushed around since before he was born. I'm going to let him find his own level."

"Nice idea—if the world will cooperate. Meanwhile, you'll be pleased to know that Philip Dorland—remember him?—is off looking for Magnus in Miami, having given up on finding him in New York. That should buy the two of you some time, at least, while you decide how to play things."

"Good thought. I figure on waiting until spring before sticking him back into school. Who knows? Maybe he'd like Juilliard after all?" Eric sat down beside her on the couch.

Ria snorted eloquently.

"And what about you? What's this special project you want to get Ace involved with?" Eric asked.

Ria turned to face him, a wicked gleam of mischief in her eyes. "Well, you know how you've always said I'm not doing enough *constructive* with my money, just becoming filthy rich. So . . . I've decided to do something you'll like: the Ria Llewellyn Foundation."

"For homeless elves?" Eric joked.

"For homeless Talents," Ria said, her expression turning serious. "Ace's story made me think. What if she hadn't run into you? For that matter, what if I hadn't been around? There *has* to be something to do with kids with capital-T Talent besides squirreling them off to elf Hill to be raised by another species. I'm going to do it."

Eric stared into her eyes for a long moment.

"What? You're going to found Professor Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters?" he finally said.

"Something like that," Ria said. "Without the funny uniforms and supervillains, I hope. Ace is going to be my pilot project. She already has a handle on her Talent. Maybe she'll be willing to help me find and take care of kids who don't. Maybe Hosea will be willing to help as well. And then kids like her—and Kayla—will have someplace to go besides institutions and the street. A place where people will understand them and teach them to understand themselves. It will take time and money. But I have both."

And I think it's something worth doing."

"Well . . . yes," Eric said. "But it's not going to be easy. Just keeping Ace out of her family's hands is going to involve a heck of a fight. I've been surfing the 'net—when I can get the computer away from Magnus—and I might never have heard of Billy Fairchild before Ace mentioned him, but he's not exactly nobody. In fact, he's building a Casino of Prayer over in Atlantic City right now. I'd imagine he can afford some pretty good lawyers to get his daughter back."

Ria smiled wolfishly, and patted his knee. "Why, Eric," she cooed dulcetly, "so can I. And I'll just adore reducing that insufferable little maggot to a grease spot, him and whoever this Gabriel Horn is. You've just got to stop thinking of Underhill as the answer to all the World Above's problems . . . even if the two are . . . linked," she finished musingly.

"Linked?" Eric asked, puzzled at the change of subject.

"Did you ever wonder why the Guardians exist? When they started? What they're for?"

What has that got to do with Gifted youngsters or elves? Eric wondered.

Ria frowned impatiently.

"Oh, come now, Eric: when we met, you weren't one of the world's deep thinkers, but you've grown up since then. Everything in Nature has a purpose. Look at humans and the Sidhe."

"All right," Eric said agreeably. "And maybe you'll tell me what this has to do with your plan to found Hogwarts in New York."

"Maybe nothing directly. But a specialist I consulted during the recent unpleasantness was adamant about the study of magic being bad for humans, though he had no problem with inborn Talents, like Ace's, or Kayla's—or yours, and frankly I can't see a lot of difference between your magic and a Guardian's, right? Magic is magic. But he was adamant about magic being for the elves and creativity for the humans, and if that's the case, how did the two ever get tangled up together? Remember Aerune's dream?"

"So I've been doing a lot of thinking and research, back to the bad old days, and Perenor's project, and wondering how and why the two realms connect. Remember that vision you told me you once had, of the world as it would have been if Perenor had gained control of the Sun-Descending Nexus and sucked up all the magic for his own use? All grey and dismal, with no light and laughter anywhere? There are places in the world already like that, as we both know, more of them all the time. Everybody always believes that the world used to be better, but nobody can quite imagine just when that used to be. The closest thing to a golden age was that fantasy world in Aerune's mind, of the way things were in Aerete's time—when humans had *no* magic—but I don't think being some Sidhe's pet is the right answer either. But that only begs the question. If humans have imagination and elves have magic, where do the Guardians—humans with magic—come into things? Where do they *fit*? What are they *for*? Aerune seemed to recognize Toni when we all fought him together; that implies that elves know something about the Guardians, doesn't it?"

Eric remembered something Master Dharniel had said, about the elves remembering the Guardians even if the Guardians had forgotten them. He said so.

Ria nodded. "Another thing to ask my specialist about; I'm sure he knows. And the fact remains,

however the relationship started out, elves and humans have been together now for an awfully long time: elves need humans because humans can dream, imagine, create—all things that elves can't do. And humans need elves—hard as that is for me to admit—to add magic and wonder to their lives by just existing. So it seems to be a symbiotic relationship: Faerie and the World, interlinked. Whether they started out together or not, by now they've grown so closely intertwined that I don't think you can separate them any more. Destroy one and you destroy the other. That's why I put so much effort into getting rid of Wheatley's little task force, and I'm pretty sure that after his last adventure, the PDI is history—I'll tell you the whole story of that another time."

"I'll hold you to that," Eric vowed. "But about the Guardians . . . you know they act only for good. Why do you want to, well, meddle?"

Ria kissed him gently on the forehead. "Because I don't like mysteries, Eric. Never have. And if elves are so convinced that no human can have innate magic, I want to know more about people who *do*."

And Eric wondered if there was anything he could possibly do to stop her.

\* \* \*

Kayla was the next to arrive. She'd restored herself and her jacket to full Goth glamour, and was wearing enough leather to upholster a small chair: skirt, bustier, her leather jacket, boots, and cap. Her eyeshadow and lipstick were both bright orange, and she was wearing a tiny Pilgrim dangling from each ear. Kayla liked to dress for the seasons.

"Where's Hosea?" Eric asked, greeting her at the door. "I thought he was coming and bringing Caity." Paul and José were spending Thanksgiving with Toni's family in Queens, but the three of them had said they might stop by on the way home, for dessert. From the number of pies Eric had seen on cooling racks in the kitchen, Eric thought there'd be plenty left. It looked as if Ace had been cooking for as many hours as Ria had been working. He hadn't known there were that many pots and pans in Ria's kitchen. Probably Ria hadn't known either.

A faintly guilty look crossed Kayla's face. "I guess you'd better let him get into that."

She shrugged out of her biker jacket and opened the closet. Beneath it, she was wearing an orange Chinese silk jacket that just covered her shoulders.

"Oh good," Magnus said, coming into the foyer and seeing Kayla, "Ace says you can help me set the table."

Kayla thrust her jacket and cap at Eric and followed Magnus, effectively ending the conversation.

\* \* \*

Fortunately Hosea arrived just as the turkey was coming out of the oven, and before Ace began to worry about holding dinner for him. But he arrived alone.

"Ah was jest helpin' Caity with her packing," Hosea said, explaining. "An Ah ran a little late."

*Packing?* There had to be more to the story than that, to judge from the glum expression on the big man's face, but Eric didn't want to push for an explanation in front of everybody. And Hosea seemed more than willing to let the subject drop, helping the others carry food to the table and complimenting

Ace on her cooking.

"I'm not a very religious person," Ria said, when they'd all taken their places around the table, "but I think it's a good idea every once in a while to stop and take stock of what you have to be thankful for. Your health, if you have it. Your life, if it's been endangered—and even if it hasn't. Your freedom, always. And your friends. Without them, the other three aren't worth much. So here's to us, and to another year lived."

"Good words," Hosea said, bowing his head.

Ria raised her glass, and they all drank.

"And I'd like to say," Ace said, blushing furiously, "that we should be thankful for love. And—hope. Because even if you don't have any of those other things—or think you don't—if you can love, and hope, you can at least get to where you do. Someday."

"Amen to that," Eric said.

\* \* \*

After the meal was done, Eric and Hosea volunteered to scrape plates and load the dishwasher—emptying it of the now-clean pots and pans that Ace had filled it with before they'd sat down to eat—while the kids went off to channel-surf and Ria returned a few phone calls.

Besides, it gave him a chance to talk to Hosea alone.

"Anything you want to tell me?" Eric asked.

"Ah supposed we'd get around to that," Hosea admitted glumly. "No reason not to tell you. Caity's moving out of the city. She's decided she can do her drawing just as well back home in West Virginia. So that's where she's going. Ah was helping her with her packing."

Eric digested the news in silence. "I'm sorry," he said, after a moment. "I know the two of you were friends."

Hosea sighed. "Well, Ah don't think she'd take any too kindly to findin' out about me bein' a Bard—or any o' the rest of it, 'specially after what happened with 'Master Fafnir.' She's taken it into her head that he was just some kind o' con man, feedin' her and the others a line o' country to get money out of the lot of 'em. Which ain't any too far from the truth, when you come down to it, really. And she's so mad about it all, and at herself with bein' roped in by it, that she's decided to put a good deal o' distance between herself and the big city. Ah'll miss her." Hosea sighed.

"So there's going to be a vacancy at Guardian House," Eric said, hoping to turn the conversation to a topic less painful for his friend. *Unfortunately, not a two-bedroom.* "I wonder who's going to move in?"

"Whoever it is, Ah hope they're a restful sort," Hosea said. "But there's one other thing you should know about Caity. While Ah was helpin' her pack, she did tell me one interesting thing. Ah'm not sure whether knowin' it sooner would've made any difference, or not, though. Seems Fafnir had already picked out the feller he was going to have his little group execute, once he'd got them scared enough to take leave o' their common sense."

"Anybody we know?" Eric asked lightly.

Hosea regarded him steadily. "Paul Kern."

Eric blinked, and took a deep breath. "Well, he had the right guy. Paul's a Guardian, all right. But how did he know—*ordid*he know?"

Hosea shrugged. "Ah suppose we won't ever know the answer to that, any more'n we'll ever know just what attracted Jaycie's Protector to her particular victims. Toni checked with the PD, though, and there were children—young ones—at all the places at the time o' the murders."

"So Rionne was protecting them—or trying to—or at least thought she was. The same way she was trying to protect Amanda," Eric said slowly. "Only she'd spent so much time in New York looking for Jaycie that she'd lost her ability to resist human imagination and human belief. . . ."

"Ayah. She must have started out looking in the shelters. The little'uns made her a part of their Secret Stories, and then 'Master Fafnir' made Bloody Mary a part of his spell," Hosea said consideringly. "Ah never thought of the Good Folk as being quite so vulnerable."

"Just as vulnerable to human creativity—belief—as humans are to Elven magic, I guess," Eric said. "But it takes a lot more belief over a longer period to affect one of the Sidhe than it does for a spell to affect a human. She was just in the wrong place at the wrong time for too long."

"There's a lot of that goin' around," Hosea said. "But sometimes good does manage to come out of it, along with all the pain."

For a while the two Bards scraped, stacked, and loaded dishes in companionable silence. When everything was finished, and the dishwasher had begun to run, Hosea spoke again.

"Do you think she'll come back, the way she said?"

"Maybe," Eric said. "You can put that in one of your songs, too."

"Ah reckon Ah will," Hosea said, smiling.

Epilogue:

The Wind That Shakes The Barley

In early December, Parker Wheatley attended a meeting he'd very much wished to avoid.

Things had been going badly for several weeks. His calls hadn't been returned. People who'd been happy to know him this time last year were distant and evasive. Even his own people were less than responsive—and as for interagency cooperation, that had vanished as of the night Ria Llewellyn had broken into his offices and kidnapped a traitor to the human race.

She'd had high-level help, of course. No one would believe him. That was one in a long list of things about which Parker Wheatley could suddenly find no one to believe him. His credibility—the true coin in which Washington bargains were made and sealed—had suddenly vanished as if it were faery gold.

Faery gold. As they did so often, his thoughts turned to Aerune mac Audelaine, who had so inexplicably abandoned him after seducing him with false promises. Without Aerune's meddling, his career wouldn't be in ruins now.

And it was. Only a fool would think otherwise. The meeting today would only put the official imprimatur on what everybody knew.

But still the forms must be observed, so he presented himself at the appropriate offices at the appointed hour, wondering what his punishment was to be. He was fairly certain that the PDI itself was to be dismantled, but it was his own future that he was concerned with now. What would they do with him? A demotion in grade with associated pay cuts? Revocation of some of his security clearances? A minor desk in some out-of-the-way bureau?

An attaché met him at the elevator, and walked him silently back to an anonymous conference room. There were seven people seated around the conference table, and Wheatley was dismayed to realize that he didn't recognize three of them. One of the others, Caleb Buchan, was the head of the newly formed Joint Oversight Committee on Intelligence. He had a thick folder in front of him.

No introductions were offered.

"Sit down, Mr. Wheatley," Buchan said.

Wheatley sat.

"I've been going over the mission statement for the . . . Paranormal Defense Initiative, is it? Very interesting reading. And of course, I've been brought up to date about your recent activities."

There didn't seem to be anything to say, so Wheatley said nothing. This was going to be worse than he thought, if the FBI and CIA were sitting in on it.

"We don't believe that there's any further need for your project, Mr. Wheatley," Buchan said. "Your resources will be reallocated. Your assets will be debriefed and assigned elsewhere as appropriate."

There was a pause. Buchan leafed through the file in front of him—an unnecessary gesture, as he'd certainly had plenty of time to familiarize himself with it before the meeting.

So far, things had gone about as Wheatley had expected them to. The PDI was history. He'd expected that. But what had been built once could be built again, given time.

"And now, I imagine you're wondering what we're going to do with you," Buchan continued, looking up. "Considering that your actions border on criminal lunacy, that's only reasonable."

Wheatley shifted in his chair, keeping his face expressionless with an effort. He certainly hadn't expected this sort of language from a Washington insider.

"Fortunately, Mr. Bell and Ms. Llewellyn are both willing to cooperate with us to keep this low-key. They're trusting us to take care of it quietly, for the good of the people. *Pro bono publico*, a phrase heard all too rarely these days. I see from your personnel records that you haven't taken a vacation in twelve years, Mr. Wheatley. Is that correct?"

It took Wheatley a moment to realize he'd been asked a direct question. "I . . . yes. Sir."

Buchan smiled. It wasn't a nice smile. "Well, then. You'll have a great deal of leave time accumulated. I suggest you take it. And you can apply for early retirement while you're at it. I'm absolutely certain the request will be granted. I understand there are wonderful opportunities in the private sector these days."

He got to his feet, indicating that the meeting was over.

"In fact, why don't you start now? I'll have my assistant call yours. She can pack up your office and have your personal things sent to your home. That way, you can start forgetting about the PDI right away."

Wheatley got to his feet automatically as the others left, but he couldn't bring himself to follow them immediately.

He'd just been fired. There'd be no transfer for him, no minor punishments. Buchan could dress it up however he liked with suggestions about "vacations" and "retirement," but Wheatley was finished in Washington. His career was over.

But Wheatley knew who to blame for his downfall.

Aerune mac Audelaine. And Ria Llewellyn.

And he'd have his revenge, on both of them.

It was only a matter of time.