

JERRY OLTION and KRISTINE KATHRY RUSCH

DEUS X

"I know where God is," Lita told her brother when he came to take her away. "I know why He hasn't been in touch with humanity for so long."

Marcus sighed. He hated these conversations and was secretly relieved he wouldn't have to face any more. Ignoring her greeting, he brushed a stray strand of hair off his forehead -- he felt in disarray today --and stepped into her room.

It smelled of incense and unchanged sheets. Her bed was made though, and all her belongings straightened. A row of tiny golden bells extended all the way across the bookshelf above her bed -- a bookshelf filled with history books. The tan suitcase he had bought for her when she graduated from college sat on the hardwood floor, her overgrown house plants in a box lid beside it.

She had already packed the suitcase. Marcus checked it to make sure she hadn't hidden anything forbidden in the bottom, but he found only toiletries and clothing. Light, indoor clothing. Good. She had no delusions about her destination, at least.

"The hacksaw is cleverly disguised as the handle," Lita said as he zipped the suitcase closed again. When he actually looked, she laughed, her high, three-note arpeggio filling the bedroom.

"Very funny," he said, and felt a pang of loss. Once Lita had had a marvelous sense of humor -- and moments like this reminded him how much he missed it, how much he missed the closeness they had had. Years ago.

He picked up the bag, grunting once at the weight. Lita followed, the plants cradled like children in her arms.

"They may not let you have those," he said.

"They always allow plants in institutions," she said.

He swallowed, his mouth drier than he wanted it. She sounded calm, almost herself. If Phil weren't waiting downstairs, Marcus might back out -- again.

But he couldn't. Not with the campaign heating up. Jimmy Carter's crazy brother had been funny in the '70s, but in the '90s a mayor's crazy sister called his own sanity into question. Besides, Lita had gotten stranger in the last year, and he couldn't control her -- or her mouth. And in Wisconsin, people didn't tolerate odd behavior very well, especially from their politicians. He certainly hoped the subject of God would be forgotten for the drive.

He lugged the suitcase past his own room -- which had once belonged to their parents, before the plane crash -- and down the stairs to the entryway, where his campaign manager waited, nervously jangling the car keys.

"Hello, Phil," Lita said from the top of the stairs. "Have you got the straightjacket ready?"

He reddened. "I, um --"

"She's being a real clown this morning," Marcus said. "Come on, Lita. Your appointment is at ten."

She descended the stairs slowly, the wood creaking beneath her weight. The slanting line of photographs on the wall -- their parents' wedding picture, their graduation pictures, and that last family photograph -- caught her attention. "Good-bye," she told them as she passed. "Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye." When she got to the bottom of the stairs, Phil opened the front door for her, and she paused to say good-bye to the entire house. Then on the way to the car she said good-bye to a Mugo pine, and to three people who weren't there.

After a bit of wrangling, Phil and Lita put the plants in the trunk of the gray Oldsmobile along with the suitcase. Lita slid into the back and Marcus sat beside her, his wool suit catching on the fabric upholstery. He missed the BMW and its leather seats, but Phil had told him a mayor should drive an American car. Marcus hadn't actually driven it much; Phil usually did all that while Marcus read his reports and memorized speeches.

"Look out!" Lita gasped when Phil pulled out into the street. He stomped on the brake, jerking them all forward against their safety belts, but there was nothing in front of the car.

"What?" Phil asked.

She shook her head, her long hair catching on her bottom lip. "I keep forgetting. You can't see them. He's out of the way now. Go ahead."

Phil drove on without answering, his back and shoulders rigid. Marcus brushed the hair out of Lita's mouth, and then used the moment to caress her cheek, something he hadn't done since she was a baby.

"We'll get this taken care of, sis. You'll be as good as new in no time."

"That'll be a relief."

"You don't have to get sarcastic."

She laid her hand on his arm. "I wasn't. Not entirely, anyway. It really would be a relief if they'd just go away. They're all so demanding, and they want something I can't give them." The implication was clear, in light of earlier conversations. She thought there was something Marcus could do, if he'd just

accept her invisible people as real.

The houses and trees streaming past were a blur beyond the windows. Phil was taking the back route, avoiding the downtown, City Hall, and any nosy reporters. Marcus tried to focus on his sister, but her blue eyes seemed to bore a hole through his own. "I've told you," he said, keeping his voice calm. "I can't see them. There's nothing I can do for them, either."

"How do you know that?"

"Because --" He stopped. Because you can't help someone who doesn't exist, he wanted to say, but he had said that over and over already. "Because I've got my hands full just running this city," he said instead.

"Because you're up for re-election, and you can't be seen talking to people who aren't there," she amended with the tone of a child who had heard the sentence many times.

"That too."

They rode in silence past the lake, and to the dangerous unmarked intersection Councilman Seals had been nagging him about. The car merged into eastside traffic, past his baby -- the industrial park still under construction. He supposed he would have to find some funding for that intersection before the three electronics firms opened their doors, and brought in the promised thousand jobs.

Phil turned the car on a side road and followed its twisty path until they reached the tasteful sandstone gate that hid the lawn of the private hospital.

"I know why God has been so silent lately," Lira said again as the huge tan building came into view. Her voice had a touch of desperation and her hands were shaking. "He's been quiet because He's under sedation."

An hour of paperwork later, Marcus left the hospital, the institutional stink buried in his clothes. He and Phil said nothing as they got into the car. The whole ordeal had left Marcus's shoulders so tight that he felt as if he would pull a muscle if he turned his head too quickly. He had almost backed out when they didn't allow Lita to bring her plants into her room.

Her voice still rung in his head: You're going to take my friends away from me. At least let me keep my plants. Please?

He had reached a compromise with the staff, probably because of his local celebrity status. Her plants remained, in a window she had chosen near the lobby, and if she responded well to treatment they would be moved into her room. She would be allowed to tend them every day, either way.

As they drove through the gate and onto the road, Phil turned to him. "Let me buy you lunch?"

Being in public was the last thing Marcus wanted, but it was something he could no longer avoid. The campaign was heating up -- and with Jim Sorenson entering the race, Marcus no longer had the free ride he had once had. Sorenson had been mayor of the city almost twenty years before, a young radical elected toward the end of the Vietnam era. He had received national press coverage, being the youngest mayor of a major U.S. city, and the aging former hippies -- who were all heavy voters -- remembered Sorenson's tenure with fondness.

"Lunch sounds good," Marcus said, "but let's stay away from City Hall."

Phil drove to an eastside diner that still had the original vinyl on the booths, and authentic fifties swirling counter stools. The hostess greeted Phil with a smile and, without asking, led him and Marcus to a table in the near-empty back room.

"Favorite of yours?" Marcus asked.

"Mmmm hmm," Phil said. "They do a great hot turkey sandwich."

So Marcus ordered a hot turkey sandwich, and an ice tea when he realized the diner didn't serve beer. Wily fellow, Phil. He knew better than to let Marcus drink on a Wednesday afternoon.

Phil looked like he could have used a drink himself, though. He had been visibly unnerved in the lounge when a small woman had walked up to him, handed him a pile of polished rocks, and walked away. He had set the rocks on a table and hurried to Marcus's side, for the first time in Marcus's memory seeking advice and protection rather than offering it.

"I hate leaving her there," Marcus said. "Maybe I should have hired someone to care for her at home."

Phil shook his head. "Even if you could afford it, how would you avoid another Channel 6 problem?"

Marcus took a sip of his ice water. A reporter from Channel 6 had taken footage of Lita talking with her imaginary friends. Phil had pulled a lot of strings to prevent the story from airing, and the whole incident still bothered him. Marcus, too. He hadn't wanted the footage to air, but manipulating the media was such a Richard Nixon thing to do. If that ever got out, he would be in a lot of trouble, especially in this election.

"I know," he said, not wanting to think about it anymore. He was glad he had a City Council meeting tonight, so he wouldn't have to go home early to an empty house.

Not that going home to Lita had been pleasant. In the last three months, she had been so insistent. She had tried to introduce him to her imaginary people, making up long alliterative names for them, and when that failed, she had acted

as "interpreter." She had even tried sleight of hand to convince him that her friends were moving things around the room. But the night she had asked him to father a baby with one of them was the night he knew he had to get help for her. He was afraid that something had really slipped -- and he didn't even want to think about what she might have done if he had humored her and said yes.

He had humored Lira before, and it had only made things worse. It had driven her delusions to another level of complexity, turning her one-time play friends into oppressed refugees who needed her help, and then his.

When the waitress returned, carrying Marcus's sandwich and Phil's chicken-fried steak, Phil let out a sigh that seemed to go on forever. His shoulders relaxed, and his thin, worried grimace slid a little closer to a smile. Marcus knew how he felt. Familiar surroundings. Comfort food. Marcus had used the same tactics many times over the last few months.

He wouldn't have to do that now. He was appalled at how relieved he felt, but both emotions were honest. Now he could bring colleagues home -- and dates, if he were so inclined. Now he could concentrate on the campaign and on the city itself.

As if that would do any good. He had been as idealistic as Sorenson when he got into politics, only the '80s were death to idealism, just as government was. For the last two years, he'd had to compromise on every issue just to get his favorite ones passed, and he had come to realize that a man did not change the world by becoming a politician. Eventually politics and the world changed the man. When the last die was cast, all Marcus would ever be was a man who had made some partially successful deals.

He wished he could sit down with his opponent and explain that to him, explain that Sorenson's tenure had been a fluke because the times had been right for it, that no mayor in the 1990s could be a revolutionary too.

The idea was laughable. They were political adversaries, and he'd better not forget that.

"You're awfully quiet," Phil said.

Marcus nodded. "Just trying to adjust my focus," he said.

For the next few weeks, Marcus kept being surprised by the yellow and red leaves fluttering to the ground from the oak and maple trees all over town. It felt like springtime to him. Lita had responded to medication, and no longer saw her imaginary people. When Marcus visited, they actually held normal, rational conversations. Nearly normal, anyway. She spoke too slowly and the brightness had left her eyes. The drugs didn't affect her memory, so she still spoke of her invisible friends, but time would take care of that. Eventually, she would lose her concern for them, and would replace them with friends from the real world.

Marcus wasn't able to visit her as often as he liked, since the election was

only two months away, but he vowed to make it up to her afterward. Now that he was able to concentrate again, things were clicking into place in a way he had forgotten was possible. Sorenson was still giving him trouble, but the man was running on the golden memories of an outmoded era. Phil had found a contemporary statistical analysis of Sorenson's reign, and the analysis showed that Sorenson's idealistic games had put the city into a recession three years before the rest of the country. Much of the work Marcus had done almost fifteen years later was a direct result of the mess Sorenson had made of the city.

The polls after that story broke showed Marcus in the lead. This afternoon he would solidify that lead with copies of reports leaked to him by two major corporations who had decided not to come into the city during the 1970s specifically because of Sorenson's policies. The reports, besides citing Sorenson as the main reason for ignoring the city's bids, also showed that the corporations would have brought five thousand jobs to the area. If Sorenson hadn't been mayor, the city would have gone into an upswing instead of a serious decline. Marcus had been saying that all along, but now he had it in writing.

He grabbed the papers off his cluttered desk and shoved them in his breast pocket. Phil would make sure that the reporters got copies at the end of the press conference, but Marcus liked to have the papers to wave around. He stepped out into the hall, passing two messengers scurrying toward his secretary's desk. The hallway had the dry, dusty odor of recycled air, mixed with the perfumes and colognes of the overdressed people who worked inside. Marcus wondered what it would smell like if Sorenson won the election. Sandalwood, maybe? He remembered how in his college days the hippies had burned sandalwood incense to mask the smell of pot.

The thought made him laugh, and Councilman Seals, a burly man who looked like a used car salesman, tilted his head quizzically as he passed. Marcus didn't bother to explain. He turned left at the wide marble stairs that led to the press rooms in the basement.

Whistling as he took the steps two at a time, he nodded to people in passing. The building was full today -- odd, even for a press conference of this importance -- and he wondered if this presaged a blow-up on some issue he hadn't been concentrating on.

When he reached the landing, a man in strangely cut clothes -- it looked as if he had tucked a navy blue bathrobe into a pair of white and blue striped jodhpurs -- tried to stop him, saying in an oddly accented voice, "Mr. Chambers, I need to speak with you in private."

Marcus sidestepped him with practiced ease. "Sorry. I've got a press conference." The man -- obviously a Sorenson supporter by the clothing -- reached for him, but missed as Marcus danced out of his way. "Come to the conference if you need to talk," Marcus told him, then turned and hurried down the remaining steps.

He heard the reporters before he saw them. The wide hall and vaulted ceiling

caught and reflected sound. He recognized the faces in this hallway. All three local television channels were there, as well as all the radio stations. The newspaper reporters, milling near the bust of Thomas Jefferson, saw Marcus first and headed into the audience room. The others followed, and the wide hall was suddenly empty except for the oversized portrait of the city's first mayor and the busts standing on Grecian columns.

Marcus went in the side door behind the fake stage and immediately ran into Phil. "Ready?" Marcus asked. He had to speak loudly because of the babble of the reporters in the main room.

"Ready." Phil was rocking from foot to foot in excitement. "If this works, we should have the network boys at your next conference. They're already calling this a race between the ideals of the sixties and the realities of the nineties. Did you catch CNN this morning?"

"Nope," Marcus said, "but I heard about it from Beverly." In fact, his secretary was telling everyone who came in that their lowly mayoral race was becoming national news. The thing that bothered him was that he was being seen as the slick politician and Sorenson as the idealist. Phil didn't care, claiming the free publicity was great. But something about it rankled. Damn it, Marcus was an idealist too. He wanted to save the world just as badly as Sorenson did. Marcus just knew the difference between possibility and fantasy.

Phil slipped out behind the thin blue curtain and walked to the podium. A single mike faced him -- an innovation from early in Marcus's tenure -- placing enough electronics equipment in back that reporters could jack into the sound system instead of tape their mikes to the main one.

The din gradually receded. Phil waited, hands clasped behind his back, until the room was completely quiet, then he thanked everyone for coming and gave a short state-of-the-campaign speech to warm up the crowd. He wound it up after a few minutes and turned over the podium to Marcus.

"Thank you," Marcus said when he reached the podium. Squinting against the harsh glare of the TV lights, he looked out at the room full of reporters in their wooden chairs, notebooks and laptop computers opened like expectant mouths on their laps, and said, deadpan, "You're probably all wondering why I called you here today...." He waited for their laughter, grinned and said, "I've always wanted to use that line, but today it seems especially appropriate. I've just discovered a little piece of information I want to share with everyone."

With that as a teaser, he held back for a couple of minutes, first setting them up with a brief history of the city's economy as it related to the state's and the nation's. Then he cited figures on the way the early recession had affected the individuals in the city -- figures which showed a significant decline in all the local businesses, including the state run university, as well as a serious decline in the number of jobs.

When he judged that everyone was properly incensed, he said, "Our office has

used these statistics before to show the detrimental effect of Mr. Sorenson's previous tenure on the city. But now we have outside confirmation." Removing the papers from his pocket, he waved them in the air like a flag and dropped his bombshell.

The significance did not escape the reporters. Instead of losing ten thousand jobs in the 1970s, the city would have gained five thousand. Fifteen thousand people would have been employed who were now out of work, and all because of Sorenson.

In the stunned silence that followed, the man he had seen on the stairs stood up, the tassles on his sleeves jingling softly, and said, "Mr. Chambers, I really need to talk with you about your sister. What you've done to her is causing us great concern."

Marcus felt as if he had been hit in the belly. He had been expecting someone to ask about Lira, but not today, not on his afternoon of triumph. He instantly realized the score, though. Sorenson had been saving it for a trump card, in case Marcus managed to tarnish his image. Well, it wouldn't work. Phil had already written a response, which Marcus had memorized. He launched into it now, altering it only enough to fit the current situation.

Focusing intently on the man, he said, "I hardly think having a sister who needs psychiatric treatment compares to the callow disregard of his fellow human beings that my opponent has shown in the pursuit of his ideals. Mr. Sorenson may wish to make a campaign issue out of my decision to seek treatment for her, but I challenge him to show me a better course of action. My sister's condition is being treated by trained professionals, which is the only humane way to deal with a situation like hers. Similarly, you should look to a professional to oversee the city government, not an amateur whose anti-business attitude has already cost us thousands of jobs!"

A few of the reporters turned around in their seats to see who he was talking to, then turned back to him with puzzled expressions. Marcus thought furiously. Was he missing something here? Was this guy somebody he should know? Maybe a local hero? He looked at Phil in the wings, who was frantically tugging his left earlobe, the signal to cut it short.

But he couldn't do that; the conference had hardly gotten started. If he bailed out now, the whole thing would be a fiasco. The only way to fix it would be to find out what was going on, and hope he could patch things up once he understood.

The reporters burst into a babble of questions, but Marcus ignored them all and said to the man in the robe and jodhpurs, "I get the feeling I should know you. What's your name?"

The man took a step forward. "I am Kardalkeddy Ez Hakon. Your sister said you couldn't see me, but fortunately, she was wrong."

* * *

Marcus sat on his leather swivel chair, his feet propped up on his cluttered oak desk. Through the window below, he had a clear view of the press entrance. Reporters were standing in front of cameras, giving special reports. Others had hurried to their cars and driven away. A few, he knew, were plugged into the phones downstairs, transmitting their stories directly to the city desk.

And probably not the story he wanted them to tell. He rubbed the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. A headache was building behind his eyes. He had to wait until everyone was gone before he could even try to go home.

The door to his office burst open, and Phil scurried in. His jacket was askew. Beads of sweat covered his brick-red forehead. "What the hell was that?" he snapped.

"I saw someone there," Marcus said, deciding to leave out the bit about the strange clothes. "He asked me about Lita."

"Yeah, right." Phil ran a hand through his stylish blunt cut. "And the ghost of FDR was hovering over us all, giving his blessing to the campaign." He grabbed Marcus's ankles and pushed them off the desk. "Thank god the cameras were all pointed at you. No one can prove you were talking to thin air, but you can bet your ass Channel 6 is going to haul out that footage of Lita. What the hell were you thinking?"

Marcus sat up. "I tell you, Phil, there was a man there. Long-haired guy with a funny accent. He must have ducked out as soon as he asked the question." Even as he spoke, Marcus knew that wasn't what happened. But he was into full damage control now; any explanation that fit the facts was better than none. "I mean, what better way to make the mayor look bad than to have him talking to the air like his crazy sister?"

Phil sighed and turned away. "I already thought of that. In fact, I already said as much downstairs." He turned back to Marcus, his expression already hardening with resolve. "That's our story, and we stick to it. We also prevent another looney from coming in again. We need security at these things. No more open conferences. We do the Reagan thing and make everyone sign in and get assigned seats, okay?"

"Okay," Marcus said.

"And I will handle this. You will make no comment on it at all. Understood?"

"Yes." Marcus gripped his hands together. He hated this kind of control, had fought it for years. But because of this one -- serious -- blunder, he had to give in to Phil.

"We have to make these reporters look like idiots, suckered into believing this kind of story. That means an incredulous laugh whenever anyone mentions it, and

nothing else. We'll beat this bastard through sheer denial." Phil adjusted his suit, then pushed the knot of his tie against his throat. "God, we should have been prepared for this kind of end run. I never thought Sorenson had it in him."

Marcus swallowed heavily, keeping his expression impassive. Phil turned, looking neater, but his hair still stuck out in all directions.

"You realize what this means, don't you?" Phil asked. "It means the campaign has just gotten very dirty."

The house had never looked so inviting. Marcus let himself in through the garage, closing the door with the remote before he stepped out of the car so he wouldn't have to face the reporters camped out on the front lawn. He made a show of shutting the drapes, and unplugged the ringing telephones in each room while he was there. When the entire house was secure and silent, he went into the kitchen where he warmed up a can of soup and made himself a roast beef sandwich. He pulled a Beck's out of the fridge and sat at the table, his entire body shaking.

Phil had bought it. At least, he was acting like he did. But that didn't solve the problem. What had the admitting nurse asked? Are there other cases of this type, Mr. Chambers? Sometimes mental health problems run in families.

Like a disease. And now he had it.

"Excuse me."

The voice made him jump. He stood and whirled, ready to throw the bastard reporter out. But instead, he saw the man in the bathrobe and jodhpurs standing beside the stove.

Marcus sank back into his chair. "Go away," he said. "Just disappear back into the ether where you belong."

"I wish I could, Sidenta," the man said. "But I do need to talk to you." He held his hands above the stove burner, warming them over its residual heat.

"You've already messed up my life. Please leave." Marcus pushed the beer away. He was talking to the imaginary man as if he were real. Just like Lira did.

"I cannot," the man said. "I need your help, Sidenta."

"I don't believe in you."

"I believe in you." The man's voice was shy. He took a step forward, knelt and took Marcus's hand. Marcus pulled away, but not before he had felt the warmth of the man's skin, and the roughness of his calluses.

"I have been trying to speak with your sister," the man said, "but she cannot hear me anymore. I had no choice but to come to you."

"Wonderful."

The man kept his head down as he spoke. In the bright kitchen lights, his hair had an odd greenish tinge. "I am Kardalkeddy Ez Hakon, Traveler Between Worlds. The sacred book of Davon foretold my coming by a thousand generations. It spoke of you, too, Sidenta, and the peace you would bring to our people."

Marcus focused on the man. This vision was convincing. No wonder Lira believed so firmly. All it had taken was twice, and he was getting sucked into the delusion too. She had been seeing them for years. He shook his head to clear it, and said, "Look, I'm not bringing peace to you or anybody else from dreamland, understand? I'm going to close my eyes, and you are going to go where laps go when people stand up. Is that clear?"

The man's bow deepened. "Forgive me, Sidenta, but I choose not to leave. I have a few moments left. I must convince you."

Marcus stubbornly looked away, but out of the corner of his eye he could still see the apparition kneeling beside him. Kardalkeddy moved his arm, and the tassles on his sleeves tinkled with tiny golden bells.

"I don't believe in you," Marcus said again.

"Sidenta," the man said. "Let us not talk of belief. Let us talk of lives, of needs, of obligations. We need you. You could affect the fate of our whole world."

Marcus closed his fist and drew his hand against his side. He didn't understand any of this. "What the hell does 'Sidenta' mean?"

Kardalkeddy touched his forehead, quickly, like a Catholic genuflecting. "It means many things. To some, it means 'leader.' To others, 'lord.' In some of the old texts, it means 'blessed spirit.'"

Marcus got up from the table and carried his beer and his soup to the sink. He poured the beer out, watching it swirling amber around the drain. "Get out," he said.

"Sidenta, please. My power for this day is nearly faded. It is not easy to breach the wall between worlds. Your sister, and now you, are the only people I have been able to reach at all, and if you do not help us I fear there will not be another. Please --"

"Get out," Marcus said firmly. He set the empty beer bottle beside the sink, then leaned forward and rested his head on the cupboards. Maybe he should resign. Maybe he should leave the campaign. Or maybe this was just a fluke, induced by stress. He would get a good night's sleep, and everything would look better in the morning.

When he finally turned around, he was alone in the kitchen. He glanced nervously around, then sighed and stuck his bowl of soup in the microwave, opened the refrigerator, and pulled out a can of Coke. He slipped off his shoes and put them on the front stairs, returning to the kitchen just as the microwave beeper went off. He took the bowl out of the microwave and was halfway back to the table when he stepped on something hard.

"Ow, damn!" he said, setting the bowl down and peering at the floor. There on the varnished hardwood was a tiny blue tassel, complete with bell.

The next day, following Phil's game plan, Marcus parked himself in his office and didn't budge all day, nor did he respond to the constant barrage of phone messages from the media. He overheard Beverly in the outer office telling each caller the same thing: "I'm sorry, but the mayor is in a meeting. Please give me your name and number and I will have him return your call."

Yeah, right.

The reporters camped out in the front office got the "Do you have an appointment?" treatment, at which Beverly was a master. Marcus smiled when he heard her typing steadily between calls, ignoring the reporters as if they weren't there.

How he envied her that ability. Marcus had tried working, but he couldn't concentrate -- and he needed to get things done, on the campaign and on city business. This disappearance was costing him in more areas than simply his public persona.

The sound of someone clearing his throat brought Marcus out of his reverie. He turned, expecting Phil or Beverly, but he drew in a sharp breath when he saw Kardalkeddy standing just inside the door. He was wearing a different outfit today: a dark blue bodysuit made of fine silky fur. His long hair had been tied in a braid that hung over his left shoulder, and another bell dangled from a blue tassel at the end of the braid.

"Go away," Marcus croaked.

"Thank you for seeing me," Kardalkeddy said. "You are a busy man, judging by the size of the crowd in your audience hall."

"That crowd is your fault," Marcus said.

"Is it?" Kardalkeddy pulled out one of the two chairs across the desk from Marcus and sat down. The leather seat creaked under Kardalkeddy's weight. "That is an interesting conundrum, is it not? You do not think I exist, yet you say I am responsible for your problem."

Marcus could think of no response to that, save looking away and trying to focus on the zoning board report on his desk.

Kardalkeddy laughed. "Yes, by all means, continue your work. I am sure it is more pressing than the needs of an entire people."

Marcus's shoulders tensed. He turned the page, but the words blurred. He had never been good at ignoring anyone or anything. It was one of the things that had made him a good politician.

"I know," Kardalkeddy said. "I shall tell you a story. A story of a people who have suffered much for their beliefs. A people who, even now, are dying because they believe they shall be saved." His voice took on a lyrical quality as he warmed to his subject. "They are a good, hardworking lot. They have listened to their god and done all that she has said. But even her council cannot save them. They need a savior, one who is of them and not of them."

Marcus turned another page. His hand was trembling.

"Fortunately," Kardalkeddy said without missing a beat, "the sacred book of Davon foretold of just such a one, who would appear in our time of need. Many other portents have already come to pass. Myself for instance, the Traveler Between Worlds who can see into the next plane of existence, and hunt for our salvation there."

Marcus pushed the report away. "So you're as loony as me, then." Kardalkeddy shook his head. "When I was a child, my parents thought me possessed. Then they listened, and realized that I spoke with a wisdom no child owned. Others came to believe, and to rely upon my otherworldly advice. Only those who cannot accept reality call me Idiot. They see me speaking to thin air, while balanced on the limb of a tree, and they would chain me with the dogs if not for the value of my words."

Marcus frowned. Kardalkeddy was sitting flat in the chair, his legs spread before him. He didn't look like a man balanced on a tree limb, even if the limb only existed in his imagination.

"This advice -- you got it from Lita?"

"Yes, Sidenta. She told us to rotate crops and to burn the fields when they are fallow. She explained how to divert rivers to water our dry land. She told us how to clean meat so that illness will not come to our people. And when the Zetain came -- the conquerors -- she taught us how to keep our own way of life alive while pretending to accept theirs."

Marcus sighed. All those books on pre-modern agriculture, the French Resistance, and the history of the religious faithful in Eastern Europe. He had thought Lita was just interested in history.

"The sacred book of Davon said the One would rise up and help us overpower the conquerors. As more and more of us died on the Zetains' swords, we pleaded with her to help us. She said she would speak with you, Sidenta, but then she disappeared. When I could not talk with her, I came to you. But you do not

believe the evidence of your own senses."

Marcus's skin was crawling. He looked Kardalkeddy directly in the eyes. "Not when they tell me things that are flat out impossible."

"How can something be impossible when it happens?"

The question froze Marcus. He sat, unable to respond, when the door opened and Phil walked in. A burst of conversation from the front office entered with him, and muted again when he closed the door.

"How's it going?" Phil asked. He wore his light gray power suit, the one he usually reserved for tough council meetings.

"Fine," Marcus said, shuffling through the zoning report and trying to look busy. He had to get Phil out of the room.

Phil reached for the chair that Kardalkeddy was sitting in, but Kardalkeddy pulled the other one out instead. Phil glanced at Marcus, obviously not seeing Kardalkeddy at all, then sat in the other chair. He'd evidently figured that Marcus had slid it out with his foot.

Amazing what the mind could rationalize when there was no other explanation.

"Channel 6 won't let go of the crazy mayor story," Phil said, "but Channel 12 bought our version completely. They've been running your footage -- which looks good when you assume there's a question -- side by side with Sorenson's news conference from this morning. He comes off as a self-centered jerk. Both state papers came out for you, and all three of the talk radio stations."

"Good," Marcus said, not trusting himself to say more.

Kardalkeddy was watching the conversation, his eyes bright.

"Of course, Sorenson has been going after the business with Lira now that you're on the record admitting to her hospitalization, but I think we can beat him on that, too. Play the humanitarian angle."

"Humanitarian. Such a natural role for you, is it not, Sidenta?"

Marcus swallowed, forcing himself to keep his gaze on Phil. "Fine."

Phil folded his hands across his flat stomach. "We need to give the press something else to talk about. I've been emphasizing the jobs thing, and people are angry about it, but we need to show that you're working to help the community."

"My record should show that," Marcus said.

Kardalkeddy snickered. "Not from this vantage."

"Not enough." Phil tilted his head in that cocky way Marcus hated. "I figure we need the library renovation."

The library renovation was one of Marcus's long-running battles. He had been arguing for it ever since he had gotten into office, but even though everyone agreed it was necessary, the council could not agree on funding.

"We don't have the votes," Marcus said.

"Votes, Sidenta?"

Phil leaned forward. "We do if we call in a few favors. We won't have to make good until after the election."

"I don't know," Marcus said. "There are still some serious flaws with the proposal. If we pass it now, it'll just come back to haunt us later. I'd like to give it another run through committee and see if we can't get it right the first time."

Phil shook his head. "We need that vote now, Marcus. We need news."

"Interesting." Kardalkeddy studied Marcus as if he were an alien life form. "You need the help of others to make changes in this world. Yet in our world you could save hundreds of thousands of lives with a single act."

Marcus glanced over at him, then back at Phil. Phil hadn't even batted an eye. Kardalkeddy sat beside him, obviously enjoying Marcus's discomfort, and that sight made Marcus boil. To Phil, he said, "All right. You win. Let's make some news."

Kardalkeddy sighed and stood. "You choose books when you can save lives. You are a small man, Sidenta." He reached up and pulled the bell from his braid, then held it over Phil's lap and let go.

The instant the bell left Kardalkeddy's fingers, he disappeared. The bell, however, landed with a soft ding on Phil's leg, then bounced to the floor.

"Where the hell did that come from?" Phil asked, bending over to retrieve it.

"What?" Marcus said innocently. "Oh, that. I must have accidentally knocked it off the desk. Sorry."

Phil looked at him suspiciously for a moment, then handed the bell to Marcus. Marcus held it in his closed fist until Phil left, a hard, cold lump of impossibility digging into his flesh.

"The bell is a talisman," Lita said. She spoke slowly, not at all like the Lita of old. "It helps him transfer between worlds. Without the bell, the transfer is painful for him."

She was sitting at the foot of her bed, her bright yellow blouse and white pants glowing in the evening light filtering through the west-facing window.

Marcus sat in the hard-backed desk chair and breathed deeply, trying to stay calm. "Good," he said. "That's a start, at least. So what can I do to make it impossible?"

Lita stared out the window as if she hadn't heard him.

He rubbed a hand over his face. "Come on, Lita. I need your help here."

She turned her head toward him. Each movement had deliberateness, as if each action had three parts: think; command; execute. "Marcus," she said. "You can't run away from this. There's a whole world over there that needs -- "

"Over where?" Marcus demanded. Lita withdrew like a turtle into her shell, the way she always did when he raised his voice, but now even that movement was slow. Sometimes he wanted to take her off the drugs so his quirky hyperactive sister would return.

"Sorry," he said, reaching out to touch her arm. "All right. I admit, they're real. At least their effect on us is real. But I don't care about some alternate universe. They're screwing up my life in this one, and I want it stopped."

"Then check yourself into the same treatment program you checked me into."

Marcus stared at her, wondering if she was joking. She stared back, her blue eyes dulled, no humor in her expression at all. He had thought of banishing Kardalkeddy with drugs, but that idea had died the moment he saw Lita again. He couldn't face having his mind altered. He had always been that way. The only drug he used was alcohol, and he had only been drunk a few times in his life.

"Of course," she said, misinterpreting his silence. "The famous mayor would not want to jeopardize his career." A slight flush rose in her cheeks as she spoke. She was angry with him. Underneath all the drugs, behind her flat affect, lay anger.

He took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Lita."

"I'll make you a deal," she said softly.

"What deal?"

She peered at him. "Did Kardalkeddy tell you what he wants from you?"

"Some crap about finding a true 'Sidenta' they could set up as a supreme dictator and run the infidels out of the country. Yeah. Sorry, but that's not my style."

Lita giggled. The sound had an eerie hollow quality. "Marcus, they don't want to find a Sidenta. They want to make one."

"Huh?"

She giggled again, and blushed. Even though her movements were slow, this was more like the Lita he loved. "Think about it," she said, her words so soft and slow that he leaned forward as if he could urge the words out with his body language. "We can't visit their world, but Kardalkeddy can visit ours, and he can bring some of his friends with him. If one of them was a woman and if she, well, if she got pregnant here, it would look like an immaculate conception to everyone else. And her baby would have origins in both worlds. He'd be able to draw on knowledge that the rest of Kardalkeddy's people aren't even aware exists. He might even have supernatural abilities."

"Supernatural abilities?" Marcus asked dryly.

"Jesus did. At least they looked like supernatural abilities to us. Maybe for his father's people he was just a normal guy."

Marcus swallowed. She had asked him to do this before, and he had put her here because of it. But now he was seeing the same people.... "Was this your idea or his?"

Lita glanced at him. "It's in their sacred book. The Book of Davon. I've always thought that was an Irish-sounding name. I looked it up, and 'Devin' means -- " She frowned, clearly searching her fogged brain for the memory. "'Devin' means 'poet-savant. A poet who puts his higher thoughts into words.' They've got lots of legends about invisible people in Ireland; I'd be willing to bet somebody from our world wrote Kardalkeddy's holy book."

Hah, Marcus thought. Imagine getting your religion from Northern Ireland. Knowing the source didn't help him any, though. He stood up and began pacing the narrow room. The window overlooked the interior garden. So far, Lira's plants remained in the visitor's center, but at least she had this. He shoved his hands in his pockets. "You're serious, aren't you? You really want me to have sex with an invisible woman, to get her pregnant, so she'll bear the local equivalent to the son of God."

"She won't be invisible to you," Lita said. "She'll be as real as Kardalkeddy."

Marcus laughed. "That's a relief."

Lita crossed her arms over her chest. "What's the big problem? You've slept with dozens of women. What's one more?"

"All the women I've slept with were real, that's what."

"Think of it as masturbation, then. Or donating to a sperm bank."

Marcus shook his head. "Lita, it's not that easy."

She shrugged. "Then spend the rest of your life ignoring Kardalkeddy and his pleas. It doesn't matter to me. I can't see him anymore." She glanced up at him and the smile that spread across her face was not friendly. "Or you could always take my drugs."

He shuddered, just a little, before he could hide the reaction. Then he flushed. He had made her this way.

She nodded, as if she had expected that response. "You don't need the drugs," she said softly. "And neither do I. As soon as you father a Sidenta, Kardalkeddy will leave both of us alone."

As Marcus drove away from the hospital, his head felt fuzzy, as if he had taken Lita's drugs. He wished that could be a solution, but after seeing what they did to her, he knew they weren't. Even Phil couldn't elect a candidate who acted like a zombie.

But the alternative seemed even worse. Sleep with a phantom? If the press got hold of that, he would be worse than a zombie. He'd be dead. Phil would kill him with his bare hands.

Christ, Phil. Just when Marcus needed to confide in him the most, he had suddenly become an adversary. He had completely taken over the reelection campaign, and while that might keep Marcus in office, he would find his hands tied in his second administration by all the empty promises Phil had made.

Plus he didn't like the fact that Phil was getting cozy with Councilman Seals. Marcus wasn't sure what deals those two were thinking up.

All of these problems plus the bad one, the one he didn't want to face. What if Phil and the doctors were right? What if Lita were crazy? Then Marcus was crazy too. One thing was certain: Lita didn't belong in the hospital any more than he did. If he wasn't willing to check himself in, then he should do everything he could to get her out of there and back home.

Everything? Marcus felt horrified to realize that he was actually considering her "deal." Yet if it would stop the visitations and let them both get back to their normal lives, then it would be worth it. And compared to what Phil was doing to Marcus's career, the price would be quite small.

That little bit of resolve buoyed him up on the drive home. He pulled into the driveway and noted with satisfaction that the reporters were gone. Phil's manipulation on the library issue had done its job.

Marcus parked the car in the garage and closed the door, then went inside the house. He didn't bother to pull the curtains or unplug the phones this time. He went into his study, put a George Winston CD in the player, and spread out on the leather couch. He would relax for a few minutes, then get back to work.

Things had started stacking up on him since he had been so distracted.

"So, Sidenta, have you solved your crisis?"

Marcus jerked upright. Kardalkeddy stood near the open window, the light forming a halo behind his head. He wore the bathrobe and jodhpurs again, and somehow that bit of familiarity made Marcus relax.

"For a true believer, your tone is a bit sarcastic," Marcus said.

Kardalkeddy got down on one knee. "Forgive me, Sidenta, but you do not make it easy to worship you."

Marcus sighed. "Get up."

Kardalkeddy stood. He touched his forehead, then faced Marcus. "As you wish, Sidenta."

Marcus stood up as well, surprised to realize that he was actually glad to see his tormentor again. At least face to face they had a chance to resolve these visitations. "Look," Marcus said, "I am not the kind of guy who needs someone to worship him. If I'm going to help you, I'd rather be your friend."

Sunlight reflected off something in the bushes just outside the window. A camera? Christ, that was all he needed. Marcus leaped toward the window, slammed it shut, and drew the curtains.

Kardalkeddy had not moved. He waited until Marcus was done, then asked softly, "You will help us, Sidenta?"

Marcus looked at the closed curtains, imagined reporters crawling through the bushes like ants, poking their cameras through every crack in the house. He couldn't live with this much longer. "Maybe," he said. "Come on. We've got to talk."

He led Kardalkeddy through the house, up the stairs and into the guest bathroom. He closed the door, then turned on the shower and the sink. Gesturing for Kardalkeddy to sit on the stool, Marcus took the countertop and said over the rush of water, "I talked to Lita and her story matches everything you've told me so far. Either she and I are crazy in the same way, or you're real."

Kardalkeddy looked around the bathroom in puzzlement, at the tile-lined shower and the light blue enamel walls with the matching blue towels on the rack, then shrugged and said, "I am real, Sidenta."

"And you're destroying my life. Lita says you'll stop if I father a child with one of your women. Is that true?" The words sounded cold and harsh. He had never spoken of intimate things like a deal over city parking garages.

Kardalkeddy rose, his body shrouded in the steam rising from the shower. "We

will leave you alone, if that is what you wish."

Marcus swallowed. The room was getting hot. He should have turned the shower on cold. "Yes," he said. "I want you to leave me alone."

Kardalkeddy frowned. "I had hoped for a more enthusiastic Sidenta, but if this is the way it must be, then this is the way it will be. I will bring her to you. At midnight. The start of the new day, when my powers are strongest." He reached out and plucked a bell from his sleeve.

"Wait!"

But Kardalkeddy had already disappeared.

Marcus spent the rest of the evening prowling the house like a caged tiger. With the curtains closed again. He unplugged the phones, too, after calling Phil and promising to come into the office bright and early in the morning. Phil had wanted to come over and discuss another campaign maneuver, but Marcus told him no. He would deal with it in the morning, in the office, after his invisible problems went away.

If they went away. If Kardalkeddy and his world weren't real, then tonight's encounter would not stop anything. It would merely be the jumping-off point for a long descent into madness. But Marcus could see no other choice.

He changed clothes twice, brought out a bottle of expensive cabernet from the basement, then took it back and got a newer, sweeter rose. He had no idea what Kardalkeddy's people drank, but rose was a safer choice for an unknown palate.

He set a fancy table, started to make a few appetizers, then decided to cook a full meal. Most of his experience with seduction had involved meals; it would help calm him down to spend an hour or two eating with the woman before they got down to business.

The lasagne was already in the oven when he realized that a traditional seduction might not work. He had no knowledge of Kardalkeddy's world, except that it seemed more primitive than his. Maybe a well-set table and strange food would frighten the woman.

Marcus finished baking the lasagne anyway, wishing that his imaginary people were more like daydreams, that the woman who would appear in his house would be blonde, buxom and fully versed in 20th century American society.

That made him laugh, remembering an old joke about a blackmail attempt on the Pope. To save the church, the Pope had been forced to make love to a woman, but he had demanded three conditions: that she be blind, so she couldn't see who was doing such a thing to her, that she be deaf for the same reason, and finally that she have big tits.

Marcus laughed again. As trade-offs went, this one was actually not so bad. Then

he had a horrible premonition that she would show up, dirty and naked, and expect him to service her then and there. The idea made him shrivel up inside.

At midnight the wine was open and breathing on the table and the lasagne was cooling on the stove. The house smelled of garlic, tomato sauce, and cooked hamburger. Two candles glowed on the table, and Marcus sat in one of the dining room chairs, hands clasped on his lap. He felt like a twelve-year-old boy on his first date: half-worried that she would view him as stupid, and half-worried because he felt stupid already.

With a tinkle of bells, Kardalkeddy appeared. He was alone. He surveyed the table, then nodded.

"Well?" Marcus asked.

"She is frightened," Kardalkeddy said. "She has never known a man before."

"Wonderful." Marcus hadn't thought of that. He stood up. He should have paid more attention in Sunday School all those years ago. Mary had been a virgin -- and a child. God. If this girl was a child, he couldn't do anything. "How old is she?"

"She is a woman full grown. She has been preparing all her life for this moment."

Marcus tried not to groan aloud. All her life? He had always avoided those kind of women before. Maybe he could get out on a technicality. "What do you consider full grown?"

"She has seen twenty-five summers. Is there a problem, Sidenta?"

He hoped to hell their years were as long as his. "No problem," he said. Then he felt his face heat. "Hey, uh, Kardalkeddy, um, how can we guarantee that this will work? I mean, sometimes it takes more than one night. I really don't want to do this for a month."

Kardalkeddy paused for a moment, as if relishing Marcus's discomfort. "We have prepared several women. It is Naralena's fertile time." He sighed. "You will treat her kindly?"

Marcus froze. What the hell kind of question was that? He had always been kind to people -- except maybe Kardalkeddy. And Sorenson. And Lira, from Kardalkeddy's perspective.

Marcus closed his eyes. The question was fair. "I will," he said.

"Good."

Marcus opened his eyes in time to see Kardalkeddy bend and reach behind him, as someone would do to help another person up a big step. His hand disappeared at

the wrist, only to reappear holding another hand. A woman stepped out of nowhere, as if she were stepping through a doorway from one room to another.

She was not a supermodel. No bikini, no flat belly, no breasts the size of grapefruit. About five foot four, maybe less. Her face was oval-shaped, cheekbones almost flat, her nose small and straight. Her skin, eyes, and hair were the same shade of gold. She wore a black dress that went to her knees, and ankle-high leather boots below that. A gold shawl wrapped around her waist and accented her wide hips. She stayed a half step behind Kardalkeddy, as though he would protect her.

"This is Naralena," he said, peering at Marcus. "Is something the matter? Is she not pleasing to you?"

Marcus's hands were damp. He resisted the urge to wipe them on his suit. "She's -- actually, she's very beautiful. Exotic." Christ, car dealership words. As if she were a Jag instead of a woman.

"Good." Kardalkeddy turned to Naralena. "I will stay if you desire it."

Marcus felt his face flame for the second time. He couldn't do anything with Kardalkeddy around, imaginary or not.

Naralena rescued him. Her wide gaze had not left Marcus's face. She nodded, once. "No. Return for me at dawn." Her voice was soft and husky.

Marcus felt a shiver run down his spine. Dawn. He had never, in all his years of single life, maneuvered this fast. He had always known the woman, at least as an acquaintance. In that moment, he realized that the dinner -- the seduction -- was not for her. It was for him.

Kardalkeddy pulled loose another bell, set it on the table, and disappeared. Marcus noted that Naralena had a leather chord tied around each wrist and ankle, and a tiny bell dangled from each. That was obviously so she wouldn't disappear when he removed her clothing. They had thought of everything.

Naralena dropped to one knee. "I am honored, Sidenta."

This would not work at all. Marcus bent over and took her hand, helping her up. His movements felt stiff and awkward. He hadn't been like this since he took out Cindy O'Brien in high school. "Please," he said, feeling ridiculous. "I need to be a person to you. Just a regular person. Come into the dining room. I've made us some dinner."

She didn't move, just stood there holding his hand, running the other over his shoulder and down his side. She smelled faintly of cloves and cinnamon.

He smiled at her. "I want you to tell me everything," he said. "About yourself. About your world."

She looked up at him, sideways, glancing at him out of the corner of her eyes. A faint smile played across her lips. An inviting smile. She put her hand on his cheek, then brought his face down to hers, and kissed him lightly.

"We do not have much time," she said in her honeyed voice. "I do not think we should waste it talking."

He wanted to disagree, but she kissed him again, much deeper than before.

And that was all it took.

* * *

Marcus crawled out of bed half an hour before dawn. Naralena reached for him, caught the love handles around his waist and pulled him back. He landed on top of her, laughing. They kissed, and he buried himself in her cinnamon scent. "I'm an old man," he said against her throat. "I need breakfast."

"I could eat as well," Naralena said.

Marcus glanced out the window. The sky was beginning to lighten. "Kardalkeddy will be here soon."

The laughter left Naralena's face. "I wish this night would not end."

Marcus stroked her cheek with the back of his hand. "Me, too," he said. He had never expected to feel this way. Something special had happened between them. It hadn't felt like a one-night stand; it had felt as if they had known each other forever.

He got up, slipped on his maroon bathrobe, then padded down the hall to Lira's room and got her fluffy pink robe for Naralena. Together they went downstairs to the kitchen, where Marcus stared for a moment at the cereal boxes, but he was too hungry for cereal. "How's lasagne sound?"

"I do not know what it is," she said, then smiled. "But if you made it for me, I would love to try it."

He pulled the lasagne out of the fridge and cut it, then put the pieces in the microwave. Naralena sat in the breakfast nook while he went into the dining room and retrieved the silverware they hadn't used last night.

He brought the candies and lit them, poured two glasses of orange juice, and then the microwave beeped. He set the plates before them, and sat down to eat. His stomach rumbled. He had taken one bite when Kardalkeddy slipped through the wall.

Kardalkeddy had been frowning as he came in, still wearing his jodhpurs, his hair mussed and deep circles beneath his eyes. He stared at them for a long moment, so long that Naralena held out her plate. "Would you like to break fast?"

The Sidenta is a good cook."

He glanced from one to the other. "Did you -- ?"

Marcus nodded quickly. He didn't want to discuss the night with anyone.

But Naralena smiled. "Repeatedly. He is good at that too."

Kardalkeddy's astonished look drew a laugh from Marcus. Despite his embarrassment, he felt good. It was nice to know that Naralena did as well.

Naralena. He reached across the table and she took his hand. He didn't want her to leave. "I was thinking" Marcus said. "I'd be willing to modify our agreement a bit."

Kardalkeddy pulled up a chair. He glanced at the entwined hands. "Would you."

"That's right," Marcus said. He hadn't discussed this with Naralena. His voice shook a little as he spoke. "If you can keep from showing up at inopportune moments, I'd like to keep in touch with Lena here. And the child." He flushed then. He felt as if he were speaking prematurely. There was no guarantee that Naralena was pregnant.

Kardalkeddy looked from Marcus to Naralena, his mouth agape. "How... ? What did you... ?"

She squeezed Marcus's hand. "He is a much nicer man than you led me to believe. He is tender and caring, and when I told him of our people, he was shocked. You have said nothing, Kardalkeddy, except vague warnings."

Marcus said, "She told me about the Zetaian and how they slaughtered her family, and the way life was before they came. Kardalkeddy, you know, if you had just told me about this -- "

"It would not have made any difference, Sidenta. You did not listen to me."

Marcus glanced at Naralena. She shrugged.

"Look," he said. "I'm worried about you guys. Life doesn't sound easy there, and if Naralena is pregnant, then it might get worse. And if you're telling me the truth, well, things didn't work out too well for the savior in our world. Personally, I mean." Marcus flushed as he spoke. He still felt a bit odd about all of this.

"His is not likely to be an easy life in ours, either," Kardalkeddy said.

Marcus sighed. "I suspected as much. But a little help from his old man at the right moments might give him a better chance."

"You ... are truly generous, Sidenta." Kardalkeddy extended a hand and raised

Naralena to her feet. She let go of Marcus's hand reluctantly. "Very well, we will return from time to time, as my powers permit. Being careful not to intrude when it would be awkward."

"I would appreciate that." Marcus stood up and encircled Naralena in his arms. She felt soft and small and fragile. He didn't want her to go back to that world, but he knew she couldn't stay. He kissed her on the forehead, then on the lips. "I'll count the hours," he said.

"And I as well." She leaned against him for a second, then Kardalkeddy cleared his throat.

She stepped away, and Marcus felt the loss of her warmth. Kardalkeddy reached for his sleeve, but Naralena stopped him and untied one of her bracelets instead. She handed it to Marcus, smiled, and let go.

The light seemed to fade from the room. Marcus stood in the suddenly empty kitchen for a moment, then sighed and padded back upstairs to shower and dress for work.

"Would you listen a minute?" Phil slammed his hand flat on the desk, startling Marcus from reliving the night for the hundredth time. "I swear to God, I don't know what's happened to you lately. First you're talking to nothing, and now you're ignoring the whole fucking world. I wish you'd make up your goddamned mind and help me with this fucking campaign."

Marcus tried to remember what Phil had been saying a minute ago. Something about funding for a homeless shelter? He couldn't remember. Everywhere he looked, he saw Naralena's face; every voice was her voice. When Beverly had come into the office earlier that morning with a cup of cinnamon tea in her hand, the aroma had driven him wild. He was glad he'd been sitting behind his desk, or she might have gotten the wrong idea.

Phil already had the wrong idea, though, and it was getting worse every day. In the week since Marcus had spent the night with Naralena, Phil had forced three more legislative time bombs through his office, all in an attempt to keep Marcus in the news. Well, Marcus was getting tired of it. Maybe it was time he said so.

He focused on Phil's bloodshot eyes and said, "You want me to help with this campaign? Then run it with some integrity. You're doing stuff that'd make Nixon blush, and I don't want any part of it. You -- "

"That's enough," Phil said.

"No, it's not enough. Not by a long shot. You seem to have forgotten who's working for who around here. Well, listen up. I need you a hell of a lot less than you need me, and for the last week, you've been a definite liability. You're screwing with my town, and I want it stopped. Do I make myself clear?"

"Clear as ice," Phil said. He got up and strode toward the door, then whirled

around and stuck a finger straight at Marcus. "Clear as thin fucking ice, old pal." He turned back around, took a second to compose himself, then opened the door and stepped into the outer office.

Marcus's hands trembled when he laid them on his desk. He had never argued with Phil like that before. But Phil had never hounded him like this either. Didn't he see that Marcus had a lot on his mind lately?

The hospital wouldn't release Lita, and no amount of string-pulling would change their mind. Sorenson was still attacking him on every front. And Naralena -- why hadn't Kardalkeddy brought her back?

Marcus sighed. He would never have believed he'd be wishing for a supernatural visitation, but here he was, pining over a one-night stand.

No, that wasn't true. He wanted Naralena again, sure, but there was more to it than that. He had touched the burn scars on her back, left when the Zetain burned her home when she was a child. He had heard the stories of the atrocities, felt the calluses on her fingers, wiped the tears from her eyes as she spoke. She had made him believe in her world, truly believe, and that had changed everything. He had a chance to make a real difference there, and not just by providing Earthly genes for their savior. He knew politics; he could probably get them organized enough to overthrow the Zetain invaders before the kid was ten. He could help in ways they would never have dreamed possible, but not without Kardalkeddy to provide the doorway. Where the hell was he?

Marcus found out three days later. He was in Lita's bedroom, staring at the row of bells on her bookshelf, when he saw a flicker of motion off to his right and Kardalkeddy stepped into existence. Instead of the robe and jodhpurs or the fur suit, the Traveler Between Worlds wore a much-used pair of coarsely woven pants and a ragged shirt. Both were stained black with dirt or worse. It smelled as if Kardalkeddy had been crawling through sewers in them.

"What happened to you?" Marcus asked.

"We were discovered." Kardalkeddy took a staggering step, then sank into the rocking chair beneath the window.

Marcus grabbed his arm. "Naralena? Is she safe?"

"For now. She is among friends. However, we must smggle her out of the country before she begins to show, for the Zetain have ordered that all pregnant women and babies up to a year of age be killed."

The breath left Marcus's body. "Why?"

Kardalkeddy looked up. "The belief that a savior will come is as powerful a tool in revolution as his actual arrival."

"God." Marcus sat on the bed. "But you don't even know that Naralena is

pregnant."

"We know," Kardalkeddy said. "We have given her three tests, all positive."

Marcus didn't want to know the details. For all he knew, Lira had given them EPT boxes before she went to the hospital. He clasped his hands tightly together. Naralena. He closed his eyes, saw the pictures of Sharon Tate from the Manson murder -- he had read Bugliosi's book --remembered how the fetus had been ripped --

He opened his eyes. "Smuggle her here," he said. "I'll take care of her."

Kardalkeddy shook his head. "That would not work, Sidenta. I do not have the power to keep her here indefinitely, and even if I did, the child must develop in our world."

Frustration built in Marcus's chest. "How about bringing her here, then taking her back to someplace else?"

Kardalkeddy rubbed his eyes. "That is not possible. To travel in my world, I must also travel here."

Marcus stood, his fists clenched. There had to be something they could do. He couldn't let Naralena flee across some dirty, dangerous foreign land with a gang of cutthroats on her tail. Even if Kardalkeddy could bring her here whenever she was in danger, she would still have to cross every treacherous mile between her home and safety. Unless...

"That's it!" Marcus smacked his fist into his open palm.

"What?" Kardalkeddy asked.

"You bring her here, we pile in the car, and I drive you wherever you need to go."

Kardalkeddy's expression brightened. "That ... could work," he said softly.

"Of course it'll work. How soon can you be ready?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Midnight again?"

"Yes. That would be best. But -- can we meet at your office? It would be much easier to bring her there than here. This place is being watched."

The press? What could that matter to Kardalkeddy? Then Marcus realized Kardalkeddy was talking about his side. The Zetain were guarding the site of Kardalkeddy's frequent disappearances. "Sure," Marcus said. "The office is fine."

The next day crawled as if the cosmic clock had been embedded in honey. All except for the few moments when Marcus told Phil he would be out of town for a couple of days. That went way too fast.

"Out of town? For what?" Phil's face flushed a deep red. Marcus could almost see the steam leaking from his ears.

"Personal reasons," Marcus said flatly.

"Personal reasons, my ass," Phil said. "Last week's pep talk notwithstanding, I'm still your campaign manager. If you don't come clean with me, then I can't do my job."

Marcus sighed. He knew Phil was right. But he just wished he could put this campaign on hold until his personal crisis was over. "Okay," he said. "I'm going to jump in the car, drive for a day, find a cheap motel where I can watch Star Trek reruns until I've forgotten my own name, then I'm going to drive back home and pick up where I left off. Any problem with that ?"

"Any problem with it? Any problem ? What am I supposed to say? The mayor left town on a whim? And where am I going to say you went? To Illinois on a junket? Canada to do some fishing? Then they'll check up on it and they won't find you. Or they will find you, in a cheap motel. Even if you are alone, they'll crucify you. Remember what they did to Gary Hart ?"

"Hart brought that on himself." Marcus ran a hand through his hair. Phil was right. Marcus really did need to come up with a story. Only he couldn't think of one. All he could do was worry about Naralena, and hope that Kardalkeddy could keep her safe. "The press isn't going to find me, and even if they do, there won't be anything to expose." Marcus grinned. "I guarantee you, there won't be a woman in sight."

"What then, a little boy maybe?"

Marcus felt as if he had been punched. He and Phil had never talked that way to each other before. And this time, Phil was serious. Marcus made himself take a deep breath and count to ten before he spoke. Getting angry at this juncture would be the worst thing he could do. "I'll pretend I didn't hear that, Phil," he said as calmly as he could. "But you said it yourself. I've been under a lot of stress. I need a break. By myself. Just to rest. I promise. I'll be back in a day or two."

Phil stared at him for a minute, then sat back in his chair with a disgusted snort. "All right. I don't care. Do what you want. But if you get caught, don't expect me to come to your rescue, because I'm not going down in flames with you."

"No one is going down in flames," Marcus said reasonably. "Except Sorenson. When I get back we're going to hammer him into the ground, and we're going to do it

without shoving any more bogus legislation through the council."

Phil stood up. "Yeah, yeah, and after that we make a jump for the governor's chair, and from there the goddamn presidency. Sure. Easy as pie. Enjoy your trip." He turned and strode out of the office.

Marcus spent the last couple hours before midnight packing the car's trunk full of things that Kardalkeddy and Naralena might be able to use. Camping equipment, dried fruit, a hunting rifle and his military .45 pistol, some of Lira's and his own clothing, and a few gold Krugerrands he had bought for investment. At 11:30 he drove downtown, parked on the street in front of City Hall, and let himself in.

When he topped the stairs and turned down the hallway, he could see light streaming out under his office door. Had Beverly forgotten to turn it off when she left? Or were Kardalkeddy and Naralena early? Marcus hurried to the door, found it locked, and dug impatiently in the pocket of his jeans for the key.

There was no one in the outer office when he opened the door. Beverly's desk was covered with files, and her desk lamp was on as well as the overhead. She must have stayed late, then forgotten to clean up before she left. Unless she was still here, in the bathroom; but no, the door was still open, and the light off. Then she must have gone home without straightening up. That wasn't like her, but maybe she intended to come in early in the morning and continue whatever she'd been doing.

Marcus went on into his own office, flipped on the light there, and paced until 12:05, when Kardalkeddy suddenly appeared.

"Are you alone, Sidenta?"

Marcus nodded. All the muscles in his body were tense. He felt as if the Zetain would follow them here, as if the chase would happen in this world as well as in Kardalkeddy's.

Kardalkeddy reached out for Naralena, who stepped through nothingness, then took another step forward to stand before Marcus. "I missed you," she whispered.

Marcus drew her into his arms, and kissed her hungrily. "I've missed you, too," he said.

They kissed again. After a moment, Kardalkeddy coughed discreetly and said, "Sidenta, we must be away. The border is far to the south."

"We'll get you there, don't worry," Marcus said. "I've got a fuzzbuster." When he saw two puzzled faces, he said, "Never mind. Let's go."

He opened the door to the outer office, just in time to see Phil make a break for the darkened bathroom doorway.

"What the hell are you doing skulking around my office in the middle of the night?" Marcus demanded.

Phil stopped, turned around, and said, "Checking on the mental health of my candidate. Who were you talking to?"

"Some friends of mine," Marcus said evenly. "On the phone."

Phil shook his head. "You weren't talking on the phone. Not unless you have a separate line that doesn't go through Beverly's." He pointed to the multi-line phone on her desk, all its call lights dark.

"Cellular," Marcus said quickly.

"Show me the set."

It was still in the car, of course. Marcus felt panic closing in. He was caught. Phil would never believe him, nor believe in him anymore. He would probably go to the press himself with this one. Unless Marcus could somehow convince him of the truth.

"Kardalkeddy, I need your help here," Marcus said.

"I am yours to command, Sidenta."

Phil crossed his arms over his chest. "Who the hell is Kardick --whatever?"

"He's the person who's about to flip my office light on and off three times." Marcus held his hands out so Phil could see them.

"Uh, Sidenta, how do I do that?"

"The switch! The little plastic thing by the door. Flip it up and down." Sweat broke out on Marcus's body.

"Oh. Like this?" The light went out, then back on.

"That's right. Twice more."

The light blinked, and Phil's eyes narrowed. "There's someone in there with you."

"Well, of course there is. You think I'd be talking to myself?" Marcus stepped into Beverly's office. "They're just not the sort of people you're used to. Naralena, come in here, and pick up those papers, would you?" He nodded toward Beverly's desk.

Naralena, her face taut with fear, nonetheless walked obediently over to the desk, scooped up a handful of papers, and held them a few feet in the air.

Phil's eyes were as wide as fried eggs. "How the hell did you do that?" he asked.

"I have friends in high places," Marcus said. "Invisibly high places. Kardalkeddy, switch out the light and close the door."

Kardalkeddy did -- from the inside.

"No, no, from this side. We've got to go." Marcus swallowed. Phil was staring at the door as if a monster were hiding behind it.

After some experimental rattling of the knob, the door opened again and Kardalkeddy stepped through, closing it behind him. He went over to Naralena, who shot Marcus a pleading look. Marcus nodded at her, just a little. She set the files down and she and Kardalkeddy walked across the room to the other door, opened it, and stepped into the hallway.

Phil glanced at the door, then at Marcus. Marcus made himself glare at Phil with his most businesslike look. "We'll talk about this when I get back. In the meantime, see what you can do about getting Lita out of that damned hospital. She's no crazier than I am."

Phil's mouth hung agape, and tiny squeaking noises came from his throat.

"Don't say it," Marcus told him, "or they might start haunting you." Then he followed Kardalkeddy and Naralena out the door and closed it softly behind him.

Marcus took the interstate south. The traffic was light this time of night. Marcus drove seventy or so until a semi passed him, then sped up and followed a half mile behind, letting the truck smoke out the cops. The last thing he needed was a speeding ticket.

Naralena and Kardalkeddy sat up front, Naralena between the two men. Her arm brushed against Marcus's and he could feel the tension in it during the first ten miles or so, before she became used to the motion. Kardalkeddy asked a few questions about the car, but quit when the explanations made no sense to him. After that he stared out the window into the blackness, squinting whenever they passed an all-night gas station. When they got closer to Chicago, the road flooded with light, and both Naralena and Kardalkeddy stared at the truck stops, roadside groceries, and mini marts with open-mouthed fascination.

Marcus felt tension in his own back. He hadn't driven at night in a long time, and beneath his outward calm lay a deep terror. It felt appropriate to drive at night; the enemy that chased them was unseen, like a bogey under the bed, and yet very real.

The city itself left his passengers speechless, at least until they drew downtown. The traffic was light enough that Marcus had decided to take 94 straight through instead of going around on 294. Their silence had him afraid he'd made the wrong decision until Kardalkeddy suddenly pointed and said, "There

is the Zetain palace."

"You're kidding" Marcus said. Kardalkeddy was pointing straight at the Sears Tower.

"I am serious," Kardalkeddy said. "There, where that tallest building is; in our world that is the Zetain Palace."

Marcus laughed. "Here it's a palace of sorts, too. A monument to big business." He drove on, amazed that there would be such a connection between worlds. He hadn't even expected the landmarks to be the same, but now that he thought about it, it made sense. How else would Kardalkeddy know exactly where to go in order to appear in Marcus's house as opposed to his office?

On the way out of town Marcus pulled off the freeway at a gas and fast-food stop and let the car coast into the nearly empty McDonald's parking lot.

"We cannot stop here," Kardalkeddy said. "This is the heart of our enemy's homeland."

"It's just a rest stop," Marcus said. "The car needs gas and we need food. Come with me, and experience the true heart of America."

He let them out of the car and they went into the McDonalds. While Naralena and Kardalkeddy stared at the murals of the Chicago skyline, Marcus ordered three big Macs, two orange juices, and a large cup of coffee for himself. He got it all to go, then put his hands on his friends' backs and literally pushed them outside.

Once inside the car, he passed out the food. They stared at the wrappers in confusion, so he pulled his back and showed them how to eat the burgers.

"They did not cook the food," Naralena said. "It was magic."

Marcus grinned. "If they had used magic, these things would taste better."

He filled the car at the Texaco station across the street, then drove down the ramp and back onto the freeway, steering with one hand, and eating with the other.

"How much farther?" Marcus asked as the Chicago skyline receded behind them.

"We have covered several days' journeys in the space of a few hours," Kardalkeddy said. "If we go for another hour, the Zetain will have to travel into their enemies' country to find us."

"Good," Marcus said. He set the cruise control and leaned back for some more driving.

Naralena had fallen asleep, her head resting on Marcus's shoulder, when they

drove over a bridge and Kardalkeddy said, "We have crossed the border."

"Great," Marcus said. "So where do we go from here?"

Kardalkeddy squinted, as if peering into bright light, and said, "That way." He pointed east.

Marcus took the next exit he could find and drove east for about two miles before Kardalkeddy told him to drive south again. The road went through a series of dilapidated family farms. On the top of a rise, Kardalkeddy said, "This will do. The city of Percelto lies over this hill. It would be better if we walked from here rather than appear in its midst."

"Good thought." Marcus pulled the car to the side of the road and shut off the engine.

They all got out and Marcus showed them the things he had packed, but Kardalkeddy shook his head sadly over most of it and said, "We would be branded as witches or worse if we arrived with these tools." In the end he took only the Krugerrands, which could be melted down for their gold. Naralena took one of Marcus's shirts, "to give to the baby when he grows up."

Her words sent a pang through Marcus. The entire morning had a feel of finality to it. "He'll have more than just that shirt," Marcus said with a gruff joviality. "I'll shower him with gifts every birthday. And Christmas. Hah!" He laughed, realizing that they didn't have Christmas in their world. Not yet.

He hugged Naralena one last time, enjoying her warmth. When they finally parted, he shook Kardalkeddy's hand, and promised to return to the same spot in a week to meet them again. The sun had broken through the early morning clouds when they stepped away from him, waved, and disappeared.

The empty road trailed on toward nothing. He had only the remembered feel of Naralena's body against his, the firm grip of Kardalkeddy's hand, as proof that they had traveled with him at all. He sat on the edge of the car until he got cold, but the road in front of him didn't change. Naralena and Kardalkeddy didn't reappear out of nothing, nor did they appear farther away. They had found safety, for a short time at least.

But they would have him. He was finally beginning to understand the Biblical stories. Jesus's father, whomever that person may have been, interceded in all sorts of ways. He probably took his son off the cross and tended him in his more advanced world for three days before returning him, healed, to Jerusalem.

Marcus grinned. No one would believe that one, but it seemed so simple. He shrugged. Now he had to tend to his own life. He got into the car, and drove back toward home. The farther he drove, the better he felt. He hadn't done something for someone else for a long time. This time, he had done a genuine good deed, and he felt great.

It wasn't until he stopped for lunch in Chicago that his fatigue caught up with him. He decided to get a room for the night -- to make good his promise to Phil -- and then reality hit him.

Phil. The campaign. City business. He had ignored it all so long. Phil had been spending more time with the council and Councilman Seals than Marcus had. Everything was a mess. Even his relationship with his campaign manager. What had Phil said about his mental health? And what had Phil been doing in his office, anyway?

Marcus had only been home for five minutes when he heard a knock on the door. He peered out the kitchen curtains and saw Phil's car in his driveway. A shudder ran down his back. It was ten a.m. The only way Phil could have known that Marcus had arrived would have been to have someone watching the place. Phil had Marcus under surveillance. So much for good old-fashioned trust and acceptance.

Marcus went into the foyer and pulled open the door. Phil pushed past him without a hello, then reached around him and slammed the door shut.

The force of Phil's anger hit Marcus like a wave. He had to take a step back. He ran a hand through his hair and caught his breath before attempting to reply. He couldn't be on the defensive. Something told him that this meeting was too important for that.

"You have someone staking out my house."

Two spots of color appeared on Phil's cheeks. "You would too if your meal ticket was acting like a nut."

"My actions have been perfectly rational," Marcus said and then mentally kicked himself. Not defensive. Oh, he was doing a good job there.

"Yeah, rational," Phil said. "If you're Jimmy Stewart and you have a big invisible rabbit friend named Harvey."

Marcus winced. He had once said that very line to Lira. "Look, Phil --"

"No, you listen, Marcus. Maybe insanity runs in the Chambers family, or maybe you attract poltergeists or maybe your brains have this extra power like people in Stephen King novels, but whatever it is, it's weird. And weird does not play in an election, you got me? I have been working hard these last few weeks to try to save your ass, and frankly, it's beginning to look like I need to save mine. I have pictures of you talking to an empty room, Marcus. You went off half-cocked at a press conference, for godsake, and now you run off to Illinois, stop beside a ditch and sit there for hours, then come home. This is not rational behavior. Marcus. I'm sorry. It's not."

Marcus sat on the stairs, the polished wood digging into his thighs. "You had me followed."

"Of course I had you followed. And I had to make sure no one else followed you. I can imagine what Channel Six would have done with footage of you hugging empty air."

Marcus ran a hand over his face. He and Phil had been friends. They had become confidants by political necessity. They understood each other. If Phil was upset about this, the public reaction would be worse. And Phil had a right to be upset. Marcus hadn't even thought to be careful on the drive. He hadn't even realized that someone had followed him; he had been too concerned with saving Naralena and Kardalkeddy. He knew how this looked. He remembered when Lira got more and more distracted, when her imaginary world became more important than her real one.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked.

Phil closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose as if he were holding back a headache. Then he moved his hand, opened his eyes, and sighed. "Let's go together and talk to Lita's doctor. Maybe he has some suggestions that we haven't thought of."

A frisson of fear ran through Marcus. "I'm not checking myself into that hospital."

"Jesus Christ, Marcus. We're just going to go talk to the doctor. Everything is confidential. He might have some ideas about treatment, so you can keep going the way you did before."

Marcus sat still for a moment. Phil couldn't force him into the hospital. No one could, except the state, and that was so hard to do a person nearly had to commit murder before they would take action. Marcus had forced Lita in, but she hadn't really put up any resistance. She had even said to the doctor that it would be a relief if the invisible people all went away.

It wouldn't be a relief for him, though. Naralena was carrying his child. She needed him to help keep her and the baby out of danger.

But Phil needed him too. So Marcus would go to the doctor, play Phil's game, and try to behave normally. He didn't have to be back in Illinois for a week. Maybe in that time, he could regain control of his office, his staff, and his city.

"All right. I'll go." Marcus said. He stood up. "But if anyone catches wind of this, I will deny that this visit was anything more than a chance to see my sister. And if I suspect that you leaked the information, I'll fire you, Phil, faster than you can say 'Marcus is crazy.' You got that?"

"I got it," Phil said.

"Good," Marcus said. He grabbed his keys from the key stand. "Let's get out of here."

The hospital was even more dismal than he remembered it. Someone had moved Lita's plants from the window. An old man wearing a blue bathrobe and white slippers had shuffled his way into the reception area where he pounded on the desk and demanded to use the phone. The receptionist had a look of harried fear to her face. An orderly and a nurse arrived a few minutes after Marcus did. They grabbed the old man's arms and hauled him away as if he were an unruly child.

"I'm here to see Dr. LaPine," Marcus said. Phil had dropped him off, promising to arrive as soon as he found a parking spot. But Marcus understood what was taking so long. This place made Phil even more uncomfortable than it made Marcus.

The receptionist nodded. Her hands were shaking. She ran a bejeweled finger along a page of the appointment calendar. "It'll just be a minute."

He sat down in one of the plastic chairs facing her desk.

"So, did you come to protest?"

The voice behind him made him jump. It sounded like his mother at her most upset -- Marcus Donald Chambers! Get in here this second! -- but it couldn't be. He turned and found himself staring at Lita.

Her gaze was brighter than it had been before, and her face had more animation. He reached out to her, but she shot a glance at his hand that warned him away. "Protest what?" he said.

"They took me off the medication two days ago. I suppose you want me back on it so I stay out of your way." She spoke at her normal pace, but he hadn't seen her this angry ever before.

"No. I came for another reason." Despite her look, he took her arm and led her into the hallway. "I helped Kardalkeddy and -- ah, I helped him escape the Zetain and now Phil thinks I'm crazy."

Lita gave a slight laugh. "I know what that's like."

"I'm here to talk to your doctor at Phil's suggestion, and then maybe see if I can get you out of here."

"As if that'll do any good," Lita said.

"You'll be home, Lita."

She shrugged.

"Lita --"

She brought her head up so that her gaze met his squarely. "I don't think you know what you did, Marcus, my dear beloved brother. I'm off the medication, but

I can't see them anymore."

"I told you," he said. "I took Kardalkeddy to Illinois. You can't see him because he's not here."

She shook her head. "No," she said, keeping her voice soft, "you don't understand. I had gotten to the point where I could slip into their world. Not for very long but just enough to get a sense of it. I can't anymore. Whatever those chemicals were, they futzed with my brain badly. You took an entire world away from me, Marcus. An entire world."

"Mr. Chambers?"

The receptionist had come into the hallway. She clutched a file in front of her like a shield. "Doctor LaPine will see you now."

Marcus shot a glance at Lira. He couldn't say anything. An apology was too small for what he had done. He turned, and found Phil hovering at the edge of the reception area. At first he wondered how much Phil had heard, and then he decided that he really didn't care. The damage had been done a long time ago.

He squared his shoulders, took a deep breath, and steeled himself. Then he followed the receptionist inside Dr. LaPine's office.

He remembered it from earlier visits: the diplomas on the wall -- six of them, expensively framed, all from major universities -- the leather furniture whose odor mixed with that of pipe smoke, the handmade oak desk in the corner, and the psychology books sitting on the matching bookshelf. LaPine was standing in the center of the room, the unlit pipe between his teeth. He was a big man who had been a track star in college: he still jogged six miles a day and competed in marathons. He nodded as Marcus came in, and indicated a spot on the couch.

Marcus sat, and LaPine sat in the straight-backed chair across from him. Phil took the rocking chair near the window.

Marcus didn't look at him, keeping his gaze on LaPine. "I thought this was going to be a private meeting."

"I asked to sit in," Phil said.

"I thought clients had to be examined in privacy." Marcus still addressed LaPine.

LaPine took the pipe out of his mouth and rested it in the pipe stand. "Not in cases of evaluation, Mr. Mayor. There's many a forensic psychologist who never meets with patients at all, merely reviews records and studies tapes and transcripts."

"But that's for court. That's when people are paying them to testify for another side." Marcus remembered that much of his legal training, even though he had

never practiced in a court of law.

LaPine shrugged, and Marcus suddenly felt cold. He glanced at Phil, whose hands were folded neatly across his lap. Only his thumbs were moving, caressing each other in small, neat, nervous circles.

"Phil paid you," Marcus said. "You paid him!"

Phil shook his head. LaPine held up a palm at Phil. "I am here to consult with you, Mr. Mayor," LaPine said. "I have reviewed video tapes --"

Marcus clenched his fists.

"-- transcripts of your conversations, and I have spoken with witnesses about your behavior. We have spoken before, remember, and I am quite familiar with your sister's case. It appears that there is some other family history of disturbance --"

"Only Aunt Verna who had Alzheimer's," Marcus said.

"-- as well as other indicators. I believe that bringing your sister here was the last step for you, the last bit of stress which took you beyond the threshold that your mind could handle --"

"I am not crazy!" Marcus stood up. "There is a rational explanation for everything."

LaPine picked up his pipe and stroked it like a lover. "Would you like to share that with us?"

Marcus hesitated. He knew how it would sound. He remembered when Lita had given a similar speech to him and to Phil. Only his was worse. He had made love with an invisible woman. He had driven invisible people to safety outside the state. He had bought into their world one hundred percent.

"No," he said. "I would not. And I won't stand for this lynching. I do not have to stay here."

"No, you don't." Phil stood too. "But if you leave, you can kiss the election good-bye. I think you'll find it nearly impossible to even finish out your term."

"I don't like the sound of that," Marcus said.

"It's quite simple really." LaPine was looking down at his pipe. "It is my professional opinion, Mr. Chambers, that you are in no condition to run this city. I believe you need treatment or your delusional phases will get worse and you might be of harm to yourself or others. I am prepared to make such a statement to the press."

"Why?" Marcus asked. "Because Phil paid you?"

"I haven't paid him anything," Phil snapped. "Jesus, you're paranoid too."

"A person is not paranoid if people are actually out to get him."

Phil opened his mouth, shut it, then opened it again. "Marcus, we've known each other a long time. You've always been a sane, rational man. You haven't acted like yourself for weeks now. You moon over things, you see things that aren't there, you lie to me. You've never done that before."

"And you have been grooming a new candidate. You have Seals all ready to run if I get out of the way."

Phil nodded. "We both understand political expediency. We agreed a long time ago to step aside if one man's career endangered the other."

"You think I'm endangering you."

"If this continues," Phil said. He leaned against LaPine's desk. "Listen, Marcus, I hate to do this. I really do. But you need help and you won't get it for yourself. I have been trying to talk to you since the press conference and you won't listen to me. Now you're getting angry at Dr. LaPine and we're only trying to save you."

Marcus took a deep breath and waited for his pulse to slow. "You know I'm not making this up," he said to Phil. "You saw the light in my office go on and off by itself, and you saw the files on Beverly's desk rise into the air by themselves. How do you explain that?"

Phil swallowed. "It was some kind of trick. Something you learned from Lira."

"Yeah, right."

Marcus stared at Phil, watching him sweat, but at last Phil looked away and said, "I didn't want to do this, but LaPine warned me that it might be the only way to break your denial. Marcus, I have tapes of you talking to thin air. I have people, including Dr. LaPine, willing to testify to your odd behavior. Worst of all, I have Lira. I have your own words defending the decision to put her away. And frankly, your behavior has been ten times worse than hers."

"You'll ruin me," Marcus whispered.

"If I have to," Phil said. "If we let the press run with this, you'll never work again. Anywhere. But if you finish the term, resign in relative silence, you can work with LaPine here or some other doctor of your choice, and once you're rested and healed, you can come back to political life."

Marcus was shaking all over. "This is blackmail."

"Actually," LaPine said, "it's intervention. And it's only recommended for extreme cases."

Marcus sat down. He could barely breathe. This must have been how Lita felt when he presented her with the options. Trapped. Misunderstood. And frightened. It was so easy to strip him to nothing. Years of work gone in a heartbeat. A single news story and he would be the crazy mayor forever.

LaPine got up and rummaged in his desk. Phil remained standing, his thumbs still tracing each other in endless circles.

"You've got me by the balls," Marcus said. "No matter what I do, I'll lose. All I can do is decide how big the loss will be."

"I'm sorry," Phil said. "You've left me no other choice."

Marcus closed his eyes and sighed. If he resigned, no one would watch him anymore. He would be free to go back to Illinois, free to rescue Naralena and Kardalkeddy, free to learn how to slip into their world, even if only for an instant. He found that the idea appealed to him.

"All right," he said. "I'll step down."

He opened his eyes. LaPine was standing beside the desk, his hands clasped behind his back, looking scholarly. Phil had his nervous, I-hate-the-world look plastered all over his face.

Marcus pushed out of the sofa and started across the room.

"Where're you going?" Phil's voice had an unnatural squeak.

"I'm going home. You got what you wanted. Now let me go."

"There's one more thing," LaPine said. "You must consent to sessions --"

"Fine," Marcus said.

"-- and special treatments --"

"Fine."

"-- and promise to stay away from anything that appears unusual." "I promise, for crissake."

"Good." LaPine traversed the room in an instant and grabbed Marcus's arm. Phil hurried to his side. "We will start the treatment now."

"What the hell is this?" Marcus said.

"You agreed," Phil said. "I'm a witness."

"I didn't agree to this!" Marcus struggled against them, but Phil and LaPine held him tightly. "You need a signature, God damn it. I didn't sign anything!"

LaPine looked to Phil, who nodded.

"You son of a bitch," Marcus said. "You're going to forge it."

Phil wouldn't look at him. LaPine rolled up Marcus's sleeve and jabbed a hypo into his arm. The pain was slight, but terrifying. Marcus watched as the clear fluid slid into his vein.

"The medication will keep you calm," LaPine said.

"Calm?" Marcus's struggles grew more intense. "Like Lita?"

"Yes," LaPine said. "It worked for her."

"Nooo!" But already Marcus could feel the slowness creeping through his veins. He felt as if he were struggling in half-time. He had to get away, but it was too late. His legs collapsed beneath him, and they eased him to a chair.

"How much did you give him?" Phil's voice floated above him.

"A normal dose," LaPine said. "But I combined it with a sedative. He needs rest. You may take him home and have someone monitor him this evening."

They eased him back on the couch. The world was swimming. Lita had said that the medication cut her connection to Kardalkeddy's world. Naralena! He might never see Naralena again.

"No," he whispered, but his mouth was dry and the word stuck in his throat.

They didn't understand what they did. Christ had said that once. Christ. Oh, Lord. It followed the Bible now. Kardalkeddy and Naralena would stay in the foreign land for a year. But there would be no angel of the Lord to tell them it was safe to return. No counsel for his son. No three-day rescue from a horrible, suffocating death on a cross. As he felt his mind slip away from him, he heard the voice of a young man he would never meet cry out to a blackened sky: My God! My God! Why hast thou forsaken me?

Oh, my son, he whispered to his unborn child, to Naralena, to Kardalkeddy, to all the people he had never met, all the people he had failed. I never meant to. I never meant to at all.