

Evil Ascending

Fiddleback Trilogy

Book II

Michael A. Stackpole

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PROLOGUE

The scream of utter frustration ripping through her brain shocked her out of stasis. She felt a jolt run through her body, then it and the scream dwindled to a tingle at her spine. That sensation proved unsettling enough that, for a moment or two, she succeeded in fighting off her body's desire to slip back into somnolent bliss.

Where?

Why?

Her mind slowly clawed its way to consciousness. In an instant she knew exactly where she was. Snippets of memories, all involving shadowy figures bearing her downward through dark tunnels, strobed through her brain. Deeper and deeper they had taken her, just as her mind had retreated deep into itself, to keep her safe. Safe, and so I could prepare.

As she recalled the need for preparation and the reason behind it, she felt the tingling in her spine shift to a cold chill clutching her with sharp talons. At first she imagined it a reaction to the memory, but then she heard faint echoes of sinister laughter. The laughter built slowly and she knew, instinctively, that had the creature causing it not been multiple dimensions from her, she would have been forced to return to stasis to preserve her sanity.

It is him. He endures, even after this much time. The scream, she realized, had come from far closer than the laughter. That was the reason it had been able to cut through all the mental shields she had created to protect herself. *He was here, in this dimension, but he was turned away. He was defeated. How is that possible?*

She forced her eyes open and waited impatiently for them to focus so she could read the chronometric display above the life-signs monitor in her stasis capsule. Glowing green numerals reported time as both objective and subjective, with the latter number causing her more concern than the former. *I have been in stasis for the equivalent of 3.27144 life-measurement units. My mission, my preparation, was projected to take 4.978831 LMUs. I am not yet ready.*

She looked at the first number again. She frowned, forcing her brain through the rigors of mathematics. Twenty-six terrestrial LMUs have passed since I was placed in stasis. Have they progressed so much that they can hold him at bay? Has the danger passed? Is it safe?

The laughter drifted in and out of her mind like snatches of music borne by the wind. At times she heard it with a deafening clarity, then it faded until she wondered if it had ever been there at all. The anger in it slowly drained until she sensed an almost paternal pride or a begrudged respect in it. Whoever had driven him off had earned his attention and, with that, she knew, came fearful, crushing retribution.

I was put into stasis to fight him—and them—to prevent his exacting revenge. I was to forge myself into a tool that would end his campaign of terror and domination. She pressed her fingertips against the soft cloth lining the stasis capsule and sought in it the peace she had known before the scream. I am not ready.

From the heart of the laughter came a new emotion. It shocked and hurt her, but she automatically shunted the pain away as the defenses she had prepared dealt with the assault. Once she broke through the wall of physical discomfort, she saw and smelled and felt and heard and tasted and sensed him and his thoughts. She had trouble following his mental processes, for though he had one purpose and one goal, it seemed as if billions of minds spoke in unison with his. Like listening for one lone flute in a concert of all the worlds' orchestras, she caught tantalizing fragments of his musings, then slowly puzzled them together.

She consciously overrode the physical lethargy imposed by the stasis capsule and let herself smile. Here he is called Fiddleback, a name in which he revels for its irony and infamy. He has agents here—many agents. But there are those who oppose him. Someone turned one of his agents, his favorite, against him. That pet has joined forces with the opposition against him, but Fiddleback has no fear. There is a trap. He will consume his enemies in this trap, and take away a greater prize in doing so.

The monstrous confidence in Fiddleback's thoughts threatened to swamp her like a tidal wave. Another .00001 LMUs racked themselves up on her chronometric display along with an increase in Fiddleback's certainty that he would succeed. That sent another jolt through her, and the metallic taste of fear flooded her mouth.

I am not ready! Part of her brain screamed as her right index finger flexed and moved upward. Lifting it felt like moving the mountain beneath which she had been buried. Had she waited until 4.978831 LMUs had passed, the stasis capsule would have opened by itself and prepared her for a return to a world where time flowed unabated. Part of her very much wanted to wait for that eventuality, but something in Fiddleback's palpable egotism told her that to wait was to awaken in a world he had made his own.

Millimeter by millimeter her finger rose until it finally met resistance. For a half-second, she felt she could not depress the switch enough to free herself. She let the energy that her claustrophobic panic freed flow into her finger. It stiffened, and she heard a faint click.

The hiss of musty air flowing into the capsule buried that sound. Dim light encircled her as the top half of

the tubular capsule rose four centimeters. She blinked her eyes twice, not against the light, but because of the swirls of dust curling in beneath the edge of the capsule. As the latches on the right side snapped open, the whole lid rotated up and to the left. In its wake, a drifting blanket of dust blew free of the lid's trailing edge and settled over her.

She sneezed.

The sound surprised her, especially the way it echoed within the small stone chamber, then she laughed. That happy sound likewise rebounded back to her, and she smiled, remembering that the denizens of this world still communicated through sounds instead of through telepathy. Although born here, she shared her parents' preference for thought transfer to the imprecision of speech.

The incessant chittering of Fiddleback's myriad thoughts nibbled through the pleasant feelings her memories had engendered. She frowned and tried to snap shut the link to him, but found it impossible. Gritting her teeth, she redoubled her effort. Success came, along with a return of the pain wall, leaving her exhausted and numb.

Golden highlights glinted from her fingernails as she outstretched her arms. Reaching down, she grasped the edge of the capsule and levered herself into a sitting position, then swung her legs over the edge. Scooting forward, she hopped down to the floor and landed in a three-point crouch. She looked left and right, her eyesight piercing the darkness without trouble, but heard and saw nothing else in the small room.

Settling back down on her haunches, she brushed her thumb over her fingertips, savoring the gritty sensation of the dust from the floor. *No one has been here for a long time. LMUs, perhaps.* She straightened up and glanced over at the wooden bin stacked with metallic debris and the four padlocked file cabinets next to it. *Dr. Chandra said no one would ever be allowed to see the Corona crash evidence. Hiding me here was a good choice.*

Padding over to the gray metal door, she remembered something about when she had been sealed in the room. Dr. Chandra had given her a key and hung it around her neck on a chain. For the first time, she became aware of it hanging down between her small breasts. She pulled it free and looked for a lock in which to insert it—she remembered having practiced with a key so she would not be trapped.

The door had no lock.

Reaching up as high as she could, she ran her hands down each edge of the metallic door-jamb. She felt no weld scars and, at the bottom of the door, she was able to insert her fingernails beneath it. Straightening up again, she took a step back to survey the door in its entirety and noticed the numeric keypad beside it.

She smiled because the doors on the ship had used similar sorts of locking mechanisms. She covered it with her hand and gave the mental command to open.

Nothing happened.

A second attempt achieved the same result. She concentrated, thinking perhaps her skills had atrophied during stasis. She rejected the thought—the whole purpose of her time in stasis had been to *hone* her skills, but part of her preferred that impossibility to the reality of being trapped.

Her third command failed as had the other two, but her concentration brought another result. She

realized that of the nine keys on the pad, several of them resonated differently to her senses. She ran her fingertips over them very lightly and felt a spark as she touched some of them.

She shook her head. Of course, the humans put this in. That which we use for manual override is what they have no choice but to use because the vast majority of them cannot project their thoughts. Four keys feel special, but what is the sequence? How many numbers?

With four keys feeling special, she knew the logical assumption was that the coded sequence involved only four numbers. Even so, the first key felt so much more powerful than the others, she suspected it had to be hit twice during the sequence. That first number centered the top row of three: She recalled it being called an 8.

The other special keys were arrayed on the keypad in a roughly geometric pattern. The 6 lay one below and one to the right of the 8. The 2 sat in the bottom row, located squarely in the middle. The 4 sat on the other end of the row with the 6.

A five-number sequence with four possible candidates is not an insurmountable number of combinations to try. She stared at the keypad again. Entering a wrong number could set off an alarm, and with the changes here, I do not want to do that. There must be another clue.

She frowned and tried to sort through anything she could remember about her hosts that would give her an indication of what she should do. She smiled as she remembered Dr. Chandra and the other humans who had worked with her, studying her, as she had grown up within the protected environment of a Federal Liaison Center. It shocked and surprised her that, as much as she had loved Chandra and his co-workers, her mother's thoughts about humans detonated in her brain: Humans are undisciplined, vain and sloppy.

Sloppy. Instead of forcing themselves to remember things, they take shortcuts. She looked at the keypad and smiled. Mnemonics, patterns, tools. Yes, it makes sense. Reaching out, she hit 8-6-2-4-8, starting with the 8 and describing a diamond-shape that ended with the 8 again. A pair of eights and a skip-straight. Not a betting hand.

She wondered where that thought had come from as the door slid silently into the ceiling. She glanced out and saw nothing but pale yellow light. Thinking herself safe, she stepped out of the room, then discovered, in a small alcove, a desk with a lamp producing the yellow light. Behind the desk, staring at her wide-eyed over the edge of a tabloid newspaper, sat a very surprised soldier.

"Jesus H. Christ!" The man pulled his feet from the top of the desk and sat forward, letting the tabloid spray across the desk in a blizzard of paper. He looked her up from her toes to the top of her head and back down again. "Oh my God!"

His thoughts raced unbridled and bursting with raw energy. The first thought she picked up from him was one of happy surprise, because the first thing he noticed was her nakedness. He then noticed her gold hair, which heightened his excitement and keyed his active fantasy life, despite the apparent drawbacks of her being, in his eyes, petite.

Then reality darkened his fantasy. He realized that no matter how much he thought he deserved a carnal adventure, there was no way anyone, naked or not, should be at his hell-hole post. His job was technically to keep people away from getting into whatever the Air Force stored down here, but all those interlopers should have been coming down from above, not out from below. With that realization she caught the first tendrils of horror in his thoughts.

The soldier looked at her again and saw beyond her nudity and golden hair. She saw herself reflected in his terror. Her jet-black flesh and metallic gold fingernails struck him as odd, but not out of the ordinary from things he had seen at the Palomino in Vegas. Even the golden stripes running from her fingers along her arms, and up her legs from her toes were not so radically out of line. He could have accepted them, but then he saw her eyes.

Large and slightly almond-shaped, he saw them as sensual—for a heartbeat. Then he saw the vertical lozenge pupil and that triggered in him an ancient race-fear of reptiles. In less time than it took for the last page from his tabloid to flutter to the ground, she had gone from an object of carnal desire to a monster from the bowels of hell.

She felt his panic and knew there was no way she could calm him. *He is all but gone now!* She threw her arms open, looked him in the eyes and projected an image into his mind. She forced him to visualize her legs blending together into 20 feet of gold-bellied snake and her tongue flickering in his direction.

The soldier's eyes rolled back up into his head as he fainted dead away. He flopped back into his chair, then dropped to the floor and lay there quietly. His arms and legs twitched a couple of time, then he rolled onto his back and began breathing normally.

She crossed to him and pressed her right hand against his forehead. Projecting her mind into his, she found his short-term memory and began to warp it. Plucking a page from the tabloid, she studied the picture of a dark-haired actress in a gown that looked barely able to restrain all of her. *I am sorry this Janine Fonda is not a blonde, as you seem to prefer, but she should do nicely for you.*

Rooting around inside his head, she tracked the beginning of his fantasy about her through the cognitive links that opened his fantasy world to her. In no time at all she found one of many fantasies he'd had involving a clandestine encounter at this, the base's most forgotten and despised duty post. She quickly raced through it, substituting Janine Fonda for Andrea Beatty-Bening, then retreated from his mind.

She noted the happy smile on his face, then started to unbutton his shirt. In no time she managed to appropriate his outer clothing. She had to roll the pants up and punch a new hole in his belt, but she found the clothes comfortable and welcomed their warmth against the chill in the air.

She realized she would need footwear, so she took his boots. Because they were far too large for her, she started to wad up pages from the tabloid to stuff into the toes. As she did so, she picked up the centerspread and froze. *It's true: He was here.*

A grainy photograph, clearly taken at night, showed a monstrously huge creature towering over a skyscraper. Though she had never actually seen Fiddleback, he had been described to her in enough detail for her to know this blurred photograph had to be him.

She stared at the symbols on the page and forced herself to remember how to decipher them. Translating quickly, she rendered the headline as "Genetically defective arachnid assaults a mythical bird that is reborn of its own ashes." Knowing that had to be incorrect, and seeing the bird reference repeated in captions and the body of the text, she decided the word *Phoenix* probably referred to a place.

"Pah-he-o-e-nicks," she sounded out. It sounded decidedly alien to her, but then everything about the world of her birth was alien to her, as she was to it. *Phoenix . This is where Fiddleback was defeated. This is where his enemies dwell, dwell in danger.* She balled the paper up and jammed it into the boot. *Then this Phoenix is where I shall go to warn them.*



Coyote straightened his tie in the way he thought Michael Loring would, and stood behind his desk as Lilith ushered Sinclair MacNeal into his office. He came around to greet Sinclair, his long legs eating up the distance easily. "How good of you to come on such short notice, Mr. MacNeal."

The shorter, dark-haired man eyed him cautiously, but accepted his proffered hand in a strong grip. "The call I received indicated that haste was important." Sinclair's blue eyes narrowed. "We have met before, Mr. Loring." He glanced at the third man in the room. "At that time you were in a company of another."

Coyote nodded, then looked up at the stunning blonde woman still waiting in the doorway. "That should be all for now, Lilith. Let me know when the aircraft is preflighted and ready to go."

"Yes, Mr. Loring."

As she closed the door to his office, Coyote pointed to the man seated in one of two wing chairs in front of the desk. "Sinclair MacNeal, this is Damon Crowley."

Sinclair looked at Crowley but did not offer him his hand. "I met a Damon Crowley before. He 'entertained' at a party a year ago, over in Goddard Tower One. He was much older than you. Your father?"

Crowley's gray-gloved left hand stroked his goatee reflectively. He ignored the question. "The Deitrich party, yes. The good doctor always throws such lavish affairs."

Sinclair's gaze turned to Coyote. "The paper background you constructed for Michael Loring is flawless. I commend you on it. I also assume, therefore, that you *are* Coyote and that this is not some sort of bizarre job interview."

Coyote smiled. "Sit." Seating himself on the edge of his desk, he reached back and picked up a thick sheaf of newsprint. "I am aware of your falling out with your father and your discharge from Build-more. As you recall, I was there. And, while Lorica Industries would very much like to employ a man of your talents, I have a personal job I need you to perform."

He tossed the tabloid to Sinclair. "Have you read the story about Phoenix in here?"

Sinclair glanced at the front page and shook his head. " *Midnight Weekly Inquirer* is not my kind of reading material, sorry."

"I know that, Mr. MacNeal. I know you take the *Tokyo Shimbun* and *Japan Weekly News* as well as two Japanese-language newsletters that are printed by the Yamaguchi-gumi. I know you subscribe to 14 other magazines, but the only two you seem to read voraciously are *Methods of Industrial Security* and *Counter-Terrorism Bulletin*. In fact, I found your CTB article on the effects of minor extortion on executives abroad fascinating."

Coyote felt that Sinclair covered his look of surprise quite well. "As you have checked on me, Mr.

MacNeal, so I have checked on you. This is why you are here. Now, back to my original question: Have you read about what happened in Phoenix two weeks ago?"

Sinclair surrendered with a smile. "I have seen news reports, but, no, I have not read 'Mutant Spider Attacks Phoenix.' As for the actual incident," he glanced down at his hands, "I managed to sleep through it. Then again, I was never one for sharing the hallucinations caused by mass hysteria."

Crowley leaned forward. "And what if I were to suggest that there was fire beneath the smoke that is this article?"

"I would suggest you get in touch with your father, because his act was much better than yours."

"Good, Mr. MacNeal, very good." Coyote walked back around and sat behind his desk. "You'll need your skepticism, because what we are about to tell you will be very surprising. I assure you it is true, as odd as it may seem."

MacNeal tossed the tabloid onto the gold-carpeted floor, "It gets odder? I can't wait."

Coyote let the sarcasm slip past, knowing he shared Sinclair's attitude before he had seen and done what prevented Fiddleback's success in assaulting Phoenix. "Mr. MacNeal, the creature in the picture that accompanies that article is, in fact, real. The maglev circuit that connects all of the corporate towers here in Phoenix had incorporated into its design a highly advanced circuitry layout. When supplied with sufficient power, as was present in the thunderstorm two weeks ago, it opened a gateway to another reality. In that reality, this creature exists."

Sinclair shook his head. "Another reality? I think you've been watching too much *Star Trek: Captain Crusher's Log*."

"In fact, there are many alternate realities, or dimensions, that exist side by side. The dimension that contains our Earth is one that is unusual in that it appears to be a nexus point and, for whatever reasons, Earth creatures hold a fascination for the creatures from these other dimensions." Coyote shrugged. "They labor to make our lives hell for their own amusement."

Sinclair stood. "They may find us amusing, and you may find *me* amusing, but I'm not amused right now. I don't know what you wanted me to do, but if I have to buy this nonsense to do it, I'm out. Good day, gentlemen."

"Crowley, you were right. Show him."

The man in the gray suit eased himself forward to the edge of his chair. "At the Deitrich party, you and I ended up washing our hands side by side in the reception center's bathroom. You noticed a peculiar scar on the back of my left hand and commented that you'd only seen anything similar on dead fish."

Crowley tugged at each finger of the glove on his left hand. As it slid free, Coyote saw a circular mass of scar tissue on the back of Crowley's left hand, it looked twisted and knotted, as if someone had taken a circular sanding tool to his flesh and had ground on it for a while. Pulling the glove all the way off, Crowley showed his hand to Sinclair.

"The lamprey scar. I remember it." Sinclair looked up at the man's face, then back down at his hand. "But the man with the scar was much older—20, 30 years your senior. You could have faked that."

"Touch it, if you wish. See if it is real." Crowley extended his hand to him, but the challenge in the occultist's voice made Sinclair hesitate. "You will recall that only you and I were in that room at the time, so only you saw the scar. You would further agree, I think, that while I might have faked the scar through some complex makeup or surgery, planning to inflict the scar on myself far enough in advance to let it heal like this, then springing it on you here, is improbable."

Sinclair stared at the hand, then looked up at Crowley. "Believing you planned ahead is easier than trying to figure out how you became younger."

Crowley slipped his hand back into the glove. "There are dimensions out there where things . . . change."

Coyote sat back in his chair. "The easiest explanation is not always the correct one. In order to defeat Fiddleback—the 'mutant spider' in question—Crowley undertook a dangerous mission to a dimension that formed the basis for part of mythological Greek hell, Tartarus. In that pocket dimension, the one in which the titan Tityus regenerates on a daily basis after having provided a meal for vultures, he helped a woman regenerate from injuries caused by Fiddleback's agents. In the process, he also regenerated from all that ailed him. In his case, this was the ravages of old age. The scar, which he had gotten before the age to which he regressed, remained unaffected."

Sinclair sat slowly, his bright eyes flicking back and forth between Crowley and Coyote. "I'm listening, but I'm not convinced."

Coyote steepled his fingers. "Good. Stories of things from yetis and lake monsters to flying saucers and zombies have a basis in truth. Scholars have, by assuming the simplest answer is the best one, created scenarios for describing mythic epics as tales reflecting or explaining in magical terms concepts that ancient peoples could not understand. Like you, like them, I did not realize, until my encounter with Fiddleback, that another explanation existed: Other realities exist and, at various points in our history and prehistory, denizens of these other places have come here and been driven back by our ancestors."

"So, you're trying to tell me that Count Dracula was really a vampire from another dimension?"

"Perhaps. But more likely Vlad the Impaler was a human under the influence of a Dark Lord." Coyote unbuttoned his blue suit coat and leaned forward onto his desk. "I do not expect you to believe that everything weird is a result of Dark Lord action—plenty of human mountebanks make a living by spreading pseudo-scientific nonsense. I just want you to be aware that things, like Fiddleback, do exist and must be opposed. At the risk of sounding decidedly melodramatic, what I want you to do is help us prevent Fiddleback from taking over the world."

"I've got the weekend free, not a problem," Sinclair quipped sarcastically.

Coyote smiled at him. "I'm glad you have a sense of humor. You'll need it."

"You said you had a job for me to do."

"So I did. Until recently, Mr. MacNeal, I was an assassin being trained and maintained by Fiddleback's organization. I came to Phoenix to kill Nero Loring. I had my eyes opened to the nature of reality, or the *realities*, and now I have chosen to side with humanity over the whim of the Dark Lords."

"Fiddleback being a Dark Lord?"

Coyote nodded.

Sinclair's eyes narrowed. "And there are more than just him?"

Coyote nodded again.

Crowley crossed his legs. "Fiddleback is but one of many. Pygmalion, Dead Tongue, Baron Someday and a dozen others all operate here on Earth. Fiddleback has been the most ambitious to date, but all are effective in their spheres of influence."

"Fiddleback, as part of his plan to solidify his hold on Earth, has created a training school for assassins and other agents. I know its general location, but I want you to pinpoint it and scout it out for me." Coyote interwove his fingers and watched Sinclair closely. "This is why I am sending you to Japan."

Sinclair's head came up as if someone had grabbed his hair and jerked it back. "Japan? I don't think you want me going to the Land of the Rising Sun. You may have a background file on me, but much of what it reports about my time in Tokyo is wrong, I'm certain."

"I don't think so. Jytte is thorough and never settles for one source. I know about your situation *vis-à-vis* the Yakuza and the others in Japan. You are precisely the person I want in place there." Coyote punched the button on his desk phone when it lit up. "Yes, Lilith?"

"The flight is standing by, Mr. Loring."

"We'll be right up." He stood. "Sorry to cut this short, but I have to catch a shuttle out to the regional airport. I have a flight leaving very shortly."

"Wait a minute. You can't just leave me in the dark here."

Coyote pointed back toward the door. "My executive assistant, Ms. Acres, will give you a full set of briefing documents. She has also prepared your reservations in Tokyo, all the documentation you'll need, a credit line of \$50,000 and has \$5000 in cash for you. You still prefer the Beretta M92S as a side arm?"

Sinclair looked a bit shocked. "Yes, but smuggling one into Japan will be impossible."

"Agreed, which is why we will have one waiting for you in your suite in the New Palace Hotel. Ms. Acres will remain in this office for a week, then she will transfer to the Lorica office in Tokyo. You can reach her here or there as needed." Opening his top drawer, Coyote pulled a sealed file folder from his desk and offered it to Sinclair. "I need you to do one more thing. I need you to take this to Phoenix General Tower, Room 10542."

Sinclair accepted the file. "I give this to Hal Garrett?"

Coyote nodded appreciatively. "Very good, Mr. MacNeal. How did you know?"

"I have a head for figures." He tapped his right temple. "After your visit to my apartment, I checked on Garrett. I remember the room number."

"Then you'll have no trouble finding it. I will contact you in Japan when I am able and you will likely see Mr. Crowley before you see me."

"One thing, Coyote."

"Yes?"

"You said you were trained at this facility, which you put in Japan . Why am I going after it when you, it seems to me, would be the logical choice to uncover it?"

Coyote smiled. "The short form is that I no longer know where it is, so I need you to find it for me. More importantly, though, Crowley believes—and I have come to agree with him—that I need to complete the training Fiddleback had intended for me, albeit without his sponsorship. This means I must go away, but for how long, I do not know. If I learn what I must quickly enough, and you find Fiddleback's beachhead in Japan , we can defeat him."

"And if you or I fail?"

Coyote pointed to Crowley . "Remember what the lamprey did to his hand?"

Sinclair nodded solemnly.

"Imagine life after Fiddleback does that to the Earth."



Sinclair MacNeal shielded his eyes from the dust storm raised by Lorica's CV-27 Peregrine. As the dual-rotor craft lifted off, the pilot rotated the nacelles at the end of the wings forward, transforming the hybrid craft from helicopter to more conventional plane. The silvery craft dipped toward the ground to pick up airspeed, then swooped up and headed directly out toward the regional airport in the distance.

Raking windblown hair back into place with his left hand, Sin looked out over the city of Phoenix . From high atop the Lorica Industries corporate citadel, he had a clear view of the black, photovoltaic cell ocean that covered the city 100 feet above the ground. He saw two Arizona Public Service crews working to repair cells damaged in the storm two weeks earlier.

Seven man-made islands floated in the black sea called Frozen Shade. To the northwest he saw the Build-more complex and even allowed himself a proud smile. The largest of the islands, dead west from the Lorica complex, dwarfed all the others. CityCenter sat at the hub of the maglev-elevated train lines that connected all of the corporate citadels and very much formed the center of life for the people living in those towers.

Raised in the Build-more tower, and having lived there when not in Japan or Europe , Sin found what he surveyed normal. On his 18th birthday, his father had taken him to the top of the Build-more tower and swept his arm wide over the city. "Sinclair, someday this will all be yours." *I'd have believed him, except I knew he'd said the same thing to my three older brothers when they turned 18.*

"Mr. MacNeal?"

Sin looked over toward the accessway into the tower. "Yes, Ms. Acres, what is it?"

The blonde woman nodded once and smiled. "Mr. Loring asked me to prepare your things for you. If you would follow me."

Sin took one last look at the city. He drew in a lungful of the dry, desert air and let himself revel in the 110°F heat. "May be hot, but it's a dry heat," he laughed to himself. "Unfortunately, Tokyo is a very wet heat at this time of year."

"Mr. MacNeal?"

"Sorry." He shook his head and followed Lilith through the doorway and down the dark stairwell. Above him, the door shut automatically and, as they descended, the air cooled appreciably. "Outsiders always note that Phoenix has *dry* heat, as if that makes it bearable. Trying to explain to them that an oven has *dry* heat also never seems to make the point. Still, the dry heat here is preferable to Tokyo during the summer."

Lilith nodded politely, but Sin definitely had the impression she did so merely because it was mannerly, not out of any interest. The stairwell ended in a stout metal door with a one-foot square of white Lucite in the wall beside the jamb. She pressed her hand to it and a neon green bar passed from top to bottom and back up again, scanning her palmprint. The light went out, then the door lock clicked.

She held the door open as Sin paused and pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket. He wiped the plate down, then stepped into the foyer of Loring's office suite. Lilith followed him, and an oaken panel slid down to hide the door. Sin smiled at her as he refolded his handkerchief and returned it to his pocket.

Lilith's green eyes studied him for a moment, then she rested her hands on her hips. "Excuse me, but why did you do that?"

"I'm a security specialist, remember? The green light and the scan rate makes that the Tojicorp knockoff of the Allard Technologies Argus Security Scanner. The Allard system has some proprietary software burned into its chips that Tojicorp never cracked, so there are a couple of tricks that can be used to defeat the TC system." Sin shrugged. "They're not that simple, and few thieves carry that sort of equipment around with them, anyway."

"I see." Lilith pulled back the cuff of her green silk jacket and activated the wrist-recording device she wore. "Note: have all security scanners replaced with Allard Technologies Argus systems." Switching the device off, she directed Sin toward her office. "This way, please."

"Neat toy, that."

"I will have one ordered for you." Lilith nodded at her red-haired secretary, then ushered Sin into her office. She closed the door behind them, which gave him a moment to survey the blond-ash paneled room. The warm, golden carpet and open airiness of the room made it seem far larger than it really was. This impression was aided by a window that took up the whole north wall and provided a breathtaking view of Squaw Peak and Camelback Mountain.

She nodded and pointed him to a straight-backed chair in front of her blackened-steel and smoky-glass desk. The desk itself was utterly bare, and he wondered how she got any work done at all without a computer or a phone. As she walked around behind it and touched the desk at several seemingly random spots, he realized her secret.

The whole desk surface is a touch-sensitive LCD computer screen!"That's the Big Blue-Delicious XR-8500, isn't it?" He leaned forward, but the polarized glass over the desk's surface only let someone looking at it from her angle see anything. "I've read about it, but I've never seen one."

Lilith smiled, and Sin thought it certain she was taking joy in having turned the tables on him. "This is actually a prototype XR-9900." She hit an invisible icon on the right side. "Daphne, can you bring Mr. MacNeal's briefcase in here, please?"

Behind him the office door opened and Lilith's trim secretary brought him a brushed aluminum attaché case. Sin looked at the twin locks and saw all the dials were set at 0. He held it in his lap until Daphne left the room, then set it down on the floor. He waited to see if that surprised Lilith, but she did not react to his behavior.

"The locks are keyed to your birthday. In there you will find your new passport, ID, credit cards, plane tickets and \$5000 in cash. I've also put the file for Hal Garrett in there." She glanced at her desktop. "He is in room . . ."

"10542."

"Very good, Mr. MacNeal. I would have not expected you to remember."

Sin smiled easily. "I trained myself to memorize numbers. The case here, for example, is keyed to a number that I can remember. It's also a number that anyone who has a file on me can remember. If I want that stuff to be secure, I change the combination to something utterly random and memorize the numbers."

Sin half expected her to make another note on her wrist-recorder, but she did not. "Do you want to check the material before you go?"

"No, I trust you." *You're efficient. It's your boss I wonder about.* "You'll be in touch when you arrive in Japan?"

"If you need me, I'll be available."

She gave him a quixotic smile that, if he saw it on the face of the women he met in his social circle, he would have taken to be a come-on. With Lilith Acres, however, he read it as some sign of inner amusement—as if he had spinach stuck in his teeth or had a shirt-tail out. To him, this meant their relationship would never extend beyond business and that suited him fine. He anticipated his return to Japan would be odd enough without trying to carry on any sort of social life.

Lilith directed him from the office to the elevator. "Have a pleasant trip, Mr. MacNeal."

"Thank *you*, Ms. Acres." He entered the empty cylinder and punched the button for the level with access to the maglev train. The cage dropped away as if the cables had been cut above him, but it gradually slowed as it neared the 12th floor. The descent let Sin look out through the many levels of the Lorica tower and at the crowds of people there. Level after level of shops and offices and apartments strobed past, yet, while he saw them all and cataloged the weaknesses of Lorica's security, his mind wandered to gnaw on a more immediate problem.

Michael Loring/Coyote and Damon Crowley had clearly bought the tabloid story about a giant spider

attacking Phoenix . Even though he had slept through the whole storm, he'd heard enough people talk about it that he knew it was decidedly odd. He'd even heard rumors about what the APS crew working at the base of the Lorica tower had found amid the ashes and broken PV cells. Even so, he couldn't buy it.

He knew he had a good imagination—a necessity to successfully work a corporate security beat. Thinking ahead of all the impossible ways to break security was the only way to ensure that it would not be broken. During his time in Japan , he showed his corporate masters tricks they had never dreamed of. He'd personally played for hours with one of the Tojicorp units to figure out how to crack it.

Despite that, however, he found himself rigidly skeptical about all the odd things reported about the world. He fully accepted that yeti *might* exist in Tibet 's mountains, but he wasn't going to believe it until he and someone like Lilith spent an evening lounging on a yeti pelt in front of a warm fire. That went double and triple for tales of zombies and downed flying saucers and aging Nazi menaces from the hollow Earth.

Sin admitted to himself that he liked Coyote and admired him for the cool courage with which the man had broken into his apartment the night before the storm. He appreciated Coyote's sense of loyalty to Hal Garrett and even respected Coyote's chameleon-like ability to slip into the Michael Loring identity so quickly.

The man's belief in the giant spider story, though, disturbed him. Coyote immediately wanted to send him to Japan to chase down a murder academy run by agents of this giant daddy-longlegs. This supposed the existence of this mythical spider and the actual existence of the assassin training center. Neither of those things was assured to be anything beyond Coyote's personal fantasies.

The mission made no sense, and it made even less sense for him to accept the job.

The doors whooshed open and let him out across from the maglev VIP lounge.

Well, at the very least, I can drop this file with Garrett and maybe talk with him. Otherwise, such as it is, Phoenix is my home and I'm not sure trooping off to Yakuzaland is such a winner of an idea.

Phoenix's maglev train circuit had been designed by Nero Loring, the man who had built Lorica Industries in much the same way that Darius MacNeal had created Build-more. Each of the trains on the circuit had been custom-constructed in a triangular shape. The upper, more narrow car was serviced from the VIP lounge and only admitted those who had the appropriate passes. Down below, in the broader, less well appointed part of the cars, lesser executives and unimportant guests waited in a crowd to be shoved into the packed cars.

Sin fished his wallet out of his back pocket and took out his Build-more identification card. He slipped it into the slot beside the doors to the lounge and took a step forward. He bumped straight into the closed doors and rebounded, a bit surprised. Looking down at the slot he saw his card sticking back out.

A dark-haired young woman in a freshly starched gray uniform looked at him from her position in the booth beside the doors. He pulled his ID back out of the slot and pressed it against the glass. She waved a laser-pen over the barcode on it, then looked at her computer monitor. She blinked once, then turned her face to him.

"Can I help you, sir?"

Sin jerked a thumb at the doors. "You can open them. The mag strip must be gone from the back of my card again."

Her face shifted into a look of snobbishly bored indifference with the ease of plastic being injected into a mold. "Sir, this is the VIP lounge. I believe you wanted the buses down on the street level."

"What?" Sin looked at the ID card, then slapped it against the glass again. "Try scanning it now, please."

The girl shook her head. "Sir, you have no authorization. Build-more does not show you as an employee."

You son of abitch /Sin ground his teeth as he clenched his jaw against the angry words he wanted to shout. *You bastard!* He turned away from the lounge doors, then almost whirled and drove the attaché case through the Plexiglass. He refrained, but not out of any fear for what Scorpion Security might do to him—the weight at the end of his arm gave him an idea.

Okay, Coyote, here's your chance to score some credibility points. He crossed to a cement bench and sat. He opened the case and pulled out a manila envelope. Undoing the clasp he popped it open and smiled as he pulled another ID card from it. *Picture's not the greatest, but it will do.* He tossed his old card into the case along with the envelope, then snapped it shut and again approached the lounge doors.

The attendant had already started to reach for the button that summoned security, but her hand froze in place as his new ID card slipped into the slot and the doors buzzed. Sinclair stepped through them and pulled his card from the return slot. Slipping it into his pocket, he glanced up at the video display to see when the next car was leaving, then took a seat well away from a pair of men who, though they were wearing business suits, could have gone a long way toward proving zombies did exist.

The attendant left her booth and walked over to him. "Sir, you shouldn't be here."

Sin rolled his eyes to heaven. "I have a valid ID, Miss. I'm in."

She smiled nervously and lowered her voice. "No sir, that's not the problem." She gently took hold of his upper right arm. "This is just the normal lounge. If you'll come with me."

Curious, Sin took out the ID card he'd used and looked closely at it. It resembled the one his father's corporation had issued except in three things: the corporate hologram in the corner represented Loric, his job description was executive vice president for Special Liaison Affairs, and it had a white border around it. He'd never seen the white border before. This surprised him because, as a security officer at Build-more, he thought he had seen everything.

She led him to a door near the point where the front of the train would end up when boarding began. "Your *carte blanche*, please," she whispered as she gently tugged at his ID card. He let go and she slipped it into a slot beside the door. The door itself slid up into the ceiling, admitting them to a dark alcove. When the door shut behind them, another opened in front, and they stepped into what looked to Sin to be a bar.

The rectangular room had a full bar with two bartenders behind it across from him. The far end had a sound system and a dance floor complete with a revolving mirrored ball and a floor that changed colors by blocks. Tables with candles glowing softly filled the space between the door and the dance floor. Doorways leading into smaller alcoves appeared every 10 feet or so along the walls and two of them were shut.

Sin frowned. *What in hell?*

Lounging at the bar, sipping drinks from tall glasses, Sin saw a half-dozen young men and women all look at him when he came in. The attendant pressed his ID card back into his hand and smiled. "I will be leaving now, sir." Her smile broadened hopefully. "Unless you want me to stay."

Sin shook his head to clear it, which killed her smile. She started to drift from sight, but Sin turned and thanked her. "And the door over there, at this end of the bar, that's where I board the train?"

She nodded. "Your ID will open it for you."

Sin thanked her again, then drifted to the bar. He glanced down at the women, then looked up at the bartender. "I never knew this was here."

The man gave him a chummy wink. "I had you pegged as a first-timer. Yeah, you get a corp to issue you a carte blanche and anything goes. What do you want?"

"A beer—Henry Weinhard's if you have it." Sin saw a leggy brunette who reminded him too much of an unpleasant memory named Christina approaching from farther down the bar. He held his hand up. "Just a beer, thanks."

She stopped and returned to her stool with the sort of walk that made Sin almost regret his decision. The bartender set a sweating bottle down in front of him, then headed back to talk to the loungers, leaving Sin alone. Sin took a long pull on the beer, letting it burn its way down his throat. *Giant spiders invading Phoenix? Coyote must have known this place existed and I didn't. Perhaps he does know what he is talking about.*

The nurse on the 10th floor of Phoenix General kindly directed Sin to Wing 5 and Room 42. Sin felt he probably could have found the room on his own, but his introduction to the hyperspeed lane of corporate life in Phoenix had disoriented him somewhat. While the carte blanche section of the maglev did not offer the wide range of services supplied by the lounge, it did have a small gift shop section, so he grabbed some candy to bring with him.

Sin knocked lightly on the door as he pushed it open. "Mr. Garrett, I'm Sinclair MacNeal. I don't know if you'll remember . . ." Sin's voice trailed off as he saw he was not Garrett's only visitor.

Garrett himself lay in an extra-long hospital bed with the back elevated at a 30-degree angle. Two intravenous feeds—one clear and the other a pinkish color—delivered liquid through one needle in his right forearm and the other on the back of his right hand. A thin, clear tube ran beneath his nose and fed him oxygen. Despite Garrett's being garbed in a hospital gown, Sin could see where the fabric pulled taut against the bandages on his stomach and chest.

He looked alert, and the tight lines around his eyes suggested to Sin that Garrett was not taking full advantage of pharmaceutical science's advances in painkiller technology. The big African-American man raised his left hand weakly, then dropped it in a gesture of resignation, or invitation to him to enter. "MacNeal . . . met you at fundraiser . . . your father gave \$10,000."

Letting the door close behind him, Sin nodded to Garrett and the other occupant whom he recognized. Standing in the corner, near the foot of the bed was a man who, while not as tall as Garrett, certainly massed more. Dark, tight eyes looked out at him from a lantern-jawed head that might as well have been

cast in iron. The man's muscular build and even the way he held his fists balled and ready for action made Sin think of him as the model for every neosocialist hero statue he'd seen in Tirane. *Looks like he's wearing the same Hell's Belles T-shirt he had on the night he came with Coyote to my apartment. Doesn't look as if he's washed it since then, either.*

Seated on the foot of the bed, a petite woman smiled at Sin. She had a pretty face and obviously embodied the concept of America as a melting pot. A strip of sky-blue cloth tied her dark, kinky hair back at the nape of her neck, but the bow looked a bit incongruous with the leather jacket, leopard-spot leotard and flat-bottomed ankle-boots she wore.

Sin decided the bow's cloth had been torn from the hem of Garrett's robe and probably tied in place by the last person in the room. For a half-second, he thought she might have been related to Lilith, because they both shared mid-back length, blonde hair and a slender, long-legged form that legions of women labored fruitlessly for years to obtain. Her dark eyes and the way she clutched her arms around herself dispelled any connection between her and Lilith. In fact, because she wore a jeans skirt that hid her legs in its thick folds, and a white blouse buttoned at collar and cuffs, Sin wondered if she wasn't actually a nun visiting Garrett without benefit of her habit.

The large man in the corner took a step out toward Sin. "You have the wrong room, MacNeal."

Garrett again raised his left hand and the girl on the bed grabbed the large man's wrist. "Bat, I know his father commissioned the shooting. It's okay."

Sin saw more pain shoot through Hal Garrett's eyes, but he knew it was not physical. The same assassins who had put Hal in the hospital bed had killed his wife and almost started gang genocide in the dark world that lurked beneath Frozen Shade. "I'm sorry, Mr. Garrett. I would have stopped it." He looked at Bat and added: "And if you want a piece of my father, you can hold my coat and have whatever I leave behind."

Hal smiled as Bat retreated to the corner. "This is Natch Feral and Jytte Ravel. Chwalibog Kabat you've met."

Sin nodded at Natch on the bed and saw that Jytte refused to make eye contact with him. Bat folded his arms across his chest and just stared smoldering holes into his head, so Sin did his best to ignore him. "Coyote sent me and asked me to give you a file."

The mention of Coyote served to brighten both Hal's and Natch's faces. Jytte finally looked at him as if appraising him and his abilities. As Sin opened his briefcase, he noticed that Bat continued to glower at him. He pulled out the folder and extended it to Natch.

Natch broke the seal, then reversed the folder and opened it in Hal's lap. Hal's eyes flicked back and forth as he scanned the document, then he laid back and closed his eyes for a second. He drew in a deep breath, hesitated for a second, forced himself to take in yet a little bit more air, then slowly exhaled. "Jytte, read it." His left index finger pointed forward. "Tell them."

Jytte took the folder from him and scanned it very quickly. "Coyote has left Phoenix for a while. He wants us to stay low-profile. If something of importance comes up, we are to contact him through Mr. MacNeal here, in Tokyo." Her eyes flashed at him. "Why you, MacNeal?"

Why me, indeed?

Before Sin could answer, Hal shifted stiffly in bed. "Because *we* need to be here to work on preventing a gang war, Natch."

"Besides, I lived in Japan for a while and I know my way around."

"Don't be so cocky, MacNeal." Bat cracked his knuckles. "There's another reason you're going."

Sin's eyes narrowed. "Yes?"

"You're not connected with Coyote."

"And?"

Bat grinned like a cannibal in a morgue. "And that means you're expendable."



Wandering through the Nevada badlands at night, she felt the presence of the snake well before she saw it or heard the warning buzz of its rattles. She turned and saw it in the moon-shadow of a large rock. A coiled mass of muscle, with black circles running down its tan spine, only its head and the quickly vibrating scales at the end of its tail stood out.

The snake's buzzing increased as she reached her hand out to it. The creature's threat-panic emanated out from it as if riding the sound waves. She recognized the terror rising from it and knew instantly that this creature would strike to protect itself. Squatting down on her haunches, she pulled her hand back and stuffed both of them into the pockets of the leather flight jacket she had stolen from the base.

Drawing in a deep breath of cool night air, she banished her fatigue and concentrated. Envisioning the snake's fear as ripples circling out from a central point, she fashioned her thoughts as a spear and drove them back through the reptile's primitive display.

Do not fear me, little brother. You would not find your venom very effective on me. She smiled as the buzz dropped in tempo. I am your ally. I am a small sun to warm you and shade to cool you. If you will guide me, I shall protect you.

Though she composed her thoughts in words, she sent them as emotions of safety and satisfaction. The Mohave rattlesnake ceased its threat display altogether, then slowly and languidly uncoiled. Gliding forward effortlessly, the four-foot-long snake slid from the rock and approached her. It stopped two feet away and half-coiled to strike but did not begin rattling again.

She slowly withdrew her left hand from the jacket and extended it. *I am Rajani. I will not harm you.*

The creature flickered its tongue over her hand, then withdrew a bit.

Yes, I taste different. Not your prey at all. We will be allies. She opened her jacket and unbuttoned the fatigue shirt at the waist. The snake slid forward and entered the darkness between her flesh and the rough cotton fabric of the shirt, it went all the way around her waist better than two times, its scaled hide

feeling slick and warm against the flesh of her belly.

Rajani stood slowly, waiting for the slap of rattles against her flank to warn her if she was in danger of a strike. She felt confident that the snake's venom would not hurt her because of her alien constitution, but she was not absolutely certain of that fact. Since she knew she could process food from Earth, and her parents had told her that humans and her people could produce hybrids, she realized that the basic protein chains that made up her body were the same as those found in most of the things the snake ate.

Her two-day trek out of the base designated "Area 51" had not been an easy one. The actual escape from the base had been much easier than she expected, but she put that down to security having been arranged to keep snoopers out instead of people in. The guards directed all their attention to things happening outside.

Emerging from the depths of the mountain, she had managed to steal the flight jacket to ward off the cold. She initially took finding it as a grand stroke of luck: It had been packed away with other warm clothing in a trunk. The barracks room was obviously used for storage—she sensed no impressions of anyone having visited the room within the last three months. She could not understand why such a valuable coat would remain forgotten when it was so cold.

She took it, a smaller pair of boots and a boonie hat into which she stuffed her hair. Looking in a mirror in the room, she imagined seeing herself through the eyes of a human and concluded, because of the way the clothes draped her so completely, she would easily be mistaken for a juvenile wearing an adult's clothing. The benefit of the oversized clothes was that they deemphasized the fact that her head was a bit disproportionately large for her body.

The most difficult part of her escape came as she attempted to leave the secure portion of the base. Luckily for her, two black, bat-wing planes swooped low for tandem landings on the long airstrip. As they touched down and raced along the dry lake bed, the two air police manning the gate turned to watch.

She took that opportunity to telepathically add in the image of a spaceship, one of the ships on which her parents had arrived on Earth, to the tableau. While that addition clearly interested them, they accepted it far more readily than she had expected. She sensed no surprise from them, and no anxiety, which is what she had largely recalled a ship's presence creating before.

"Looks like they've got the F-42 out for night maneuvers."

The African-American guard pulled off his cap and scratched his head. "Wonder if that thing can see the Stealths?"

His partner laughed aloud. "C'mon, my kid's got a radar gun that can spot those antiques on the wing. The tech those onion-heads have can read it molecule by molecule."

"I guess."

Rajani raced out into the Nevada desert. With the term *onion-head* had come an undercurrent of fear and hatred. That immediately sparked a bitter memory of the fights Dr. Chandra used to have with his research assistant, Nicholas Hunt. Whenever the little man with a lopsided head had looked at her, she had sensed the same fear-based hatred, and it abated only slightly when his focus of attention shifted from her to Dr. Chandra.

He called it prejudice. On an intellectual level she had understood how fear of the unknown and uncertainty about the future can fester into a knot of hatred for anything different and possibly superior. Because of her empathic abilities, however, Rajani had experienced the virulence of the hatred in a way that Dr. Chandra never could, and she wondered if its strength had been what warped Nicholas' features and head, instead of the childhood accident he claimed.

The gentle tickle of the snake's rattles against her side brought her back to the present. At first she thought the snake had been picking up on the emotions triggered by the memories, but then the night breeze brought the sound of the whimpering dog and a sobbing child to her. Though faint, she knew the sounds came from very close by. Pointing her face into the wind, then turning her head left and right in two scans, she located the source of the sound and headed toward it.

She used a dry wash to make her approach. The banks only rose up about three feet above the sandy bed. Tumbleweeds and some small prickly-pear cactus grew up along the edges, which helped shield her, but she still had to crouch. Working forward slowly, her night vision allowing her to avoid stepping on anything that might make a sound, she reached the outskirts of a small campsite.

Huddled in the darkness, she studied the situation using all her senses. She saw two children clinging to each other, and a mutt of a dog with them. The larger one spoke softly to the smaller, but her words did nothing to dull the terror radiating from the boy like heat from a blast furnace. Both wore rags, and dust caked them except where it had smeared across their cheeks from wiping away tears. Though the larger one did her best to hide her feelings, she became the minor star in a binary system of fear.

Like the mongrel beside them, the children had both been chained to a metal stake driven into the ground just beyond a small fire. Rajani sensed a connection—an alliance—between them and the dog. Beyond them, almost eclipsed by the strength of the young boy's terror, she picked up the random emotional patterns of two other individuals. She could not determine age or sex because of the degree of interference caused by the boy, but the steady level of their feelings told her they were unconscious.

Like a shadow, Rajani moved into the camp. The sheer shock of the surprise exploding from the girl when she saw her nearly made Rajani cry out. She raised a hand in caution to the girl, then held it out to the left so the dog could get a noseful of her. *Yes, brother mine, I have come to strengthen your pack. I will free you and your companions.*

The hair on the dog's spine, which had risen abruptly, slowly settled back down. The dog licked her hand, which made the girl less anxious. The boy, who Rajani knew was her brother, peeked out at her with one eye. Rajani smiled at him and his sister, then took another step forward and grasped the metal stake.

The girl waved her hands. "No, no. Go away. You have to go away!" Her harsh whisper barely carried the six-foot length of the chain, but the fear backing it slammed into Rajani like a pile driver. The little boy's anxieties spiked upon hearing his sister's words. His hopes for rescue had been raised then shattered. Panic pulsed from him like blood from an arterial gash.

His panic was the empathic equivalent of staring at the sun with a telescope. She tucked her head down and raised her fists to her temples. Immediately, the shields she had once relied upon to keep her sane amid a world of emotions dropped into place, shutting everything out. Looking up, she could see the fear in the children's eyes, but it no longer assaulted her.

She twisted the stake to the left, then back to the right, and yanked it out of the ground. The chains rattled a bit, but no more than they did when the children moved. She stood and slipped the ends of the

chains off the stake. "You are free."

A hand grabbed her right shoulder and spun her around. A huge man whose belly stretched a dirty plaid shirt to the point where it gapped open between the buttons looked down at her. "Whadda we got here?" He tried to bat her hat off, but the chinstrap held, leaving it to hang at her back.

The flood of golden hair clearly surprised the man. "Boxer, check this out. We got us a night-thrill." He reached inside her jacket and grasped the lapels of her fatigue shirt. Pulling left and right, he popped buttons and exposed her breasts to the night air. "Oh, yeah, fine. She's mine first."

Rajani, stunned and surprised by the man's appearance and the malignancy of his lust, could think of nothing as his big calloused hands brushed across her breasts and around to her back. He started to pull her forward, then he jerked sharply and screamed. Reeling backward, arms flailing, he stared wide-eyed at the snake hanging from his right wrist by its fangs. His heels caught on a rock and sent him flying back into a stand of cholla cactus.

Boxer had awakened when his name had been called, but the scream brought him to his feet. Wearing only frayed jeans and holed socks, Boxer charged at Rajani like a bull. He snatched her up in a hug, but she managed to rake his face with her gold claws. Shrieking madly, he dropped her to the ground and clutched at his ruined face.

She landed hard on the ground and fell back as blood streamed from between the man's fingers. Before Rajani could move, the dog shot at the man and sunk its teeth deeply into his right leg, bringing him down. Moving in concert with the dog, the little girl scooted forward on her butt and looped the length of chain around the man's throat. Planting her feet on his meaty shoulders, she yanked back with her hands while straightening her legs.

The man's neck popped with a gunshot sound that made Rajani wince and the boy cry out. Rajani looked over at the other man, but she sensed nothing in the way of active emotions from him. His body twitched a bit, but his breathing came raggedly and his lack of reaction to the cactus festooning him told her he was suffering from a total central nervous system collapse. With its rattle playing an accompaniment to the sound of the man's dying breaths, the snake coiled itself on his chest.

She scanned the area one more time, but felt nothing beyond the quartet of Earthlings around her. She shut herself off from the anger and hatred pouring from the girl, unprepared for such harsh emotions. The little boy continued to radiate panic, but it began to drop off as the dog trotted over to him and licked his face.

Squatting down by the fire, Rajani used the one remaining button to close her blouse. "Are you unhurt?"

The fire layered bright highlights into the girl's honey-blond hair as she nodded. "Boxer knew I'd do him if I got the chance."

The edge in the girl's voice shocked Rajani. She looked more closely at her and, through the thin fabric of the girl's soiled T-shirt, she detected the initial budding of the girl's breasts. *She can be no more than 12 LMUs in age physically, but her voice and her anger . . .* "I am Rajani."

The girl let the chain go slack and slip through her fingers. "I'm Dorothy and that's Mickey. The big one, the one your snake got, that's Uncle Andy. Boxer was his friend. They brought me up here to sell me. I brought Mickey with me."

"Sell you?" Rajani looked from Dorothy to the little boy, who remained hidden in the folds of the thin blanket they had been given. "But your parents, do they know?"

"Know?" Dorothy pointed at Andy's body. "Check his pockets. My father gave him a bill of sale."

"What?"

"Well, daddy's not been right since Mommy died." Mickey began to whimper, so Dorothy turned toward him. "Quiet, quiet. It's not your fault. Daddy didn't mean it when he said it."

The boy fell silent, but his anxiety began to radiate out again. Rajani smiled at his silhouette in an effort to draw him out, but he hunkered down, trying to make himself small and unnoticed. "Your brother is certainly shy."

"Yes, he is. And I'm giving you the wrong impression of my father. He is a good man, really he is. Honest. He brung us up proper, too." She waved her brother forward. "Mickey, say 'thank you' to this nice woman for helping us."

"Ang ou," he whispered from the darkness. He slowly made his way into the firelight and watched the dancing flames with bright fascination in his eyes. When he looked up and made eye contact with Rajani, she saw the flesh on his cheeks rise up around his eyes in a smile, but he kept his face half hidden with the blanket.

"How old are you, Mickey?"

Half the blanket slipped back over his left shoulder as his hand came out and displayed all his fingers. Rajani smiled. "Five?"

The boy nodded emphatically.

Dorothy reached out and stroked his brown hair, "It's okay, Mickey. She's a good person. If she weren't, Rex woulda bitten her."

Rajani smiled reassuringly at Mickey, then glanced around the camp. "The truck has Arizona plates. You're not that far from your home, are you?"

Dorothy shook her head. "No, we're from . . ."

"Phlaya," Mickey shouted. As he did so, he pulled his right hand away from his face. Though she did not need it, the firelight fully illuminated the tangle of teeth in Mickey's misshapen face. They lined up like warped bowling pins behind one crooked incisor. His upper lip rose up and parted as if curtains on a stage, unable to hide his cleft palate or allow him to close his lips to speak.

With Mickey's revelation, Rajani immediately caught Dorothy's hawk-like scrutiny of her reaction. Over and above that, she sensed Mickey's courage dropping precipitously toward panic if she rejected him as had so many others. She wanted to reach out to him, but she held back for fear the boy might take any motion toward him as aggression.

She looked at his sister. "Your mother died when Mickey was born?"

Dorothy nodded. "There was lots of blood. I was seven. I've taken care of him since then. Dad had a

girlfriend who helped for a while, but it's pretty much just been Mickey and me." She patted him on the head. "If you didn't catch it, he said 'Flagstaff' in reply to your question."

Rajani nodded to Mickey.« *Thank you, Mickey,*» she sent to him telepathically.

The boy looked at her, then tugged at his right ear. His sister looked at him with a concerned frown on her face. "Do you have another earache, Mickey? Because of his teeth and all, he had trouble with them. I think he has trouble hearing because of them, too."

"I think he's okay, Dorothy." Rajani held her hands out to the fire. "No one has gotten medical help for your brother?"

"Orfey!" Mickey beamed.

The girl shook her head. "My father signed on as a proxxer for Daizaimoku Corp in Flag when my mom got pregnant with Mickey. Trying to save her ran up some bills, which Daisymuck said they'd cover, but at the expense of care for Mickey. They said if my mom had lived and they had her vote, too, they would have taken care of things. Mickey keeps getting sick, so that uses up what little credit my dad has built up with Daisymuck. Andy talked him into selling me to get the money to fix Mickey, but I knew that wouldn't happen, so I brought Mickey with me."

The girl's eyes narrowed. "So, what's your story? Black skin, gold stripes and some really hot eye-mods. You one of them exotic dancers from Vegas or something? Or are you a gangbanger from Eclipse way out of your turf?"

Rajani was pretty certain Dorothy was speaking English. She understood the first question and would have gone with it except that she knew nothing about Las Vegas and Dorothy seemed to feel the second explanation was more plausible by the feelings she gave off. "The latter. Got tricked into visiting Vegas, then abandoned."

Dorothy smiled broadly. "Figured you were from Phoenix . You going back?" Insecurity poured from her as she continued. "We have to go back to Flag now, so we could travel together. Safety in numbers and all."

Fenix?"I go to Pah-he-o-e-nicks."

Dorothy shrugged. "Whatever, gangslang ain't my Jones. Flag's on the way to Phoenix , so you can come with us, 'kay?" The plea Dorothy managed to keep out of her voice rang off her emotionally like peals from a bell.

So, Eclipse and Phoenix are synonymous. "Yes, traveling with you would be fine with me." Rajani reached out and gave Dorothy a big hug. Clearly, the world has changed during the time I spent in stasis. I went in hoping I could come out to help save the world from Fiddleback but, if it has changed so radically that fathers can sell their children, perhaps it is too late.



Looking at the ancient and beautiful monastery clinging to the mountainside, Coyote felt as if he had traveled a thousand years back through time on his journey to Tibet . Adjusting his Serengeti Vermillion sunglasses, he glanced over at Crowley . He wanted to see if the sight awed his companion, but instead caught the dark-haired occultist studying him for his reaction to it. They both laughed, then urged their little ponies onward along the narrow, winding trail.

From Phoenix they had flown to LA and caught a flight direct to Tokyo . From there they transferred to a flight to New Delhi . That led to another flight to Guwahati, then to Paro , Bhutan and finally into Gonggar, Tibet . Each leg had been completed in smaller and smaller planes, including the last in which they flew in an old People's Liberation Army plane that had been repainted after Tibet reasserted its independence in 1999.

At Gonggar they took a bus on the 60-mile trip into Lhasa . Crowley had commented that the capital looked a lot more festive than the last time he had been there. "In 1985, when the Chinese hosted a celebration of the 20th anniversary of Tibet 's autonomy, you couldn't see any signs that weren't written in Chinese. Now look at it; everything is Tibetan."

Coyote had probed a bit more about Crowley 's presence in Tibet at that time, but his companion seemed reluctant to expand upon his comments. Coyote knew there had been riots in the late 1980s to protest the Chinese domination of the region. Restrictions on foreign travel through the area had been fierce, and had remained so until 1997 when the Second Cultural Revolution had created so many problems for Beijing that they relaxed their grip on the outlying regions. Nei Mongol, Manchuria and Tibet revolted, kicking out the Han settlers through which the central government had tried to colonize their nations. After two years of bloody fighting in Tibet , the 14th Dalai Lama returned on June 6, his birthday, and proclaimed Tibet free again.

Throughout the journey from Lhasa to Shigaste and up to Namling, Coyote had seen plenty of evidence of the Tibetan war for independence. Maoist statues had been toppled, then left to be weathered by the sandblasting winds of Tibet . As Crowley explained when driving through Shigaste, "The people have left the Chinese monuments and buildings in the same state of repair that the First Cultural Revolution left Tibetan temples. They have devoted themselves to restoring their history and have left the Chinese things to rot."

They abandoned their rented Range Rover in Namling and were met by a yellow-hatted monk with six horses. Crowley introduced the man as Getsul Khedrup, explaining that he was not yet a full monk, but well on his way to his final ordination. Following Khedrup, they rode their shaggy ponies up and out of the fertile central Yarlung Valley . For the next two days they continued up and away from civilization, seeing only nomads tending large herds of yaks as they went.

The weather cooled as they climbed in altitude, but Coyote remained surprised at how seasonable the climate was. He had expected to need cold-weather gear, but they were not assaulting Mount Everest . The thick yak-hair blankets their guide had brought with them were more than enough to ward off the chilly night air. During the day, a thin shirt or jacket proved more than sufficient, especially since the desert plateau on which they traveled got so little rain.

Coyote turned to Crowley as they approached the monastery. "It is beautiful. By the looks of it, it must have been one of the first restoration projects of the new government."

Crowley shared a smile with Khedrup, then shook his head. "No restoration needed. The Chinese never shelled it like they did Norbulinka, the Jokhang, Sera Monastery or the Potala."

"This is a rather remote area. I guess getting here would have been difficult."

"Actually, the Chinese wanted Kanggenpo destroyed *very* badly. The Dalai Lama stopped here on his way out of Tibet in March of 1959." Crowley pointed to some scars on the landscape. "It's been a good 50 years, but you can still see evidence of the elite mechanized division they sent out to get him and his family. Because he had escaped from Norbulinka disguised as a soldier, Mao Zedong put a crack unit on him."

Coyote's eyes narrowed. "How could this monastery avoid damage?" He dropped a hand to the stainless-steel pistol riding on his right hip. "I could hit the walls from here with my Wildey."

"Ah, but you can see it; they could not. Even during the First Cultural Revolution, Mao wanted this place destroyed, but again his hunters could not find it."

Coyote considered his words for a moment. "I take it this has something to do with my empathic abilities, my being a *sensitive*? When you explained it all to me before, you likened it to being able to see in the ultraviolet range. I take it this place is rendered in ultraviolet, for all intents and purposes?"

"Close and logical, but no." Crowley frowned for a moment, then pointed back toward the monastery. "What do you see?"

Coyote looked up, then removed his glasses. Where he had once seen the tall ochre walls of the monastery, with tiled roofs and colorful banners flying from them, he saw nothing. "It's gone."

"To continue your sight analogy, what would you see in a place where there was no light at all?"

"Nothing."

"Exactly." Crowley closed his eyes and Kanggenpo materialized out of thin air and again hung from the sheer mountainside. "Kanggenpo is one of a number of spots on the Earth in which empathic abilities are muted. Right now I am sending to you the image that I am getting from Khedrup—he can see it because those shielding the lamasery are permitting him to see it. If I so desired, I could change the image in subtle ways, so you would only see what I passed on."

"But if this place deadens my abilities, how will I learn what you are bringing me here to learn?"

Crowley smiled easily. "I said *muted*, not deadened. Imagine weight training on a world with greater gravity than Earth. You will have to work harder to be able to break through. They will show you how. Kanggenpo is probably the only place on the planet where you can learn what you must know. And the only way you get here is to be led by someone who knows the way."

The taller man settled his sunglasses over his eyes again. "Kanggenpo. You said it means 'ice temple.' If one has to be led here, how was it founded and how did you find it?"

"I think the *khenpo* can better explain the history of Kanggenpo than I." Crowley's gloved left hand strayed to his goatee and stroked it unconsciously. "I got here because I helped foil an assassination attempt on the Dalai Lama in the summer of 1989—the Chinese government was trying to corner the market on stupid repression tactics that year. Word went out and I was brought to Kanggenpo much as you are being brought now."

As their ponies struggled up the last steep section of the trail, the massive bronze gates in the monastery

wall swung inward. Coming around a curve in the trail, Coyote caught his first glimpse of the lamasery's cobbled courtyard and the twin stone lions stretched down a long stairway to form the railings. Through the narrow viewing port the gate made, Coyote saw tantalizing bits and pieces of vast murals painted on the interior walls.

Red-robed monks and their brown-robed students traveled in tiny knots throughout the ancient fortress. While he saw a few individuals that were not the typical black-haired ethnic Tibetans, that surprised Coyote less than another detail he noticed. "No women?"

Crowley shook his head. "No women, which is a bit odd since Gelukpa Buddhism is a tradition built out of the Vajrayana tradition, which is known in the West as Tantric Buddhism. Tantric practices include esoteric sexual rituals and meditations, which outraged many missionaries and right-thinking folks in the West when they heard of it. Once monks in the Geluk tradition have mastered all five disciplines, tantric studies are open to them. Until that time, which will take a minimum of 20 years, they are strictly celibate and abstain from alcohol and narcotics."

"What you've brought me here to study won't take 20 years, will it?"

"That anxious to see your executive assistant again, are you?"

Coyote chuckled lightly. "Better her than Fiddleback, but I don't think either one would wait 20 years for me to complete my coursework here."

"True. No, here you will be schooled in the third and fourth groups of Geluk studies. *Oumah* is the study of the path between extremes and *Sunyata* concerns itself with nonexistence or voidness." Crowley nodded at Khedrup. "He will be studying *Oumah* first, then *Sunyata*, because his goal is to become one with the universe and attain enlightenment. You will study them in reverse because you desire to learn how to flow through the universe."

Their two ponies clip-clopped through the entryway and *rapjungs* labored to close the massive gates behind them. Ahead, Khedrup had already dismounted and another of the novitiates led his riding and pack ponies off. Their guide bowed to the red-robed monk slowly descending the steps, then ran off into the monastery's interior.

Crowley sprang from his saddle as if he'd had more than a half-dozen hours of sleep in the past 36 and bowed to the monk. "*Toshi dili, Lama Mong.*"

The wizened monk smiled serenely and returned the bow. "*Pyag dan-po-la, Mi-ma-yin.*"

Coyote slowly swung down from his saddle, and his legs ached as they accepted his weight again. He nodded respectfully to the old monk, then followed it with a bow as a *ragjung* led his ponies off. "*Nga min* Coyote *yjn*," he offered in the only Tibetan Crowley had taught him.

The monk looked from Coyote to Crowley. "Coyote?" The old man scratched at his bald pate. "*Ha ko ma song, Mi-ma-yin.*"

"*Kyi rkan-jnyis*," Crowley replied with a shrug. "Coyote' is a word he did not understand. I translated for him."

The monk nodded. "But does your friend know you called him a cur?"

"No, he did not." The monk's use of flawless English surprised Coyote. "A coyote is a stepping stone between wolves and dogs."

" *Kyi-can, Mi-ma-yin*, I think, not *kyi rkan-jnyis*. " He smiled at Coyote. "Would you not think of it more as a jackal than a cur?"

"Given the choice, yes, definitely."

Mong nodded solemnly. "Then *Kyi-can* you shall be."

Coyote thought he heard judgment in Mong's voice, but no emotions broke the serenity of the monk's expression. "Thank you, I think."

Crowley let a look of indifference sweep across his face. "Mong is the *khenpo* of Kanggenpo."

Again Coyote bowed to the old monk. Mong returned his bow, then offered him his hand. Coyote took it and found the small man had a surprisingly strong grip. *His hands are calloused as well. He seems to be more than just an ascetic.*

"I hope Kanggenpo will suit your needs."

"As do I, Lama Mong."

Coyote looked around the interior of the lamasery and immediately noted one detail that surprised him: Around the main gate, in 27 little alcoves running up the sides and across the top, red-robed monks sat in the lotus position, chanting softly. In the south wall, Coyote noted the same arrangement, but the gate they surrounded had been carved of stone and could not be moved. To the north, hidden among smaller buildings, he saw one or two monks in place and assumed the rest were there as well. He also assumed there was a gate to the east, but both the north and east walls fit flush into the mountain.

"If I might inquire, why do you have gates that lead nowhere and people watching them?"

"They are *pa-tsab*. They serve as the guardians of Kanggenpo. They are the reason we remain undiscovered." Mong looked toward the stone gate in the south wall. "Twenty-seven at each gate adds up to the sacred number 108. We are warded well no matter which direction enemies might choose to come at us."

"I see."

"You will see even more, Coyote." Crowley clapped him on the shoulder. "I'll be leaving you here in Mong's very capable hands. *O-na gha-le sku bzugs snan, Lama Mong.* "

" *O-na gha-le peb, Mi-ma-yin.*" The old monk bowed to Crowley and smiled at him.

Crowley walked away from both men, heading south. He turned left, as if wanting to mount the stairs, but his image seemed to go two-dimensional. It slipped forward and vanished as if it had passed beyond some sort of invisible curtain. Without a sound, his lagging foot vanished and no evidence remained to suggest he had ever been there at all.

"Mi-ma-yin has changed in body, but not spirit." Mong eyed him up and down, his gaze lingering on the massive silvery pistol on Coyote's hip. "I understand the reverse has happened with you, *Kyi-can.*"

"I suppose, yes, by way of contrast with Crowley, this is true. Does this concern you?"

"Should it?" The monk watched him closely.

"It should concern others, not you." Coyote kept his face neutral. "One thing I wish to know, if I might: Why do you call Crowley 'Mi-ma-yin'?"

"When he first came to us, he had another identity, one of which Crowley was only a part. Mi-ma-yin means 'one who is not human.' It usually refers to ghosts, but in his case . . ." The old monk shrugged, and Coyote understood.

Coyote folded his arms across his chest. "Then teach me what you taught him. The creature I hunt is not human, either."



Sinclair MacNeal smiled in spite of himself as the America West flight attendant handed him his glass of Diet Pepsi. "Are you certain you don't want something stronger, Mr. MacNeal? You look like you've had a rough day, and it's only 8 A.M."

"No and yes." He accepted the glass from her, and their fingers brushed against each other. He quickly read the name embroidered on her apron. "Thank you, Erika. I'm afraid it's not a new day for me, just extra innings from yesterday."

"I'll be back soon to see if you need anything else." She winked at him and continued her service to the first-class cabin of the America West 787.

Sin laid his head back against the thick leather padding of the wide seat and sipped his soda again. *This is insanity for me. I've no reason to go to Japan for a madman.* He set the drink down and started worrying the package of almonds Erika had placed on his tray table. *I've also got no reason to stay in Phoenix.*

His father, Darius MacNeal, had made good on his threat to fire him and evict him from the Build-more corporate citadel. After his trip to the hospital for Coyote, Sin had tried to return to his apartment, but he found himself locked out of the residential levels of the main tower. When he went to complain to security, he was handed a small box of personal items and was told everything else had been paid for by Build-more and, therefore, would remain in the possession of Build-more.

The guard had even gone so far as to try to strip the clothes off his back, but Sin decided that would be going too far. After the paramedics carted the man off, Sin stormed into his father's office and right past his secretary. *She never even made an attempt to stop me. She knew what was coming.*

Inside, he found his father sitting down to drinks with two other men. The first was a tall, slender man who could have benefited from having his hawk-beak nose pared down to normal size and having the scraps used to give him a chin. Sin recognized him as a Build-more employee from the Operations division. *A bean counter. His name is Dodd. Watson Dodd.*

Darius and Dodd dwarfed the third man, yet the small man did not seem to take notice of their size differential. When Sin entered the room, his hands tightened down into fists, then opened again slowly. He snapped his heels together, bowed his blond head and grinned wolfishly. "*Guten abend, Herr MacNeal.*"

"Get bent, you fascist pygmy." Sin waved Dodd and the smaller man away contemptuously. "You both just remembered an urgent meeting—Dodd, your wife's delivering now and you, Heinrich, your Warriors just found another synagogue to vandalize."

"Well, well, has the Prodigal Son returned?" Darius' left hand pressed Dodd down into a chair. Heinrich sat back and sipped his drink. "You should not be ordering my guests about."

"Guests? You do not want them here, Father." Sin's long strides ate up the distance between him and the bar. "You and I are going to have it out, right here, right now."

Darius smoothed his white hair into place at the back of his head, "It will have to wait. I need to brief Mr. Dodd on his duties as my new vice president in charge of security."

"What!" Sin stared so hard at Dodd that the man's chest should have caved in. "That's my job."

"That *was* your job, traitor." Darius' blue eyes burned with energy. "You were fired after your disgraceful conduct two weeks ago. Were it not for company policy offering two weeks' severance to all employees, you'd have been gone that second. You dared presume to order me to cease my financial relationship with the Warriors of the Aryan World Alliance."

Heinrich looked shocked at that little revelation. "You wound me, Sinclair. I thought we were friends."

"I'll wound you worse, you snake. Next time you decide to assassinate someone, why don't you pull the trigger yourself?" He looked at his father. "I just left the hospital where they've got Hal Garrett. He'll recover, but one of the bullets impinged on some nerve. Partial paralysis of his left leg. That's what the money you gave WAWA got you."

Sin glared at Dodd. "When your child's born, be sure to tell him Daddy hires men to gimp good citizens for a living. Make your kid proud."

His father shook his head. "Wait, you must forgive my son. He was too indulged as a child."

"Oh, you're claiming me, now? That's more than you did when I grew up or the last time you fired me." Sin hit a hidden release on the bar, letting a panel swing out. He took a cut-crystal glass from there and filled it with ice. "Your guests don't rate the good crystal, Dad?"

Darius smoldered. "Your mother warped you."

Sin laughed and filled his glass with Jameson's Irish Whisky. "Ah, blame it on Mother again because she named me." He looked at the other two men. "You've met my brothers Harpo, Hypo and Dumbo, haven't you?"

"Alexander, Xerxes and Tiberius. Don't you dare disparage them because they are better sons than you could ever be."

"Invertebrate zombies that worship the cornucopia that walks like a man." Sin took a slug of the whisky and let it burn its way down to his belly. "You've hated me since the start because I dared stand up to you. You can't walk all over me like you do them."

"Because you run away from conflict."

"Ah, the victor writes the history, is that it?" Sin set his glass down on the bar. "I think some minority reports would disagree with you."

"How can you be like this, after all I've done for you?" His father's voice took on an offended tone. "If not for me . . ."

"I might have actually been happy."

"Are we doing to go over Christina again?" Sin's father looked pained. "I told you she was only after my money."

Sin shook his head, then focused on Watson Dodd. "I come back from college with my fiancée, Christina. Dad tells me she's not good enough for me, only a gold digger. He then sends me off to London to deal with a problem in a site there. I'm gone for a month, at the end of which Chrissy breaks off our engagement. And guess why?" He pointed at his father. "She wasn't good enough for me, but she was for my father."

"I just proved she was after my money."

"But did you have to keep proving it for three years?" Sin pounded his right fist against his thigh. "Remember that, Dodd, when my father tells you that your wife is not good enough for you."

Darius laughed lightly. "Are you through?"

"Nope, we're through, Father. You're a bastard, always have been a bastard and always will be a bastard. I *was* going to demand my things, but no more. I want nothing from you."

"And nothing you shall get." Darius pointed imperiously toward the door. "You no longer have a father."

"I haven't had one since conception, so nothing's new there."

"Run, run the way you always do."

"I'm leaving, but not because that's what you command me to do." Sin tossed down the rest of the whisky. "I'm going because I'll be beyond your reach. I know, in the long run, that will bug you worse than having me be under your thumb here."

Sin hammered his fist down into the armrest. How could I have been so stupid. He orchestrated that confrontation. He knew what I'd do. I shouldn't have given him the satisfaction.

Erika slid into the open seat beside him. "Mind if I catch my breath?"

Sin shook his head. "I welcome the company. Are you based in Phoenix or Tokyo?"

"Phoenix, but I have two weeks in Tokyo after this run." She tucked her blonde hair behind her left ear.

"Business or pleasure in Japan for you, Mr. MacNeal?"

"Sinclair. I don't honestly know. New job, so I hope a bit of both."

She patted him on the knee. "I hope so, too." She glanced at her watch, then tapped the flat LCD screen built into the seat in front of him. "Are you going to watch the movie? It won a number of awards."

"I know he's supposed to be the best since Olivier or Gibson, but I can't see Macaulay Caulkin as Henry V. I may just get some sleep."

A tone sounded from back in the main cabin. "Well, sleep tight. I'll wake you before we land. Sweet dreams."

Erika awakened Sin as the jet began its descent into Narita. The pilot brought the plane in smooth and level, touching down with only the slightest bump when the gear hit the ground. Sin looked out through the rain-streaked windows at the gray airport. The vision of a future nightmare that had prompted environmentalists to protest the opening of the airport back in the 1970s had come true. The creeping concrete plague had spread out from the airport and stretched as far as he could see.

Sin completed the immigration forms Erika passed out. He noted he was staying at the New Palace Hotel. He peeled the barcoded stickers off his ticket sleeve and affixed them to the Customs portion of the form. Erika collected it along with all the others from first class, then led those privileged passengers out through the forward bulkhead. They filed down a short corridor to a pleasant, if antiseptic, waiting room.

Erika handed the forms to a balding Japanese man in a blue and gray uniform, then headed back to the plane. "It was nice to meet you, Sinclair. Perhaps I'll see you in Tokyo ."

"That would be a most welcome surprise." He reached out and took her hand.

She folded him into a hug and whispered, "I put your form on top, so you should get through first."

He gave her a little extra squeeze to let her know he appreciated her effort, then reluctantly let her go. He found himself a seat in the waiting area and almost instantly regretted his choice. A wide-hipped matron with a fox-fur muffler sat down next to him and wedged her doggie-carryall between them. The Sharpei/Lhasa apso mix in the cage looked like a mountain of shag carpet with eyes. The woman crooned at the dog in low tones which could have been English, except for the -izzie, -uggams and -ookums suffixes.

"Mr. Sinclair MacNeal?" the immigration man called out.

Sin stood and crossed to the inspection station. He presented the ID card Coyote had gotten for him and saw the immigration official take special notice of it. "*Konnichi-wa.*"

The man looked unimpressed with Sin's Japanese. "How are you today?" he asked amid stamping various forms.

"Anmari."

"Just okay? Well, it is a long flight, isn't it?"

"Hai."

"Mr. MacNeal, you need not speak Japanese to me. I am fully conversant in your tongue." The older man's gaze flickered toward a screen after he ran Sin's ID through the reader. He frowned, punched a button, then ran it through again.

"Do-shitan-dayo?"

"Nothing is wrong, Mr. MacNeal. I thought I had something here, but it appears not." The man hit Sin's immigration form with one final stamp. "Your luggage will be sent directly to the New Palace Hotel. Please enjoy your stay in Japan."

"*Domo arigato.*" Sin took his ID back from the immigration officer and passed through a little hallway and out a door to the main international concourse. He glanced at the overhead signs and started the long trek to the rail terminal to catch a train into Tokyo.

Coyote is good. Somehow he managed to get the security alert on my identity reversed or canceled. He has influence here in Japan, which scores more points for him. Sin shook his head. When he'd left Japan three years before he'd done so under his own steam, but only just barely. In fact, until the jet had gotten out of Stinger missile range of the island, he wasn't willing to bet he was going to make it. Since that time, visitors had mentioned how he was considered *persona non grata* in the land of the Rising Sun.

Slipping into the thick line of people heading toward the train station, Sin concentrated on letting their voices and the cadence of their words bring him back to the time before he left. After his father had stolen Christina, Sin had left the United States to work in Japan. Hired on as a security consultant, which initially meant he was to escort visitors from the US and keep them out of trouble, he rose up through the ranks at Raibyoin Corp fairly swiftly. His no-nonsense attitude about trouble, as well as his ability to act tough or use a gun, meant a lot in Japan.

Out of the corner of his eye, Sin saw an improbably large Japanese man in a dark blazer move off a stool at a noodle stand. The man wore a pair of dark sunglasses and was clearly attempting to project an air of menace. Sin found him almost laughable, but the man moved into the stream of traffic in an effort to cut him off.

I don't like this at all. Sin feigned moving deeper away from the behemoth, then cut for the noodle shop itself. The large man clawed his way back through the crowd to get at Sin, but by that time Sin had already passed beyond the counter and into the kitchen. The help in the back started shouting at him, but he smiled and repeated *sumimasen* to each of them, then he headed toward the back door.

This is too easy. They've anticipated me. Sin turned the knob on the rear door and let the latch slip free. Then, leaning back, he kicked the door open as hard as he could. Cutting through the doorway low, he arced a right fist into the belly of the man on his left. The man doubled over, so Sin straightened him with a knee to the face then backhanded him down the security hallway that linked the various airport shops.

Retreating one step, he put his back to the far wall and watched the door lethargically swing shut again. The man who had been standing behind it clearly had not expected it to open so swiftly. The doorknob had caught him in the groin, and he slowly sagged to the floor.

Sin started to laugh aloud when another man slowly applauded from farther down the corridor. Sin looked at him, then nodded. "*Konnichi-wa, Takagi Kazuo-san.*"

" *Konnichi-wa, Sinklaru-san.* It is good to see you again, my friend." The stocky young Japanese man bowed to Sin, then shook his hand. "It has been three years, has it not?"

" *Hai.*" Sin smiled and looked at the man's hands. "I see your oyabun still hasn't got any of your fingers in a jar."

Kazuo shrugged. "Uncle Takeshi sees too much of himself in me, I think. Now I see you've not lost any of your old piss 'n' vinegar."

Sin shrugged appropriately. "They weren't bad, but I was looking for, and therefore reacting to, another threat level."

"Ah, your friend Nagashita. Yes, well, you will love this: After he missed you when you left Japan, he was elevated to colonel and put in charge of the Internal Defense Cadre!" Kazuo clapped his hands. "Now that pit bull is at the emperor's beck and call—and largely out of our hair."

"To paraphrase John Paul Jones, give me another run at old Yamashiro Nagashita, and I could make him emperor." Sin draped his arm around his Yakuza friend's shoulders. "Give me a lift to my hotel, old friend. I smuggled two bottles of Glenfiddich out of Phoenix. One can be for your uncle, but the other we'll use to toast the good fortune of the IDC."

"And then you will tell me why you have returned?"

"That I will, Kazuo, because the only way I will do what has to be done is with your help."



Rajani knew as she stared down at her sleeping body, that she was dreaming.

The snake lay coiled beside Rajani, using her body as a shield between itself and Rex. Mickey had curled himself up into a ball with Rex curving his body to fit along Mickey's spine. Dorothy lay between Rajani and Mickey with her fingers tangled in her brother's dark hair. At their feet, a bed of coals glowed from within a circle of stones.

Above them, dark clouds hid the wide, starry bowl of the sky. Earlier in the day, when their last ride left them off outside Ash Fork, the sky had been blue. The thought of camping out in what had been the Prescott National Forest seemed like a pleasant adventure. The arrival of the midsummer monsoon clouds as the day cooled made Rajani reassess her judgment, but the kids did not seem to mind.

Even as she studied the wooded landscape around her, it began to shift. A putrid green light bled into the clouds and all the pine trees picked up the malevolent glow. Red streamers shot through the clouds and the rusty pine needles began to pulsate as if they were metal and being heated. Unconsciously, Rajani raised her hands to pull in the heat she knew should have been present, but instead felt herself being drained of warmth and vitality.

The landscape began to blur into a green-red maelstrom. The colors thickened, flooding over her and her companions. The bloody red ground curved up and the green sky down to capture her in a sphere.

Where the two bowls met, little eddies swirled the colors together, locking the bowls together with a black line.

What is this? She reached her hands out, and even though they did not seem to touch the inside of the sphere, she felt resistance at the black line. She tried to twirl her fingers in the direction opposite the swirls that had locked things down, but she could not get the line to separate again. *I'm trapped.*

Above her, the green dome began to boil. As she looked up, a crystalline lattice with a curiously web-like design worked into it drilled down into the sphere. It glowed rhythmically with power. Needle-nosed and possessing a slender body, it slid into the sphere and left a gaping hole behind it. Rajani began to will herself toward the opening, but the crystal swerved toward her and sliced across the surface of her right thigh.

She cried out in pain, but quickly recognized the agony as being well beyond physical. She broke through the wall of pain and for a second found herself eavesdropping on the thoughts of Fiddleback. *No match!* blasted into her brain, then the crystal had passed on and took the pain with it.

Rajani felt herself drawn along behind the crystal auger like a swimmer caught in the wake of a ship. Her first impulse was to resist it, but then it swooped down toward Dorothy and her brother. She let herself be pulled after it and reached out with her left hand to touch the aft end of the pulsing gray crystal.

Again the pain hit her, but she steeled herself against it. « *No match!* » She shot into the matrix as it plunged in at the children. She felt the searching drone check itself and saw a tantalizingly brief glimpse of the search target. *Not Jaeger/Coyote!* the drone concluded and began to spin furiously.

Rajani withdrew her hand, but let herself remain in position to draft off the crystal construct, it whirled through the sphere and broke out through the other side. The globe that had been her reality exploded like a balloon shot through with a bullet and she burst out through into a realm of darkness and twinkling starlight.

Looking out, she saw other lights dip and dive through the dark. They shot in at glowing lights like moths attacking flames, and she realized these mobile lights were other searcher drones akin to the one she followed. *They are searching for Jaeger/Coyote. Is it safe to assume he knows of Fiddleback's defeat?*

"Safe assumption, but a dangerous game you play here."

Rajani felt a strong, firm hand on her right arm. She glanced down as the hand jerked her around and noticed a gold ring of a curious design on the ring finger of an utterly black hand. « *Is it you they seek?* » She sent, then she realized the human silhouette was that of a man. "Who are you?"

The man jerked her toward him, yanking her free of the crystalline probe. "What were you doing? Are you mad?"

"I don't understand."

"Look at yourself!"

She did so and realized why his voice carried as much alarm in it as it did. A golden nimbus surrounded her. The gold lines running from the backs of her fingers up along her arms and shoulders radiated out through the fabric of the flight jacket she wore. Assuming for a moment that every light in the sky was

another person, they were candles in comparison to her sun.

Except him. He radiates nothing.

"The drones are hunting Coyote but, even so, I am not anxious to make myself a target."

Rajani nodded sharply, then concentrated. She brought her mental defenses into play, neatly snuffing the glow surrounding her. "Who are you? What are you?"

Again the man-thing ignored her questions. "You have to leave here. Your trick to deflect the hunter away from the child worked because the creatures monitoring these devices are slow and stupid. Unfortunately, your display may have alerted others. You must return and protect the child."

« *Who are you?* » She sent such vehemence that a tremor shook the man holding her. A golden bolt of energy seemed to emerge from her forehead and punch through his chest. His eyes and nostrils lit with goldfire, then black again subsumed it. He jerked back, releasing her, and held his head in his hands. In that confusing moment she caught *wrath* and *wraith* from him, but nothing that really answered her question.

"You are very good, but out of control. Look!" He pointed off into the sky and she saw a dozen of the probes orienting themselves on the both of them.

"I am sorry . . ."

"Save it. Protect the child; he is in danger." The shadow man pointed down toward the glowing circle of light below them, and Rajani saw a smaller triangle of red lights moving in toward it. "You deal with that problem and I will take care of the probes. Go, now!"

Rajani pointed her toes and raised her arms. She slipped down through the darkness as if it were a greased tunnel and arrived at her destination far more swiftly than she could have hoped. Above her she saw a silver-blue light outline the man, then it metamorphosed into a glowing silver behemoth that smashed two of the probes together into blazing dust.

Rajani felt a wrenching sense of chaos as she touched and reentered her body. She forced it awake, snapping her eyes open. She rolled over to her right and touched Dorothy's leg. "Wake up, Dorothy, wake up."

"What?" Dorothy brushed blonde hair from her face. "Geez, what happened to you?"

Rajani felt a cold stickiness on her right leg. She looked down and saw a dark splotch on the right thigh where the crystal had touched her. *I'm bleeding*. She pressed her hand to the wound and black blood oozed up between her fingers. "It's nothing, Dorothy. Get Mickey up. We have to move out."

"Aaha?" Mickey asked as he rubbed sleep from his eyes.

Rex stretched, then sat and scratched himself. Suddenly his head came up and with it came the fur on his spine. A low growl rumbled from his throat, then he looked over at Rajani and stood. From the dog she got a sense of duty tinged with growing fear as she tossed some sticks on the coals. Rex looked back out into the shadows surrounding the campsite and barked once.

The yipped howls of a dozen canine throats answered him. Mickey reached out to Rex, but the dog

moved beyond his grasp to position himself between the boy and the threat. Likewise, Rajani moved forward while Dorothy picked up a big stick. Alone, Mickey clutched his blanket and huddled down to make himself a small target.

He's small physically, but his fear is immense! Sheer terror radiated out of the boy, and Rajani renewed the defenses she had erected earlier. She structured them to let low levels of emotion through, but to cut her off in case of a huge emotional outburst. *I cannot afford to be blinded.*

"Hush, Mickey." Dorothy grasped the knotted pine branch in both hands. "They're coming, Rajani."

Behind her the kindling caught and the fire flared to life.

Rajani saw it reflected in a galaxy of eyes barely three feet off the ground. As she watched, however, one set drifted up and forward. A lupine head skylined itself and, as the creature moved in toward the circle of light, Rajani saw him complete the transformation from a wolf to a ruddy-furred wolfman.

"Grrrrreeetings," the creature growled seductively, infusing the word with insincerity. He eyed Rajani up and down, then Dorothy. Only on Mickey did his gaze linger, and Rajani felt pleasure rippling from the wolfman so strongly that it almost brought a smile to her face.

Forcing his emotions aside, Rajani snarled. "Leave here. There is nothing here for you."

"Perhaps you are not for me, nor she, but he is a tender and tasty little morsel." The wolfman squatted down and barked sharply at Mickey, making the boy jump. "Oh, yes!"

Mickey's wave of fear crested over Rajani, then she felt an equally sharp jolt of pleasure from the wolfman. With a bitter, coppery taste in her mouth, she realized the wolfman hungered for Mickey's terror, lusted after it as Andy had lusted after her.

"If you dare touch him . . ." she began. Beyond him, backing him, a dozen dogs and coyotes slunk forward. One, a huge Alsatian, came forward more boldly and bared his fangs at Rex. The Alsatian started to growl and set itself to lunge, but the wolfman turned and snarled at the Alsatian, forcing it to back off.

Mickey's fear almost overrode the exchange between wolfman and Alsatian. In it, Rajani sensed the Alsatian's resentment at the wolfman's domination of what had been his pack. In return, the wolfman radiated invincibility and contempt for the Alsatian. The pack shifted uneasily, as if to deny they ever objected to the wolfman's leadership, and the Alsatian backed away from the emotional fury projected by the wolfman.

The wolfman turned and studied Rajani. He sniffed the air, but the slight breeze curled the smoke's fire around her like a cloak. He sneezed once, then nodded. "You are most interesting prey, but it is not you that I want." He pointed at Mickey with a clawed finger, then gestured with it to command the boy forward.

Mickey buried his head in the blanket, and Rajani felt his terror rip through her like a chain saw. The wolfman's eyes glazed over almost orgasmically, and he howled in delight. Discipline wavered among his pack, then he snarled and the various curs backed away. The Alsatian moved the least and turned to face the wolfman directly.

His control over them is not complete. Dropping to one knee, she reached back with her right hand

and let the rattler slither forward into it. The wolfman's eyes followed the snake's movement, then he looked up and she made eye contact. « *I will not let you have the boy.* »

«I give you no choice, alien.»

"Dorothy, scream!"

Though she had put on a brave front, Dorothy let all her fear out through her scream. The wolfman oriented on her, then back to Mickey when his sister's screams spiked his terror higher than ever. The wolfman grinned sloppily and opened himself wide to the emotional feast the two human children provided him.

Mickey's fear hammered Rajani, but she fought against it. Instead of letting her shield slide up to protect her, she let her own fear and anguish pour out. She felt hormones course through her body, giving her more physical energy that she translated into mental power. Reshaping and guiding Mickey's fright, she forged it into a weapon.

The wolfman soaked up the emotional storm like a plant basking in sunlight. Rajani took her share of that same energy and forced it back into itself. She trapped and concentrated it, like light trapped in a laser tube. She squeezed it tighter and tighter, letting the pressure build. Her hands balled into fists, and her teeth ground together. Finally, when she could hold it no more, she directed the fear at the wolfman and gave him everything.

Open as he was, the wolfman had no time to muster his defenses. As had happened with the shadow man, the golden bolt Rajani projected pierced him. Unlike the shadow man, however, it did more than show itself in his eyes and nostrils. It jetted like dragonfire from every orifice of his body. It seeped out over his skin like sweat and poured out of his ears and nose like blood. His mouth opened, but gold energy, not words, vomited forth.

In a heartbeat, the wolfman went from hunger to satiation, then beyond. Brimming with fear, he could not metabolize it all. It covered him, permeated him and became him. Panic seized and twisted him, stunning his mind and crushing his psyche. Locked in the throes of a psychic meltdown, he made a last-ditch effort to save himself. Relinquishing his grasp on the energy, he vented as much as he could into the area.

The pack instantly sensed his terror and attacked. Leaping, yipping canine forms closed on him. A brindle pit bull sank its teeth into the wolfman's calf while a Doberman pinscher dove at his throat and a terrier worried his left ankle. The wolfman tried to bat the Doberman aside, but a rottweiler took a bite out of his left hamstring, and he went down. Before he could yell, the snarling canine mass buried him.

The Alsatian had hung back, but started forward when the wolfman lost his footing. But before he could join the melee, Rex hit him from the flank and locked his white teeth on the Alsatian's throat. They rolled over and over out into the shadows to be quickly eclipsed by the bloody and frenzied pack.

"Move, fast!" Rajani pointed back away from the yellow eyes and reddened teeth of the roiling dogfight.

"Eh!" shouted Mickey as he stood.

"Rex will find us, Mickey. Move!" Dorothy grabbed Mickey's hand and started sprinting on through the thin woods.

Rajani took one look back at the pack, then followed the children. Her right leg throbbed with pain, but

seemed to be functional. Tracking the kids more by emotion than sight or sound, she caught up with them quickly and led the way down a steep hill. Using her night vision to pick out deer trails, she got them safely away from their old campsite.

Dorothy leaned heavily on a tree. "Wait, gotta catch my breath." She gulped down air. "That was a luper, wasn't it?"

Rajani shook her head. "A luper?"

"A werewolf, a loup-garou." Dorothy bent over and breathed in through her nose. "My dad's girlfriend was Cajun. She told us stories."

"Ah oaries."

"Yes, Mickey, bad stories." Dorothy looked up at her. "That was one, wasn't it?"

"I don't know." Werewolves? There are no such things, or were none when I went into stasis. Were my parents wrong? Was Dr. Chandra mistaken? Have things changed so much in such little time?

Rajani turned and peered back along their backtrail. She saw movement through the brush, then heard something. Mickey smiled and pointed. "Eheze!"

"C'mere, Rex!" Dorothy shouted.

Mickey clapped his hands and Rajani smiled. She watched the dog descend the hill. "Aside from the limp, Rex looks okay."

She reached out with her mind to welcome Rex, but she sensed nothing from him. As the canine approached them, the dog's form shifted and bloated, it thickened and widened, growing taller as it reared up on its hind legs. Torn and bleeding, dragging its left leg behind it, the creature they had taken to be Rex transformed itself into the luper they had left behind.

"Almost worked . . . your trick. I killed them." He clutched his right hand to his stomach, and Rajani saw at least two of his fingers had been gnawed off. "Even your Rex." He swallowed hard and looked at her. "Share the boy with me. Please."

"No. Go away."

The luper grimaced painfully. "I asked. Now I demand. I *need* him. Give him to me."

"No!" Rajani slowly crouched and pushed Mickey behind her. « *I will not surrender him to you.* »

«You cannot stand against me!» The wolfman's lower jaw dropped open in a lupine grin. «We should have dominion over these creatures. If I must destroy you first to get it, I will.»

«Your bark does not frighten me.»

«Then perhaps my bite will!»

The wolfman looked at her, and again they made eye contact. Rajani began to push more fear out at him, but hot, raw, bestial emotions slammed back down the link. Gore-drenched tableaux raped her

mind as she saw the wolfman lead his pack through massacres in outlying towns. Transferred to her was the obscene delight he took in slaking his thirst with bright, arterial blood. The victim's horror pulsed out stronger and stronger as his heart weakened and he knew he was dying, but feared he would not die fast enough.

Rajani snapped her head to the left and felt her hair veil half her face. She brought her defenses up, but they merely filtered the wolfman's blood-spattered fantasies.

Instead of seeing them in any organized fashion, things became a blended mixture of corpses bobbing in bloody pools, with terror rising from them like scarlet steam.

Rajani felt the wolfman probing her mind, looking for her fears so they could be woven into his sick fantasies, but she deflected him. She tried to turn his thoughts back on him, but his physical weakness only seemed to strengthen him mentally. Sensing her resistance, he poured the power on and a blood-red world congealed around her. She felt locked in as the blood dried to a deep maroon, then became clear so she could watch the wolfman stalk toward Mickey.

« *You are done.* » The wolfman, to her eyes, blazed with an unholy red light. « *I am Invincible!* »

Then, suddenly, the wolfman jerked up to his full height. Rajani saw something waver in and out of focus as she fought to see empathically. *Concentrate. Focus.* She locked her jaw and fed despair into anger and hope. *What is happening?*

The scene cleared, and she saw it. Glowing with a bright silver light, one of the search drones burrowed its way through the werewolf's back, it drilled its way in, going almost all the way out of its chest, then it reversed direction and withdrew. It shot straight up into the sky, and she heard laughter echo from everywhere at the same time.

« *I love it when they make themselves into such wonderful targets.* » Rajani felt the rictus holding her face as a shadow hand touched her on the shoulder. « *Make the child safe.* »

The world shifted abruptly, and Rajani found herself staring at the crumpled wolfman. Mickey looked at it, then her, and then waved his hand.

"Yes, Mickey, it went bye-bye." Dorothy hugged her little brother, then stared at Rajani. "What happened? He stared at you and you stopped moving. Then he clutches his stomach and starts bleeding from the mouth and nose. What happened?"

"Kishal." Mickey pointed at the body. "Kishal."

"Crystal, Mickey?" Dorothy looked very confused. "What is he talking about?"

Rajani shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe he saw something. I think the beast had some internal injuries from the fight with his pack. Running after us did him in. He was dead, but didn't even notice it." As she saw Dorothy's face hardening, she added quickly, "I've seen that sort of thing happen in Eclipse."

Dorothy shook her head slightly, then relented. "Maybe, but I don't know."

"It doesn't matter, Dorothy. We'll be safe for the rest of tonight. Then, tomorrow or the next day, we can be in Flagstaff and reunite you with your father." *Then you'll be safe, and I can go to Phoenix and find this Coyote.*



Sweat matting the dark hair on his chest, Coyote finished his hundredth sit-up and smiled as Mong appeared in the doorway of his cell. He uncrossed his hands from his chest and levered himself to his feet. Drawing his heels together, he bowed to the red-robed monk. "Good morning, Lama Mong."

Mong studied him for a moment, and Coyote found the expression on the elderly man's face unfathomable. The monk nodded, then smiled. "I am pleased to see you have recovered from travel lethargy. You have slept much and deeply since you arrived here."

Coyote used a bed sheet to wipe the sweat from his face. "I must confess, I think it was more than just jet lag. The last month has been rather stressful for me. I did not realize it until I lay down to sleep that first night, but there had been a background level of pressure on me throughout that time. It felt as though I was on a leash and constantly struggling against it. Here I feel none of that, and the exhaustion caught up with me."

The monk pointed to the black silk robe that matched the pants Coyote already had pulled on. "Finish dressing, and I will lead you on a tour here. There is much for you to learn."

The silk felt cold at first, but it warmed quickly as he belted it in place with a sash. "How long will it take you to teach me what I need to know?"

Mong shrugged as he led the way into a dimly lit, narrow corridor. "I do not know. The Dark Lords do not inform us of their training techniques or curriculum."

Coyote nodded bitterly. "And I have no knowledge of it."

"Conscious knowledge, you mean," Mong mused. "We shall see what skills you possess and what you must learn."

As the monk guided him through the lamasery, its antiquity impressed him. Of his life he knew little beyond what he had discovered in the past month. While Jytte Ravel had made available to him the files about his early life, much of the things he learned from them were rumors and probably exaggerated beyond reality anyway. In contrast, the building had a strength and history that he hungered for.

He let his fingertips brush along the rough-hewn wall, reveling in the gritty reality of the stones. *This place will be a cocoon for me.* Remembering how Fiddleback had called him a pet and treated him like something subhuman stoked his desire to destroy his former master. *Here I will complete my chrysalis. I will become my own master. I will turn what you gave me into what will destroy you.*

The lama paused beside a doorway and waved Coyote on through it. "This is our armory and training center."

Coyote slowly descended the blocky stone steps. Three dozen stone pillars supported the roof, and Coyote guessed the whole training complex sat directly below the main temple. The pillars broke the room down into small 10 x 10-foot training areas, with longer strips in the outer perimeter. Thick mats,

darkened by the dirt of thousands of feet, covered most of the floor and the soot from hanging butter-fat lamps blackened the ceiling.

Two dozen brown-robed *rapjungs* worked through a series of *katas*. They advanced, punched, blocked and kicked in unison, mirroring their instructor's display. Many of the young men wore broad smiles, as if what they were doing was play, but a select few looked serene and peaceful even as they fought against shadows.

Mong descended the long staircase behind Coyote. "Awareness of self and the fragility of the physical body are important in our studies. All too often, the concept of self one has involves thought or a list of attributes. Only through a conscious integration of mind and body, to the point where the union becomes automatic and unconscious, is it possible to begin down the path of enlightenment."

The tall man nodded and pointed to a wall upon which hung a full array of weapons. "And knowledge of these reinforces knowledge of life's fragility?"

"That, and it confirms more about mankind." Mong gestured broadly, taking in all the weapons at once. "Consider, if you will, that man's earliest tools were rocks and sticks. Every weapon, every tool is, in effect, descended from those very humble beginnings. Things become vastly more complex as man refines his tools over and over again. Man is a toolmaker, and acknowledgment of that fact is crucial to understanding mankind."

Coyote pulled a short weapon from the wall with his left hand. The blade ran perpendicular to the haft as with an ax, but was more slender as befitting a dagger with a single interior edge. From the point where the blade had been bolted to the shaft, a weighted length of metal chain hung down. With his right hand he grasped the chain about a foot from the weight and whirled it around. "*Kusari-gama*, Japanese in origin, favored by ninja. Yadama Shinryukan dispatched many a samurai with one of these before Araki Mataemon tricked him into fighting in a bamboo grove."

"And what is the sickle part but a stick, and the weight but a rock?"

Coyote acknowledged the monk's comment with a nod, then thought for a moment. "Your point is well made, but are you not stretching it to suggest all tools, all machines, come from sticks and stones? What of radios and cars?"

The monk smiled. "Modern devices do make defending my thesis more difficult. Bear in mind that mankind has always struggled against nature and the circumstances that would kill him. Sticks and stones allowed him to translate superior mental power into superior physical power. By bashing two sticks together, for example, he could alert other hunters in his band to potential prey. In doing this he would effectively double or triple his own strength by augmenting it with others, it may be stretching things to suggest a radio is merely two sticks that can be heard over vast distances, but the core of the reality is the same."

"That reality being that man is a toolmaker and through his tools has learned to survive." Coyote increased the speed of the spinning weight, then let the chain play out through his fingers. The diamond-shaped steel weight arced out and struck a spark from one of the pillars, then Coyote pitched the weight's rotational plane sharply upward. The weight reached the peak of the arc, then looped back down and he caught it in his right hand.

"I've used this before."

"Apparently." The monk pointed to other weapons on the wall. "What of the others, Kyi-can?"

"All of them?" He hung the *kusari-gama* back in its place on the wall. "Spears, *assagai* , *yari* , *naginata* , a reproduction of a Roman pilum, an Inuit walrus spear and even a boar spear. The swords: claymore, rapier, *daito* , *katana* , *wakizashi* , shamsheer, scimitar, broadsword and obsidian-edged Aztec war club."

As he looked at each weapon, he knew how it would feel in his hands. He knew its weight and its limitations. He knew what sort of damage it would do, how best to employ it in attacks and how to defend against it. *If I was Fiddleback's pet, then he was training me to be a fighting pet. Knowledge of these things is more than I would need to know to be an assassin.*

"I know them all, lama. I know these and very much more." Coyote shook his head grimly, "It would appear that much of your work has already been done."

"Perhaps, Kyi-can, perhaps." The monk headed back up the stairs. "Fiddleback constructed you well."

"You mean *trained* ."

"I *meant* constructed."

"What?" Coyote hurried up the stairs after the smaller man. " *Constructedme?*"

Mong nodded as he headed down a corridor with a sunlight opening at the end. "Throughout the 1970s, '80s and '90s, women claimed they had been kidnapped and forced to conceive children. They said their abductors were aliens or satanic cultists who were interested in breeding hybrids or innocent babies for sacrifice. Skeptics pointed out that there was no physical evidence of these crimes and, in many cases, something as simple as psychoactively induced hypnotic suggestions were employed by their kidnappers to create this belief on the part of the victims. In fact, women were often chosen who had a history of mental problems and genetic defects specifically because no one would believe aliens had been stupid enough to select them for breeding programs."

"Why would someone go to all the trouble of faking such horrible stories?" Coyote frowned. "And what has this to do with me?"

"Camouflage, Kyi-can." Mong stepped out into the lamasery courtyard to the right of the long stairway. "Amid so many people claiming truth where there was clearly falsehood, no one would listen to those who *had* been kidnapped. There *were* women who were taken and held in thrall to carry a child to term. There *were* men who were targeted, who had sperm samples taken from them, but were unable to tell their tales to anyone who would believe them."

"You know who my parents were?"

The monk shook his head as he walked around and mounted the steps. "I do not, though you find it obvious that your parents were excellent physical specimens, with superior intellects and imaginations. Athletic, both of them, to be sure. Perhaps one was a chess champion or a wizard at computer programming or destined for a Nobel in physics. The other, I should think, would have had a creative side—indulging in painting or poetry."

Taking the steps two at a time, Coyote caught up with Mong. "The athletics connection is logical. I assume the creativity is because that is a link into empathy?"

"Very good." Mong pressed his hand along the flank of the stone lion balustrade as he worked his way up the stairs. "Your training would have maximized your potential in physical actions, and your creativity would have been indulged in other ways. No doubt your master would have wanted you to learn what we will teach you, but you would have received the training as a gift from him, not something you earn so that it belongs to you."

"So I would define myself in relationship to him." *Pet and master.*

"Yes." The monk reached the flat foyer of the temple and pointed toward the interior beyond two open bronze doors. "This is the *Lhakang*, the main hall in which Buddha is housed, it is used for prayer and meditation. You are being housed in the *Dukhang* along with all the other monks. Beneath the *Lhakang* is the *Gonkhang*, which is reserved for our guardian, the Yidam. It is sacred and private, and I trust you will respect that by not attempting to enter it."

"As you wish, lama." Coyote stepped forward and looked into the *Lhakang*. Up front he saw an altar, in front of which a number of beaten-gold bowls had been arrayed at the feet of the seated figure of Buddha. At least one looked to be full of rice and another with flowers. Flanking the main statue he saw smaller deities represented along with bodhisattvas, saints and monks. Instructional murals filled the walls between the pillars supporting the ceiling. A number of monks and their novices sat on the stone floor, their meditative murmurs filling the cavernous room with a low hum.

"In bringing me here, Crowley said you would instruct me in *Sunyata* and *Oumah*. He noted my instruction would be in that order, which is the reverse in which you normally provide instruction." Coyote folded his arms across his chest. "Having seen what Crowley can do—for example, the manner in which he left here—I know this ability to slip between worlds is powerful. I would gather, however, given how you train people here normally, learning this ability is not the focus of your teaching."

"It is a way station." Mong turned to face out into the lamasery courtyard. "The people who come here wish to become enlightened. They wish to understand how all reality is one. They are, if you will, interested in the tree as a whole. The ability to leap from leaf to leaf is a minor sideline."

"Yet one that you find very useful."

Mong stared at him. "Useful?"

"I should have said 'vital.'" Coyote gave the monk a tightly controlled smile. "You have a community here of over 500 individuals, yet you have no fields under cultivation. On the trip up here I saw little evidence of the sort of caravan you would need to keep this place supplied. I also noticed, when I woke up yesterday to eat what a *rapjung* brought to me, that the fruit that looked like an orange was segmented differently than oranges I've had before."

Mong shrugged. "You and Mi-ma-yin notice the segmentation problem. Most of our monks just noticed they do not have 'Sunkist' stamped on them."

"So, you send *getsuls* and *gelongs* out to forage amongst the various realities?"

"Since all reality is one, accepting nourishment from another dimension is a blessing." The monk folded his arms into the sleeves of his robe. "I think there is one more thing you should see before we begin your formal lessons. Follow me, please."

Mong headed off on the long circuit around the outside of the *Lhakang* . Off to his right, Coyote saw the northern gate in the lamasery wall. Aside from its having carved stone doors that could not possibly ever move, it looked exactly like the western gate through which he had entered Kanggenpo. The 27 monks seated in the prayer alcoves surrounding it were deep in their meditations.

Coyote came around to the rear of the *Lhakang* a step behind Mong. He stopped short as the monk pointed to it. "You entered through the west and will depart through the east."

The gate appeared similar to the others in all its elements, but they had been rearranged and changed to make that gate seem threatening. *It is almost malignant and hateful.* A stone causeway connected it to the *Lhakang* level of the main temple, placing it 40 feet above the courtyard level served by the other three gates. As with the others, 27 monks guarded it, but they were armed with weapons and wore armor. The two sets of nine in the vertical alcoves on either flank carried swords, spears and bows and arrows, with their armor of traditional Tibetan design. The monks in the horizontal row capping the gate had old AKM and G3 assault rifles slung over their shoulders and two had LAW rockets leaning against the alcove walls.

The gateway they surrounded led directly into the mountainside, and their alcoves had been carved into the mountain's hide. Seeing no doors, Coyote thought the gateway was just the entrance to a huge, dark cavern. Then he caught sight of what had to be the doors, but he was uncertain because they seemed insubstantial and ethereal. Intricately worked with arcane designs, they slowly solidified into a ghostly gray plasm, then began to fade again before they reached opacity.

Opposite the gateway, painted tall and menacing on the rear of the *Lhakang* , a black-skinned giant with four arms snarled at the gateway. Bright white tusks thrust out and up from his lower jaw, and his eyes looked filled with blood. His upper two hands held lightning bolts, the lower left a sword and the lower right a mace. Around his neck hung a string of skulls, and Coyote noticed that a number of them were not of terrestrial origin.

Coyote looked from the gateway to the picture and back. "I have the feeling I'm not intended to understand this."

Mong nodded solemnly. "The painting is of our Yidam. He is called *Vajrabhairava* , and he protects us from all harmful creatures. The monks warding our gates chant his name again and again and again to keep us safe."

He nodded toward the east and the heart of the mountain. "The gate is the only way you will leave here. If you have learned enough that you can travel through it to the outside world, you will have command of the skills you have come here to learn."

"And if I don't?"

Mong's expression darkened. "Pray you do. Being reborn into this world is not something I would wish on even the most malignant Dark Lord."



Putter resting on his shoulder, Sinclair MacNeal waited for the Proteus green to reshape itself into a clone of the 17th hole at the Tournament of Players Club in Scottsdale. The machinery beneath the AstroTurf carpet pulled the left edge in until it achieved a perfect kidney shape. Pistons rose and fell to provide the rolling terrain and the gentle hump in the middle of the green. At the farthest possible point of the green, a dark hole opened up and a man placed a pin and flag in it.

Takeshi Takagi tugged at the wrist of his golfing glove. "I selected this last hole in honor of your visit, Sinclair."

"I am honored, oyabun." Sinclair squatted down as his 'caddy' moved his ball from the fairway simulator and spotted it on the green at the end of the kidney farthest from the pin. *You old fox, you did this because you know I blew this hole in the Build-more Pro-Am three months ago.* Had there been no hump through the middle of the kidney, he would have rolled his putt up and around the lip and just tried to get it near the cup. He'd par the hole, but that would leave him one stroke ahead of Takeshi and Kazuo. Unfortunately, he knew from recent and painful experience, hitting the ball hard enough to get it over the hump would also roll it right off the green.

The other two caddies—also Yakuza soldiers who looked uneasy in short-sleeved jumpsuits and carrying huge golf bags—placed the other balls on the green. Kazuo had not tried to play the hole safe and was rewarded with a five-foot putt on a very slight down slope. Takeshi, the slender, white-haired oyabun of the Ya-maguchi-gumi, ended up 15 feet away from the hole, on Sin's side of the hump, but all he had to do was putt across it and run parallel to it right to the hole.

Kazuo grinned like a cat lapping up cream. "You are away, Sin."

Sin closed his eyes for a half-second. Here, in the basement of the Takagi mansion, he was playing golf on a series of simulators with the two most powerful men in the Japanese underworld. The oyabun had selected an 18-hole course made up of some of the most difficult holes available in the world. They started on the tee simulator and had a computer analyze their shots. It then decided where they would be placed on the fairway simulator and, from that, where they would end up on the green.

The simulators themselves, as well as the whole game room, were a masterpiece of environmental duplication. AstroTurf fibers grew and shrank to replicate conditions from roughs to the best of greens. Terrain features filled themselves in and, while no part of the simulators flooded to produce water hazards, a spaghetti-like overgrowth of carpet made for excellent sand traps. Projected video of the area surrounding the individual holes and a subtle soundtrack made it possible for Sinclair to believe he was actually playing the holes depicted.

Though it was a game of a game, the pressure felt as great to him as it did during the Build-more tournament. He recognized, however, that in many ways, it should have seemed far more heavy. *These men could kill me, and no one would ever know. In Phoenix all I did was disgrace myself in front of a television audience of millions. Same position, same shot I played it safe then and lost. Time to go for broke.*

Sin stood and extended his putter to his caddy. "Kusabi."

The man stared at him blankly, then looked at the oyabun.

"Give him his wedge, as he has asked." Takeshi smiled. "The board would have your membership for using a sand wedge on a green."

"But you are more forgiving?"

"It depends upon the results of your gamble."

Doesn't it always? Sin shifted his stance and carefully gripped the club. Left index finger linked through right little finger and right hand covered left thumb. His ball stood just off the toe of his left shoe. *Easy . . . easy . . . concentrate. Smooth swing, gentle touch.* He brought the club back to waist height and swung down through the ball.

The sand wedge's flatly pitched head popped the ball up like an undercut cue ball on a billiards table. It shot from point to point on the kidney like a spaceplane going suborbital. It reached its apex above the hump, then fell to the ground again with a barely audible thump. Rolling toward the hole, it looked on target, but swung around the lip of the cup and ended up a foot downhill from its goal.

"Well played, Sinclair." The oyabun stepped up to his own putt and clearly found standing on the side of the hump a bit awkward. He shifted his stance, and his caddy exchanged one putter for another. Lining up for a left-handed putt, the oyabun kept his club steady, watched the ball and, with a gentle click, sent it at the cup.

"Left-handed. I'm impressed."

The ball rolled up the hump and looked as if it might stall, but the oyabun knew exactly what he was doing. He gave the ball enough power to make it over the top, then it picked up speed rolling down the other side. It hit a small bump that popped it back out on to the wider part of the green, then followed the path Kazuo's ball would have to use right on into the cup.

Sinclair applauded appreciatively. "With your off-hand. You should be on the tour. This puts you one down for this hole."

"And makes us even, if you make your putt."

Sinclair nodded silently as Kazuo stepped onto the green. The Yakuza addressed the ball confidently and hit it toward the hole. His putt rolled true, but slowed and stopped right on the edge of the cup. He waited a full 10 seconds for it to drop, then stepped forward and poked it into the hole. "Par."

Sin walked over to where his ball waited and accepted his putter from his caddy. *Sink this, and I win. Miss, and the oyabun wins.* Sin looked up and watched the oyabun watch him. Sin settled himself over the ball, lined up the shot and took one practice stroke with his putter. *One foot. Easy.*

He stroked the ball, and it sank into the cup with ease. "Par."

"Well done, Sinclair." The oyabun handed his putter to his caddy, then waved his guest toward the spiral staircase up and out of the Sim Country Club. Sin relinquished his putter to his caddy and kicked his golf shoes off onto the mat at the base of the stairs. He followed the oyabun's ascension into the upper room. The transition from the TPC's 17th hole in Scottsdale to a traditional wood and *shoji* room felt a bit abrupt, but the oyabun had furnished the room like a country club's clubhouse to help ease the shift.

Takeshi seated himself on a wide, white leather couch and directed Sin to a similar chair across a low table with his dark eyes. "I have not lost in a long time. My associates are not as skillful as you."

Take away their little fingers, and I'm not surprised." Thank you, *Takeshi-sama*. Unlike your people, my

job is not so demanding that I cannot get sufficient practice on my game." Sin sat and immediately felt as if his chair was a giant marshmallow trying to eat him.

Kazuo sank into the chair across from his. "And now, with your new job, you should have even more time, eh?"

"That depends, my friend, on a number of things."

Sin accepted a glass of amber liquid from the silver tray carried by a butler. The two Yakuza likewise took glasses from the tray, then the oyabun leaned forward on the edge of the couch. He sipped the drink, then nodded a salute to Sin. "Thank you for this scotch. It is excellent."

"Do itashimashite, Takeshi-sama."

The oyabun held the crystal glass cupped in his hands and rested his elbows on his knees. "My nephew has told me that you are no longer with your father's firm. He also said you believed that success in your current job depended upon receiving our help. I would have met with you sooner except for some business in Hong Kong, but you should not take my tardiness in seeing you as a rejection of your friendship."

"I did not, oyabun. I understand very well the difficulties of the tasks thrust upon you." Sin drank some of the scotch and let himself relax into the chair. "Your invitation to play here, in your home, was a very pleasant surprise."

"It was the least I could do to repay your kindness for hosting Kazuo on his visits to Phoenix, and to applaud your courage in returning to our island again." The oyabun's dark eyes glittered. "Your new employer must be very powerful indeed."

Sin sensed a mixture of curiosity and confidence in the oyabun's comment. *Fishing for information, or confirmation of what you already know?* "I have only been working for him over the past week but, yes, he does seem very well connected. Even so, there are things he does not know, and assistance he requires. He personally sent me here to Japan, fully knowledgeable of my past difficulties and my allies."

Takeshi Takagi leaned back in the couch. "I still recall how you accepted blame for us in that stock manipulation affair three years ago. I know your exile back to the United States forced a reconciliation with your father on his terms. I respect you more than you could know for performing this duty for us. How can I help you?"

"I need information on an institution that is likely to be very private or oddly disguised. It will be the sort of thing that will attract no notice among us, but the *burakumin* and minor merchants might find it odd. I need your ears to listen closely, for the collection of data should be passive. If what I am searching for does exist, I do not want to alert its people to the fact that I am looking for them."

He drank a bit more, then continued. "Somewhere, here, there is an institution or training center. Its resources would be nearly limitless, yet it would seem very stingy to those outside. It would seem, on the surface, to be more normal than anything else in terms of daily administration. It would never seek the limelight, but would not draw attention to itself by trying to hide, either."

Kazuo smiled easily. "You mean, if it were a warehouse, it would look like one and function like one, but never become too successful, yet never so security-conscious that it would become noticed."

"Exactly. It would have loading-dock workers who moved crates in and out, but never had cause to visit the executive offices. It might be a school that offers basic and advanced courses, but a part of the student body never interacts with those from the general public. It might sponsor a Little League baseball team and even display trophies it had won, but never tour the team through the whole facility."

Takeshi nodded as his eyes narrowed. "It would be hiding in plain sight, as with Poe's purloined letter."

"*Hai!*" Sin set his drink on the arm of his chair and pulled himself forward. "Even so, there will be things that they cannot hide. For example, they might successfully clean up a shooting range so no brass could be found and shred all bullet boxes and targets into pulp so fine it could never be reconstructed. On the other hand, the chances are excellent that the laundry women would be able to smell cordite on the clothes used in the shooting exercise. A delivery person might never see what is in the packages he drops off, but he would notice if the firm only worked with certain companies or, more significantly, seemed to change suppliers on an almost random basis."

The oyabun ran a hand over his smooth chin. "You want information about a firm that is so ordinary that it seems unremarkable, and you want us to gather this in a passive manner." He shook his head. "You want us to find the firms about which no one is talking, in essence."

"You have it precisely, which is why I need help." Sin sighed heavily. "There are some things you can look for. This place will have a number of non-natives as long-term clients or residents. One of those residents vanished six weeks or more ago and did not return as anticipated. Guns of every variety are available here, and there is a prodigious amount of ammo used. Gun drills will also take place in odd ways, so rumors of an accidental shooting are possible. Weapons and equipment will have to be smuggled in and out without notice, so access to a private airfield or shipping could be a factor. It will require a lot of power, so independent or high-power demands are likely. It will have communications needs that suggest its own satellite facility."

Uncle and nephew exchanged a glance that Sin knew was significant, but he could not decipher it. "What?"

Kazuo shrugged uneasily, "There is one place where all the things you mention could be placed, and it would go unnoticed. Unfortunately, that is also the one place in all of Tokyo where our influence is the weakest: Kimpunshima."

"The reservation? I hadn't thought about that." *Golddust Island . Makes sense for all the wrong reasons.* "This could make my job very easy or absolutely impossible."

Sin knew that, because of the clash of cultures in the 1980s and 1990s, tension had risen between the Japanese and foreigners. A diet full of nationalists forced a number of laws that severely restricted the accepted habitation zones for resident aliens in Japan . The laws served to protect the contamination and dissolution of the Japanese culture, as well as isolating the foreigners so they could only really deal with those the Japanese wished to have represent them.

The largest of the reservations was Kimpunshima. Built as a floating island in Tokyo harbor, a typhoon had devastated it in the mid-'90s. It had been rebuilt and improved and enlarged until some people began to think of it as the fifth island in the Japanese chain. Various parts of it had been segregated so the streets and neighborhood distribution amounted to an economic map of the world, with the whole of Japan right in scale with Kimpunshima.

Sin had enjoyed living there for his first two years in Japan , but mainly because he could leave the

American sector and find himself in France or Italy or Mexico by taking a tram from one tower to another. Soon, however, he realized that he could not successfully maintain corporate security in Japan while living apart from the Japanese. With the Yamaguchi-gumi's covert help, he obtained one of the rare Imperial Invitations to live wherever he wanted.

"If you can check to make certain there are no suitable sites outside Kimpunshima, I will try to cover it."

Takeshi Takagi nodded. "We will do this, Sinclair. We will make our search methodical and precise." The oyabun downed the last of his scotch. "And I think, my friend, that we will need to consult each other at least weekly, on our investigations. To aid you, I even volunteer use of my Simcenter for these meetings."

As Sinclair rode the private elevator up to his suite, he chuckled again at the way the oyabun had trapped him into golfing each week. *He will beat me, there is no doubt about it. He will select a course so difficult that both of us will be forced to play our best. It will be interesting.*

The door opened, and he flicked the lights on with the switch beside the doorway. The huge living room had been decorated with standard Western furnishings, but everything had been carved in a way or upholstered with cloth that was in keeping with Japanese mythology. The suite seemed to him like a halfway house between the West and the East. He found the combination annoying because it suggested a contempt for him by his hosts.

That was not really surprising to him. The same fierce nationalism that had created the reservations was the fire in the belly of Japan's economy. While Emperor Akihito still headed up the government, Japan had really reentered the days of the shogunate. In this case, though, the shogun waged economic power, not military might, and he sought to dominate the world, not just Japan.

In the 1800s, Japan had tried to reject the gun and return to the days of the samurai, complete with total isolation. That had been a mistake and, in some ways, was blamed for Japan's defeat in World War Two. Having been rebuilt in a Western image, traditionalists fought against that warping of Japanese society. They sought to preserve what they had by sucking the rest of the world dry of the things Japan needed to sustain itself.

That created a number of paradoxes for those who would be shogun. They had to maintain the emperor because he was the soul of Japan, yet his inherent influence over the people could make him a very dangerous person if he spoke out against their plans. The corporators also had to tolerate the Yakuza, because they were the staunchest nationalists of all and were more than capable of doing the things necessary to keep the lower classes in line. They had to accept contact and trade with the West while studiously avoiding its seduction. It was a walk across a tightrope with both ends burning and alligators waiting below.

Dangerous, yes, but the view from up there is unequalled.

Smiling, Sin hit the glowing red button on the hardwood cabinet to the right of the elevator. From its hidden recess, the message printer dropped two sheets of paper into a wire basket. Picking them up, he saw the first was from Erika inviting him to a party over on Kimpunshima in the American sector. The second was from Lilith Acres telling him her departure for Japan would be delayed a week.

Sin deposited Lilith's message in the shredder slot and heard the gears grind it down into micro-fine confetti. He reread Erika's note and smiled. *Good timing, Erika. I think I will accept your invitation. If Kimpunshima is tied into this whole thing, going in as your guest is probably a better cover than*

even Coyote could arrange.



During the entire journey from Nevada to Flagstaff, Rajani had assumed that finding Dorothy and Mickey's father would be the easiest part of the operation. In the early 1980s, before she had entered stasis, she had come to know enough of the world to be able to plot out a course of action that would result in reuniting the children with their father. While she had been kept apart from the normal world outside Area 51, or a half-dozen other secret facilities where she was studied and educated, the outside world had come to her in rich color and stereo sound.

At first she had been dead set against returning the two children to the man who had sold them, but the love for him that both kids showed puzzled her. Dorothy appeared very reluctant to discuss her father, and Rajani could tell being sold had hurt her deeply, but more because of the separation it caused than of the betrayal of the bond between them. Dorothy explained it had been a hard time because it was the anniversary of her mother's death, and her father's girlfriend was brutally murdered by a co-worker who had pushed her into a pulping mill.

Realizing she had no choice but to return them, Rajani thought she would simply direct the children to the police in Flagstaff. Despite stasis, she remembered seeing ample evidence—on television—that the police would gladly pack the children into one of their black-and-white vehicles and take them directly home. When she began to suggest this strategy, Dorothy nixed it instantly. "The state of Arizona is last in social spending, Rajani. In Rumanian orphanages, they tell the kids to clean their plates because there are starving children in Arizona who would love to have whatever they leave."

For a moment or two the sharp resentment Rajani sensed from Dorothy seemed out of place, but she recalled plenty of cases she'd studied in which the disadvantaged were suspicious of authorities. So, despite what she knew of the police from "Cagney and Lacey" and "Barney Miller," she fell back to a second line of defense. Unfortunately, Magnum, PI and Jessica Fletcher did not have phone listings in Arizona, and the local paper had no ad in it for the Equalizer.

Realizing she was on her own didn't depress her. She found her mission oddly revitalizing after the long trek south and east. *If I cannot find their father, how can I expect to locate this Coyote or help defeat Fiddleback?* Resolved to finding a way into Flagstaff and acknowledging that even the A-team would find this difficult, she set about organizing a plan.

Daizaimoku, she quickly discovered, owned the whole city and controlled the vast majority of it. To protect its interests, the multinational corporation had fortified the city with a series of trenches and walls that reminded Rajani of pictures she'd seen of Berlin—except these lacked the gay and happy graffiti that suggested hope to those on the wrong side of the wall in Germany. Armed men walked the walls, and patrols with slavering monster-dogs made a circuit on a random schedule on the ground outside the tallest wall.

"Daisymuck controls the east and south gates. The Mormon enclave controls the west gate and the Indians control the north. No way we're getting in either of the last two—we're not Indians and I don't want to be caught by the Mormons." Dorothy defiantly folded her arms across her chest. "We came out of the east gate, but that's because Andy stopped by his place first. We lived closer to the south gate."

Rajani frowned as she considered and rejected strategies. Squatting around a small fire amid the vast refugee camp outside Flagstaff, she found concentrating virtually impossible. Dirty, scrawny children ran pell-mell through the tent-and-cardboard city, screaming in terror or squealing in play. Roving gangs of men and women cruised through the camp like schools of sharks looking for prey to rob. Brain-blasted derelicts wallowed in their delusions, mumbling to themselves and jealously guarding collections of worthless trinkets as if they were the keys to the universe.

"I have seen the guards let some people into Flagstaff, Dorothy. Why would they do that?"

"Proxxers, like my dad."

"I don't understand."

Dorothy sat down beside her and checked both ways to see no one was watching. She dug deep into her clothing and pulled out a laminated blue identification card. It had the Daizaimoku logo in hologram on it and her name and thumbprint in red. Micro-fine type on the front and back defined all the rights and privileges she earned by possessing the card.

Dorothy's voice dropped into a hoarse whisper tinged with fear. "This is my Daisymuck ID card. It's blue because I can't vote, but I got it because my dad has signed his vote proxies over to the Corp. For his vote we get to eat, have housing and stuff. It ain't a whole lot but . . ." Dorothy's stomach growled.

"It's something." Rajani likewise kept her voice low. "Can't that get you back into the city?"

She shook her head. "Only in the company of a valid adult card. The folks that get in have a card from somewhere else that can be exchanged for one with Daisymuck. I have Mickey's card, so we could return if you had a white card."

Rajani smiled slowly. "If I had a card, I could go in and they'd give me a Daizaimoku card, right? Then I could go in and out at will? I could come out and get you?"

Dorothy nodded slowly. "Yeah, but finding a card to exchange is tough." She slipped her blue card into her clothes again as a sharp-eyed gang of adults wandered past. "The rovers are looking for cards that will get them in, too."

"Couldn't I, ah . . ." *What is the word I'm looking for?* ". . . forge one?"

Even Mickey giggled at that idea.

Dorothy looked at her closely for a second, then shook her head. "For a gangbanger from Eclipse, you sure can be a Snow White. These cards have special fibers worked through them to prevent forgery. The microtype is virtually impossible to duplicate. Not only that, but if they detected a forgery, they'd take you out and shoot you."

"For forgery?"

Dorothy nodded solemnly. "Daizaimoku owns the votes of the proxxers. They use them to make the laws. They could be using them right now to pass a law that says squatting outside Flagstaff is a capital crime, and they could shoot all of us."

"But that would be illegal." Rajani blinked in surprise. "This *is* still the United States, isn't it?"

"Sure, so 10 years from now some court somewhere says what happened was wrong and someone gets fined. Big deal. They own Flag, they write the laws, they administer justice—their justice." She reached over and tousled her brother's hair.

"Let me look at your card again." Rajani forced all distraction away as Dorothy produced the small, blue card. Rajani took it from her and studied it closely. She memorized how it looked and what it said. She cataloged its weight and texture and temperature. She flipped it over and back, then looked over the layout on the card again. Once she had every little detail fixed in her mind, she slipped the card back to Dorothy.

"What's another corp they would likely have seen here, but wouldn't find so familiar that they'd be able to spot a fake right off the bat?"

Dorothy shrugged. "Maybe one of the Phoenix corps, like Sumitomo-Dial or Genentech-Carbide." She looked around through the litter surrounding their little campsite. Amid a small pile of metal scraps that Mickey had gathered up, she found the bent top of a tin of Vienna sausages. She straightened it out against her thigh, then handed it to Rajani. "There, Genentech-Carbide All-Natural Simulated Koktail Weenies. Their logo's in the corner."

Good, even close to the right size for the card. Rajani used her right thumbnail to score a line in the piece of metal, then she tore the aluminum along that line. She scraped the torn edge along a rock to dull it, then quickly brandished it. "What do you think?"

Dorothy shivered and pulled Mickey close. "I think you stand a better chance of finding a kinky guard and working a deal with him than getting them to accept that as an ID card."

Rajani glanced up at the night sky. "Another hour or two, and then I go." She smiled a devilish grin. "This will work. Trust me."

Rajani waited until the wee hours of the night to make her approach. Out of range of Mickey's constant anxiety, she opened herself up to the thoughts and feelings of the three men on duty at the southern gate. The two armed guards who challenged those who approached both seemed sleepy, though their level of mental activity started a slow climb as she approached. The third man, sitting in a glassed-in cage in the center of the 15-foot-thick wall, had a flat-level of brain activity which Rajani had come to associate with a drug-induced coma or watching television.

"Need a card exchange." Rajani flashed her fake ID at the man approaching her. He hesitated, and she sensed confusion in him. She pushed her hat back on her head, and he looked up into her eyes. *Locked!*

She projected into his brain a composite image made from Dorothy's ID card and the logo from the wiener tin. His confusion spiked into panic, but she sent sensations of embarrassment at having made a mistake and welcome relief at having recognized that fact. The man blushed, then shook his head. Right along with her, he wondered how he could ever have thought this harmless woman was a threat.

He waved her on through the gate to the interior man. As she approached him, Rajani forced her racing heart to calm. Dr. Chandra's experiments had shown her to be very competent in manipulating and reading living creatures. Unfortunately for her, unlike other alien species, she showed no aptitude whatsoever for computer cracking or being able to mentally guide and influence machines.

A chain is only as strong as its weakest link. In this case, it's Immigration Officer Grant, here. Rajani smiled sweetly at the man in the cage and saw the small image of a television reflected in his glasses. As he looked up at her she sensed resentment at being disturbed, but she let him know she'd be no trouble at all. A routine card issue, she would be hardly more time than the vertblok cutting into the movie on the TV.

A small tray slid out from the wall. A panel rose up like an alligator's upper jaw. "Put the card in here, please." The microphone and synthesizer made his voice tinny and mechanical. Rajani immediately felt the fragile link she had established with him crumbling.

He needs to look at me again. She held the card out, then hesitated. The man's anger began to build, but the television distracted him. He waited with his hand on the withdrawal lever for the basket as tiny pictures flashed across his glasses. "C'mon, put the card in." Along with his demand came the first inkling of suspicion.

Rajani fought down her panic and read his full name from his identification tag. "Bob Grant. Do you have a cousin named John?"

Grant's head came up and their gazes met. "John? Yes."

Suspicion continued to climb, but anger slowly backed off. Rajani caught fragments of memories from the Immigration officer. "I thought so. I can see the family resemblance." More images came through and she quickly sifted them for any solid sort of detail she could latch onto. "I knew him up in Taos years ago."

A moment's confusion washed over the man's face. "Taos? But John never . . ."

"It was a vacation. He was off on a lark. You know how he was." She smiled softly and looked down. "Only a week, but I'll never forget him." She pulsed sexual innuendo out with her statement, and got more puzzlement back in return. That confused her for a moment, then she sent Grant a revision of her image in which she sharpened her features a bit and let the hint of stubble dot her chin.

Her quick sex change made Grant blush, and she felt an urge on his part to get rid of this evidence of his cousin's unnatural life-style. "Are you sure you want in here? Daizaimoku doesn't put up with any strangeness. They're very conservative here."

"I know," she admitted as she looked up and softened her image again. "That was a time before I found out who I was and had my surgery." She smiled as she pushed a wave of confusion over Grant, then followed it with a quick one-two punch of exhaustion, and a vain hope that the damned reader wouldn't force him into preparing the card manually.

Her assault succeeded in blasting Grant's rudimentary mental defenses into kindling. To him, she was a transsexual/homosexual who had not settled for just a sex change. She'd gone so far as to tattoo her body black and gold and have some alterations done to her eyes. She was definitely a weird one, which was just exactly what he didn't need, especially during the middle of the Sylvester Stallone Comedy Film Festival. *Why my shift?*

Rajani took advantage of his vulnerability and pushed him. "I remember John talking about the time you went fishing and those dogs came after you. He said he was angry that he got bit and you didn't, but when that farmhand nursed him back to health and awakened him, well, he considered it a blessing in disguise."

Guilt gushed from Grant like oil from a ruptured pipeline. Rajani sent a message back through the waves of emotion pouring from the man. *I don't want this on my shift*, she sent. *She'll be trouble if she gets in, and I don't want that on me. Why couldn't she have come back during the day?*

The spark of an idea began in his brain and her assurances that he was brilliant fanned it to life. Grant smiled at her from his cage. "Look, because you're one of John's friends, I'm going to give you a temp pass. Once you're inside, you can get a card at a center. That way you can keep your old card just in case you head back to wherever." He winked at her to assure her that he was doing her a favor.

"You are even more of a squared-away guy than John said, Bob." She palmed her fake card as the metal tray retracted into the wall. Grant hastily scrawled something on a sheet of paper, then shoved it into the tray and back out to her. She took it, nearly laughed at the illegible signature at the bottom, then winked at him.

"Maybe I'll look you up when I get settled, okay, Bob?"

"Sure. Drinks are on me," he smiled in contrast to the panic he was projecting. Rajani let his panic grow rapidly and sowed his mind with confusion. So much so, in fact, that it would be four days before he wondered why, after he gave her the pass, she wandered back out in the squatters' camp.

The immigration officer at the east gate accepted the temporary pass and issued her an official pass with the click of a half-dozen computer buttons. "Leslie Grant" legitimately entered Flagstaff with her two step-children in tow. Dorothy took charge of the expedition once they passed through the outer wall. Mickey let Rajani hold his hand as they trooped through the streets after his sister.

Rajani sensed Dorothy's disappointment as they reached the destination she'd directed them toward. "Dammit, they've shifted things again. This was our *contiminimum* block, but it's been changed."

"Don't you mean *con- do-min- ium*?" Rajani looked at the building in front of which Dorothy had stopped. The exterior had been painted a standard khaki tan and looked as if it had some flat sort of metal siding on it. Each apartment was marked by a single window in the street end of the building. Along the side, Rajani saw ribbed siding that added some texture to the building, but no windows or doors on that side. She saw the start of balconies and railing on the back side and assumed stairs there provided access to each of the four floors.

The building itself had no street number, but beneath each window, in foot-high letters, she saw an eight-digit number. "What was your address, Dorothy?"

"We lived in #49337629." She pointed at the third floor and along to the third apartment from the far end. "It used to be there, but now it's gone. And, yes, I did mean *contiminimum*. You have to have these down in Phoenix."

Mickey pointed off along the street. "Uane!"

Dorothy followed her brother's line of sight and smiled. "Yes, a crane. C'mon."

Holding firmly on to Mickey's hand, Rajani followed Dorothy down the street. As they traveled, she saw a number of other apartment complexes that looked as if they had been built out of the same sort of materials as the first one they'd looked at, but these had a different shape. One was a pyramid and another had two holes in the center. While each looked to Rajani to be different in overall shape, each could be broken down into small, boxy apartment components.

It's like dwellings put together from building blocks. Rajani saw the crane lifting a metal container and slowly lowering it into place on a new stack of buildings. They used to ship things in containers like this before I went into stasis. Now they cut a window in them and house people. As the box descended, two workers snapped power and plumbing connectors in place, linking the upper apartment with the one below it.

"There, on the bottom row, that's our apartment." Dorothy started crossing a side street and heading toward the building.

Rajani grabbed her arm. "Wait. They're still building there. Is it safe?"

Dorothy frowned at her. "Of course it's safe. You ride for a while, then there's a bump and it's business as usual."

"You mean you stay in the thing when it is moved?"

Dorothy answered her with a withering stare. "You've never had a continuous moved on you?"

Rajani shook her head. "No, never. Why would they move it?"

The girl shrugged. "The Mormon Polys must have moved some folks in to unbalance this district." She pulled her arm free from Rajani's grasp and continued to the building. The man operating the crane shouted something at her, but she just flipped him off and walked up to apartment #49337629. Mickey tugged on Rajani's arm and led her across the street.

The first thing that hit her about the apartment was the scent of stale beer and even more stale sweat. Its sharp odor made her wince and almost caused her to vomit. At first she thought something must have died in there, then she realized that impression came from the stench combined with the level of mental activity she sensed from inside the dark box.

Mickey twisted his hand free of hers and went flying through the room. He hugged the shin of the slender, pale man sitting in a recliner. The light from the huge black-and-white television painted the man in cadaverous tones of white and gray. He clutched a beer can in his right hand and stared without blinking at the pictures moving across the screen. Though his left hand rested two inches from Mickey's head, he seemed not to notice his son, and made no move to greet him. The remote control remained in that hand as firmly as if it had been grafted on.

Rajani looked up as light from a refrigerator splashed out into the room from the middle of the apartment. Dorothy bent over and stuck her head into the white box, then straightened up and cursed. "On the Coors diet again, eh, Dad?" Anger and concern mixed in her voice, and Rajani knew Dorothy feared the worst for both her father and her brother.

Rajani choked down the lump in her throat. "This is your father?" Contempt filled her words and radiated out from her like sound waves from a tuning fork. Mickey's head snapped up. "This is the reason you wanted to come *home*?"

Dorothy closed the refrigerator door, cloaking herself with darkness. "He is my *father*. We are family." She didn't say it, but Rajani knew Dorothy clung desperately to something that was bad because it was better than having nothing.

The man in the chair stirred a bit. "Dot? Getcher pa a beer?" His right hand opened, and the can it held dropped out of sight. It clattered heavily into an unseen aluminum midden and, from the sound it made, Rajani knew it had not been empty.

"Sure, Da." The refrigerator door opened, and a silvery can appeared in Dorothy's hand. "Incoming, Da."

Mickey looked up to watch his sister arc the can through the air toward her father. The can rotated nicely, making for an easy catch, but the man in the chair did nothing to grab it. It would have slammed into his stomach, but Rajani crossed the three steps to the chair and snagged it before it landed.

The cold can sent a shiver up her spine. Rajani looked over at Dorothy. "Go clean your brother up. Get him ready for bed." She set the unopened can down in the man's right hand. "Your father and I are going to talk."

"Dot, getcher dad a beer," he mumbled.

Dorothy started to protest, but Rajani's eyes narrowed and let her know that nothing could be done to win a contest of wills at this point. Mickey looked from Dorothy to Rajani and back, then slowly released his father's leg and headed off down the narrow corridor beside the kitchen. Reluctantly, Dorothy followed him.

Rajani moved and cut off the man's view of the television. His left thumb punched buttons on the remote control, but nothing changed. He blinked his eyes once, then twice in rapid succession. The slack muscles of his face tightened, giving some shape to his stubbly cheeks. His mouth closed, then his tongue licked dry lips. "Whaaaa?"

"What am I?" Rajani drove an axe blade of sheer terror through the man's mind. She chopped through his stupor and saw what memories arose in response to the fright she projected into him. She raced past his fear of failing his children, the despair from the death of his girlfriend and the pain of losing his wife. What she wanted was deeper and more primal. She sliced down in until she blew by his adolescence and touched the memories he recorded when he was little older than Mickey. "That's right, I'm the Grimmand," she growled, co-opting the name of the bogeyman his mother used to frighten him with. "I've come to see what sort of man would sell his children before I rip him to pieces."

She grabbed the beer can in her right hand and punched her golden nails through the front of it. Beer sprayed out over his face and torso, then she tossed the foaming can down into the pile beside his chair. "Greed, sloth, gluttony or the greatest sin—stupidity. Which was it?"

The man stared at her wide-eyed with terror. "Not sold, not sold . . ."

"Don't lie to me!" Rajani yanked free the memory of his handing Dorothy and Mickey over to his brother Andy.

"*Get a good price for her, and whatever you can get for him!*" She made those words echo again and again inside his head. She used them to shatter his self-image and in her anger it took her a second or two to realize how easily it had collapsed. Within the shards of a heroic granite statue, she discovered a wailing infant and, as she watched, it regressed in age to the point where it could no longer survive.

He's dying. He has no will to live. He's been killing himself by inches since they left. She projected herself into his mind and scooped him up into her arms. « No, you cannot die on me. Your daughter

needs you. Your son needs you. You will live for them.»

The infant looked up at her with an ancient weariness in its eyes. Its mouth opened, but its tiny lungs couldn't power out a scream. Its little fingers grasped at nothing, silently signing its inability to succeed at anything.« *I am worthless. Let me go!* »

Rajani shook her head, and a golden lock curled through the premature baby's right palm. The fist closed on it, and the baby clutched at it with all its failing might. Rajani knew he wanted to pull on her hair and hurt her, but he could not. Still, she used that desire to slowly bring him back.« *You cannot hurt me. You are less than either of your children, and they could not hurt me. Not yet, anyway. I am safe from them, and safe from you.* »

The child in her arms aged rapidly. He plumped quickly enough that she had to set him down. In the half-second it took her to do that, the child's legs had become strong enough to support his weight. He rapidly progressed from infant through toddler to his son's age. The child looked down at his body, then up at her. "What is the use? The world was hell when I grew up. It was worse when Dorothy was born and worse again when Mickey came. I have failed them. I failed their mother. They are better off without me."

"No, they are not."

"Others will care for them, do better for them."

"But your children don't love others. They love you." Rajani aimed a solid stream of thoughts at the child. She poured into him her memories of the trip, including the things his children said about him. She forced their father to see himself through the eyes of his children and to know how much they loved and depended upon him. His bond with them was more than as someone who obtained food for them and maintained their shelter. He was the core of their reality, and Rajani drilled that point home over and over again.

As the memories filled him, the child grew into a man. He fought against the transformation, staring at adult limbs as if they were unwanted growths. He scraped at the whiskers on his face and raked his fingers across his hairy chest. He slumped down to deny his height and hugged his arms around himself to make himself seem smaller. "No, I cannot take responsibility for them. I am not strong enough. It is too difficult."

Rajani reached up and grabbed his upper arms. "You *have* the strength. No, you will not change the world, but your children can. They *are* strong, and they have done incredible things to return to you. You owe them. You know there is only one way to escape what haunts you, and that is to ensure that you and your wife are immortal by providing your children the foundation for their success."

"Can I?"

"By simply surviving, you will be that foundation." Rajani backed away from him. "With a little bit of effort on your part, they will excel beyond your wildest dreams."

She withdrew herself from his mind and straightened up over his slumped form. He looked up at her, then his eyes closed. For a half-second she thought he might have slipped away again, but then a loud buzzing snore sounded from him, and Rajani smiled.

"He always did sound like a chainsaw." Dorothy leaned against the apartment wall. "You're not

fromPhoenix , are you?"

Rajani shook her head. "No, but I am heading there."

Dorothy looked right through her. "Are you even human?"

Rajani stiffened. "Human enough to know what it is to lose your parents." She looked down at Dorothy's father. "He'll be okay now, I think. He knows what he means to you and how important he is to you. He lost that somewhere, when your mother died and the pressure got too great. He's found it again."

"Are you going to stay? We have room."

Rajani smiled confidently in the face of Dorothy's fear and hopefulness. "Don't worry, Dorothy. You are more than strong enough to see to your brother and father. You don't need me here, neither does your father." She hugged her arms around herself. "I would very much like to stay, but what I have to do necessitates my making it toPhoenix . In fact, I should probably head out tonight."

Dorothy crossed the room and hugged her tightly. "Thank you, Rajani."

Rajani returned the hug, then broke it and blinked away tears. "Give Mickey my love."

Dorothy nodded and sniffled. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

Rajani winked at her and retreated from the apartment. She let the sound of the crane's loud engine pound into her and blank her mind as quickly as possible. She lengthened her stride to get away from there fast, but something tugged at her. She turned and took one look back.

"Ouah-ah, ajni," Mickey yelled to her from the window. His broken smile lit his face and conjured a smile on her face.

She waved at him.« Good-bye, Mickey. Be safe.»

«You, too, Rajani. Good-bye!»

She stared at him, then they shared a silent laugh and Rajani wandered happily off into the night.



Coyote drew in a deep breath and closed his eyes. He let it out slowly and forced himself to ignore the dull ache in his ribs from where a *getsul* had kicked him during the morning exercises. *It hurts, but my counterstrike would have killed him had I not pulled it. He did not expect his attack to get through and was preparing a counter to my parry. He thought too far ahead and paid.*

Coyote heard the whisper of Mong's bare feet on the stone floor of his room, but he did not open his eyes. Instead, he concentrated and drank in all the clues to the man's presence. He knew enough about Mong to know that the noise had been intentional, but Coyote wondered if the monk could control the ticklish chill of the air currents swirling around him, or the faint scent of dried sweat. He didn't think so,

but he discovered he'd not have been surprised if the monk had that ability.

"You fought well this morning, Kyi-can. You combine the grace of aikido with a very lethal form of karate."

"Thank you, Lama Mong. Your acolytes are very skilled." Coyote forced his fists open and laid them palm-up in his lap. "Only their reticence to kill prevents them from defeating me." Coyote opened his eyes and felt pleased his head was turned to face Mong exactly.

"Perhaps, Kyi-can, perhaps." The wizened monk's almond eyes narrowed. "They view the martial arts and weapons training as a means toward an end."

"As do I."

"They pursue self-discovery and awareness instead of death. The discipline and exercise fuses body and soul and spirit into a single union that becomes the core of each student's being." Mong's hands described a globe that he compressed into a tight, small ball. "This knowledge of self is vital because, in its compressed form, it is stripped of labels and tags and only comprises that which one truly is."

The monastery's visitor frowned. "I am not certain I follow this."

Mong smiled benevolently. "The average man—and I assure you that you are not average—would respond to being asked, 'Who are you?' in a very predictable way. He would say his name, then note that he had a degree in history from, say, the University of Vermont, or that he had won an industry award for something he did, or that he was on the board of this corporation or that, and so on. It is much akin to describing the nature of an automobile by noting the color of its paint and the brand of its tires. It speaks to the trappings of its nature, but not the truth of its nature itself."

Coyote nodded. The sum and total of his knowledge about himself came down to facts contained in two very slim files. The first said he was Tycho Caine, an assassin trained in a highly secret place in Japan. He liked fast cars, gambling and was one of the best assassins in the world. Everything else beyond that was a fraud created by himself, his former master or the previous Coyote. The second file, the one that detailed his life as Michael Loring, he knew to be less than a month old and put together through cooperation between Nero Loring and Jytte Ravel.

Both identities would check fully within the technological world. Caine and Loring had superior credit ratings and a string of transcripts that made him seem a genius who blew through schools like bullets through crêpe paper. Because the information concerning those identities had been encrypted and duplicated, infused into magnetic tape strips and matched with laser disks and barcodes, he existed and was real. Because of that data, and who it said he was supposed to be, people he had never met would claim to be his classmates and others would confess to having known him for a long time.

Still, despite that real-world legitimacy, his core had been shaped quite differently. As Mong spoke, Coyote realized he did not have much in the way of the tags and labels associated with him. *Those who trained me stripped that away and prevented its accretion so I would not have to work past it later. I was being groomed for what I will be taught here.*

What he could tell about himself did make him proud. As the physical training with the acolytes had shown, he had a union of self and body that made him a most deadly opponent. He knew, from the adventure that culminated in frustrating Fiddleback, that his training had made him quick of mind and capable of acting ruthlessly when the situation demanded it. Even so, by his reluctance to engage in

wholesale slaughter, a slaughter of which he was very capable, he knew that he had some internal brake on the darker side of his being.

"*Sunyata* is the name we give to the discipline of studying nonbeing or the void. This is necessary because the little tags and labels serve as hooks and anchors to keep us in our reality. As we define ourselves in association with things in this world, we bind ourselves to this world. While Mi-ma-yin introduced me as the *khenpo* of Kanggenpo, I think of myself only as Mong. Like a hot-air balloon wishing to fly up from the ground, anchor lines must be cut and ballast must be cast off."

Coyote nodded. "As I have little baggage in this regard, I hope this will be possible. I know better than to hope it will be simple."

"Discovery is simple, but mastery is torture itself." Mong folded his arms across his chest. "Mi-ma-yin learned quickly but, like you, his anchors were few. His mastery likewise came quickly, but that was because he had a need that drove him. Have you such a need?"

The images of Fiddleback and the empty skull of an innocent girl fused in his brain. "Yes."

"Excellent. Then we shall begin simply." The hint of a smile tugged at the corners of Mong's mouth. "Here is an old Zen koan that should help you: What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

As the monk left the room, Coyote's eyes closed. *What is the sound of one hand clapping?* Instantly, his mind flashed to the sound made when he slapped a hand against a thigh or when fingers slapped down against his palm. *Those sound like claps, but the first is not a hand acting alone, and the second is not really a clap. Those are wrong.*

His mind raced as he approached the question in a logical manner. It is possible for a single hand to clap? The question suggests it is, and that a sound results. Is a hand arcing through the air toward a phantom partner in a clap really clapping? He sifted and searched through a dozen different ways he could clap with one hand, but rejected them all. Either they involved hitting something else to create a sound, or he felt they were not truly claps.

In his meditation, he swerved off onto another course of thought. What is the nature of this exercise? It is the annihilation of self and the compression of self to free me of all the things holding me in this reality. Perhaps the Western paradigm of logical and scientific thinking is merely a construct of this world. There were things I saw in other dimensions that seemed to defy the very physical laws we use to define our world, so perhaps that is holding me back.

With that realization, he began to think consciously in illogical and abstract ways. As he came up with answers to the question like the 'color of entropy' or the 'death of death,' he found himself thinking in terms he had not before. Wading through oceans of non sequiturs, he knew he was approaching the goal that would be the answer to that question, but he discovered other problems. The first was that his construction of non sequiturs was *thought* —not natural or *felt*. He was, in short, being logical in his illogic.

He also discovered that logic was a part of his core being. As he knew that logic would help him discover the true nature of any of the other dimensions he would visit, he knew it could not be what hampered him. *Even if I discover that there is no rhyme or reason to a place, it will be my logical mind that will help me make that discovery. This is not a hindrance, but a survival trait.*

Moreover, it struck him that the answer to that question would have to be broader than the focus of his

inquiry so far. He had been concentrating on mechanisms for creating the sound so he could follow what the sound would be. In reality, he had been asked what that sound was.

I know of no method by which a hand can clap by itself or produce a sound. It is impossible for a hand to clap by itself. It follows then that there is no sound that can be made by a single hand clapping. So, the sound of one hand clapping is nothing!

The concept of nothing detonated in his brain with the force of a 10-megaton bomb. The sea of non sequiturs dried up, leaving desiccated phrases in the mental mud that its head then fused into stone. Pressure built and pushed his consciousness outside, letting his world fragment and fray until it projected his mental eye out of his skull and sent it jetting up through the ceiling of the room.

As his sense of self flew above him, the whole monastery became like glass to him. He could see distorted shapes and shadows through the thick bricks. Only the dark heart of the temple itself remained opaque to his sight, and that disturbed him. *That is the Gonkhang which is where the Yidam is supposed to dwell. I cannot see there, but what I feel . . .*

Utterly hostile sensations pulsed out from the black rectangle representing the underground chapel. They stung him like fragments from a grenade, and his attempt to evade them almost shocked him back into his body. Coyote focused his mind on nothingness and the pain lessened.

Coyote willed himself forward and down toward the blackness, then realized that in doing so he projected his own sensations out and into that block. He saw a reddish sphere push out and around himself, then merge with the darkness. As it did so, the sensations he had been feeling immediately vanished and the rectangle cleared to show an empty place cast in ghostly twilight tones.

The sudden and sharp shifting from dangerous and alien to harmless confused Coyote. In that instant, he snapped his eyes open. He found himself, sweat-soaked and chest heaving, still kneeling in his chamber. The thin sliver of daylight that normally slashed through his doorway had vanished. The sweat on his flesh conducted the night's chill straight through him, yet his shiver came from more than the cold.

Night. I've meditated for the better part of the day. His stomach rumbled loudly. Or days.

He rose to his feet and pulled on a black, sleeveless T-shirt. In bare feet, he padded down the stone hallway. He let the darkness embrace him and, as he passed before each darkened doorway of a monk's cell, he sensed the sleeping man within. Beyond them, like the omnipresent crash of waves on the beach, he felt the power radiating out from the monks at each gate. Yet, despite all he *was* sensing, the heart of the temple seemed a great void to him and that, he knew, was as unnatural as he once would have supposed feeling anything at all was.

Letting his right hand brush against the corridor's wall, he stalked through the ancient buildings and toward the temple. He assumed he could gain access to the *Gonkhang* through the *Dukhang*. Even though he had told Mong he would respect the *Gonkhang*'s sanctity, the urgency he felt to unravel the mystery there overrode his need to keep his promise. He had survived in battling Fiddleback by leaving nothing to chance, and a void in the center of the lamasery would not do.

The whistled hiss of a weapon being swung through the air echoed up and out of the training area as Coyote swept past it. He stopped and listened for a moment, but heard nothing. He concentrated and forced himself to wait passively for any sensation in the room, but it remained psychically silent. *No feelings, no sound, nothing.*

He smiled to himself. The sound of one hand clapping.

Silently, he slipped into the shadowed training room and slowly descended the stairs. He moved so painstakingly slow that tired and tight muscles threatened to cramp on him, but he persisted. Step by step he went down. He let the cold of the stones bleed up through his feet, and he visualized his outline vanishing within the darkness.

After 30 minutes, he had reached the halfway point in his descent. A dozen steps remained in his trek, and with each step his feeling of closing on his prey increased. He sensed himself the hunter, yet did all he could to banish that feeling. He knew for certain, because of its ability to mask itself, that the thing he sought had skills beyond those he himself possessed. *In an instant, this thing could turn on me and, doubtlessly, destroy me.*

His eyes took a long time to adjust, due to the near-absence of light. Coyote looked out into the long, deep room, searching for any hint of his adversary. As happens when one stares out into the darkness for a long time, he saw shapes flit past. He could not be immediately certain they were not just floaters in his eyes, but when they resolved themselves into consistent, if odd, patterns, he decided they were not.

Again he heard a sound. The light snap seemed, to him, to be the sound of a silken sleeve slapping itself around the haft of a pole weapon, or otherwise being stressed into making a whip-crack sound. He immediately turned his head to lock onto the sound, and he saw the black shape dart off through the pillars. Then another snap sounded from the far left, and a third from deep to the right.

Without conscious thought, Coyote knew that three such sounds after so much silence was not a mistake. It was a trap and, in that, he was meant to orient on the final sound. *If I am supposed to look there, then . . .*

He launched himself from the steps and out into the darkness to his left. He snapped his left foot up through where he sensed a momentary spark of surprise. His foot met resistance, then the thick wooden shaft of a *naginata* snapped. His leap carried him beyond the broken weapon and through the echoes of the thunder crack.

He landed in a low crouch, then pulled his head back and let his body roll into a backward somersault. Ending on all fours, he did a right-shoulder roll back toward the stairs. He brought his left arm up, forearm perpendicular to his upper arm, but parallel to the floor, and swept it up in an arc to protect his head. It deflected a kick wide and Coyote rolled out from under it.

His arm stung. *That would easily have fractured my skull had it landed.* Clutching his left arm to his chest, he started a left-shoulder roll back the way he had come. Slapping his left hand flat against the stone, he stopped the roll in the middle and pivoted his body so both his legs scythed through the space parallel to the course of his roll.

His opponent somehow saw enough of what was coming that he leaped up above the attack, but did not clear it entirely. Coyote caught an ankle, and he felt the creature's center of balance shift. He heard his foe land on the floor, but not heavily enough to cause injury, then it rolled away in the whisper of silken robes.

Coyote pushed himself off the floor and leaped to his feet, but his fatigue left him feeling disoriented in the darkness. He half-turned to the left, seeking any clue that could help place him in the room, then stars exploded before his eyes as a kick caught him above the left eye. His head snapped around to the right and his stunned body tumbled off in that direction.

He hit the ground and bounced once. Regaining momentary control of himself, he let his body spin, and then twisted around so he could let the momentum bring him to his feet again. As he did so, however, he ran into the side of the stairs and smacked his head against the stone.

Huge shimmering balls of light burst like fireworks in his vision. He shook his head and closed his eyes, but nothing would banish them. His left hand snaked back and felt blood coming from the wound in the back of his head. *I need help.*

Something in the darkness grabbed him by the armpits and lifted him like a child onto the steps. Coyote opened his eyes and stared at the thing, but the light balls made seeing anything clearly impossible. "What are you?" The thing's eyes burned with a scarlet light. Coyote succumbed to the sudden and overwhelming desire to sleep.

Coyote's eyes opened as Mong prodded him. Lying at the base of the stairs, Coyote saw three of the monks standing around him, and he felt the pressure of a bandage around his head. "Did you see?"

Mong held his hand out. "Quiet. You took a nasty fall. You should have gotten something to eat after your meditation. You were weak and took a misstep."

"I did?"

Mong nodded slowly. "A *getsul* heard you cry out as you fell. We came immediately and stitched you up. I don't know what you dreamt about while you lay here, but it is time to return to your room."

Coyote closed his eyes. Nice try, Mong, but the dream remark went too far. There was something here. Something more substantial than the sound of one hand clapping.

Despite the throbbing pain in the back of his head, Coyote forced himself to conjure up the last image he had seen. He melded all the views of it he had seen into one, then deleted the distortion caused by the balls. Piece after piece slid into place, and he suddenly realized where he had seen the black face with white tusks and red eyes before.

I fought the Yidam down here. He opened his eyes and saw his thought confirmed by Mong's unguarded glance at him. Fine, Mong. You play your game, and I'll play mine. Do what you will, but I guarantee this: In the end, I'll know why a Buddhist demon exists in the heart of this monastery and why you keep this such a deep, dark secret.



Sin lay back in bed as Erika sat up and reached for a cigarette and her lighter. He stroked her back with his right hand. She smiled at him, lit her cigarette, drew deeply on it and sent a plume of smoke up toward the ceiling.

She offered him the cigarette, but he shook his head. "Never developed the habit, I'm afraid."

She smiled, the cherry on the end of the cigarette putting a rosy glow on her face. "I quit a long time ago,

but a cigarette still tastes great after sex." She raked the fingernails of her left hand through the damp hair on his chest. "With you around, though, I could become a regular chain-smoker."

Sin picked her left hand up and kissed her palm. "Ah, but smoking is bad for you. You'll have to get plenty of exercise to counteract those evil effects."

Erika smiled at him and laughed lightly. "That could become a deliriously wonderful cycle, you know." She yawned.

"My thoughts exactly." Sin suppressed his own yawn. "I don't know about you, but I'm exhausted."

Erika nodded and stubbed her cigarette out in the ashtray on the nightstand. "Tired but very, very happy." She slid down beside him and pulled the sheet up to her waist. Doubling the pillow over, she lay on her left side and smiled at him. "An hour or two of shut-eye, then see what we can do to raise the price of Phillip Morris stock, shall we?"

Sin reached down and pulled the sheet up to her shoulder. He kissed her on the tip of her pert nose, then slowly slipped out of bed. "I'm going to hit the shower for a second here, to cool off. Be back before you know it."

As he stood up she said, "Wait."

"What?"

She held her right hand out, thumb erect, as if she were an artist trying to judge relative sizes of objects in a painting. "Just wanted to memorize you so I get you right in this dream I'm planning."

"Oh?"

"It will be wonderful." She yawned and stretched. "Wake me when you get back, and I'll show you all about it." She closed her eyes and feigned sleep, then winked at him and snuggled beneath the sheet.

Weaving slightly unsteadily for his first step, Sin stumbled to the bathroom and shut the door before he flicked the light on. Its brightness stung his eyes, but he shielded them with his left hand, then leaned heavily against the sink. Lowering his hand, he looked up at his reflection and shook his head.

I'm sure Coyote is going to love your spending this much time cloistered with Erika. He smiled as he remembered what she looked like in the electric-blue dress currently decorating his living-room floor. If he saw her in that dress, he'd understand. He might not like it, but he'd understand.

He opened the shower stall's smoky-glass door and stepped in. He set the water on medium and pointed the nozzle toward the wall. As the door snapped shut behind him, he yanked up on the water control handle and started a stinging spray from the shower head. He let it warm up and swung the nozzle in line with his head.

Washing down over him, the water felt as wonderful as his time at the Kimpunshima party did. With Erika on his arm, no one paid too much attention to him. This gave him the freedom to listen a lot, and he realized that Kimpunshima had not changed too much since he had lived in Japan. It was still the bastion of ethnocentric fools who gloried in the high salaries their companies paid them to live in Japan, without realizing that, contrary to their self-images, they were not at the top of the food chain.

What had surprised him was the number, and relative importance, of the Japanese at the party. Most had been identified to him as middle- to upper-level employees with different Japanese corporations. It struck him that the majority of them were American- or European-born or raised and had been selected for ease of interface with the Kimpunshima residents. Still, Sin had been told one person, a handsome young man, was Ryuhito, the emperor's grandson, which would have been a great departure from the sort of interaction he had seen in the past.

The other odd thing he noticed was a recurring topic of conversation. He had been used to fads of all types traveling like diseases through the Kimpunshima population when he had lived in Japan. At one point, for a month he preferred to forget entirely, it seemed like every European had a Hula Hoop grafted to his middle. Paleo-retro parties built on the 1950s theme predominated the social schedule at the time. He remembered one costume party in which people were required to come as their favorite old television character—and they had to dress in shades of black and white with gray makeup to keep the look genuine. He recalled a nasty fight when Ethel Mertz found Fred with Rowdy Yates and Dale Evans, but in general, it had been harmless.

The difference he found at the party was that people almost seemed to be proselytizing about Arrigo and Michelle El-Leichter and the Galbro training center they had. At first he thought they ran some sort of business-skill improvement center, but the sense he got from folks was that it was something more. *They kept hinting at hidden knowledge, which means they're being conned. One of the things old Horatio might not have dreamt of is that there are folks who are out to separate anyone and everyone from their money.*

Sin heard the bathroom door open and close. "Decide to join me?"

The shower-stall door swung open. Sin found himself staring down the bore of his own Beretta 9mm pistol. The small, dark-haired Japanese man holding the gun eased the hammer back, then leaned against the wash stand. "It is illegal to possess one of these in Japan, Mr. MacNeal."

"Then I'd hide it while you have the chance, Nagashita." Sin shut the water off. "I won't tell."

The Internal Defense Cadre colonel shook his head. "I could shoot you now, you know. I could tell my superiors that you jumped me and that I had to defend myself."

"They'd never believe you. They know you'd kill me with your bare hands just for the pleasure of it." Sin glanced at the towel on the rack near the shower. "May I?"

Nagashita nodded and dropped the gun's aiming point to his legs. "I do want you alive, but walking is optional."

Easy, Sin. This is no time to fool around. He reached for the towel slowly as he looked at the IDC officer. The man wore clothing associated by countless movies with ninja warriors. While his uniform looked traditional, Sin could tell from the tightness of the fabric across Nagashita's chest that he wore body armor beneath it. His bracers and greaves appeared to be formed from Kevlar, and Sin did not doubt that the *shuriken* on the weapon harness were ceramic instead of metal. A mini-Uzi filled the holster on Nagashita's right thigh, while the more traditional *katana* had been slung on his back with its hilt protruding just above his left shoulder.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" Sin finished drying himself off, then wrapped the towel around his waist. "You can't still be angry about missing me three years ago, can you? I thought you a much better loser than that."

Nagashita's dark eyes narrowed, but he said nothing. He gently let the hammer on the Beretta fall, then dangled the gun from his index finger and extended it to Sin. "That has not been forgotten, but I am merely an instrument of my master's will. My own satisfaction means nothing in the face of his wishes."

Sin took the gun and popped the clip out. Pulling the slide back, he popped the single-chambered round out and caught it before it hit the floor. He replaced it in the clip, but did not return the clip to the gun. "What do you want, Nagashita?"

The IDC man opened the bathroom door. "Your living room, now."

Sin walked out of the bathroom and in the light of the bedside lamp saw that wet, rumpled sheets and cigarette ash were the only evidence that Erika had ever been there. He tossed the gun and clip on the bed, then reached for the pants he had draped over a chair.

Nagashita shoved him from behind. "He just asked me to deliver you, *nendo*. He said nothing about having you dress."

Snarling soundlessly, Sin walked to the bedroom doorway and saw six IDC ninja stationed around the room. Two stood at the doorway through which he passed and another two stood beside the main door. The last two bracketed the chair that had been pulled into the middle of the living-room floor.

The only light came from the bedroom and filtered out and around Sin's shadow. Moving forward and to the side let a tantalizingly brief flash of light wash over the old man sitting in the chair, then Nagashita's black outline covered him. *No, it's not possible.*

The voice coming from the chair sounded to Sin to be far too strong for the frail body he had seen. "Forgive me, Mr. MacNeal, but the logistics of having you visit me are more fraught with danger than the reverse. Also, please excuse the fact that you will never see Ms. Conklin again in Japan. Her visitation and work permits have been revoked. It is for her safety."

Sin shook his head, scattering droplets of water around the room. "I don't understand."

The little man's silhouette held up its right hand and rubbed thumb against forefingers until a droplet of water evaporated. "This evening you attended a party that included among its number my grandson. Your presence was brought to Colonel Nagashita's attention, and he immediately requested the honor of killing you. You caused him much embarrassment three years ago and, at that time, he requested leave of me to kill himself."

Sin glanced back over his shoulder at Nagashita. "He always was a traditionalist."

"As am I, Mr. MacNeal, yet I am a pragmatist as well. Colonel Nagashita was too valuable to me then to let him die, and you are too valuable to me now to let him kill you." His hand returned to his lap. "I need your services."

"I am flattered, but I already have an employer."

"I know. I believe he would find my mission and whatever he has charged you with coincide in most important areas. After all, Michael Loring appeared to head up Lorica Industries after the former CEO, Nerys Loring, died amid a strange atmospheric disturbance. I know you are here in connection with that, and I know that storm has been linked with the appearance of a monstrous creature in Phoenix itself."

The American laughed. "I am afraid I find it easier to believe Godzilla will rampage through Tokyo tonight than I do to believe a monster threatened Phoenix ."

"But if you thought Godzilla or something like it *did* threaten Phoenix or Tokyo or your family, you would do what you could to prevent it, would you not?"

Sin slowly nodded. "I would."

"And thus I am doing." The old man's head came up. "You have heard of Arrigo and Michelle El-Leichter?"

Sin nodded again. "Yes. They live in Kimpunshima and appear to have some sort of training institute set up there."

"I believe they exercise an undue influence on my grandson."

"Exile them, just like you did Erika." Sin's response came a bit hot, and Nagashita hissed behind him. "Forgive my rudeness, but it seems like a viable solution."

The old man remained silent for a moment, then spoke again in a lower voice. "I cannot. They have powerful friends who protect them. Exiling my grandson will do no good. He must be shown that they are frauds and stupid so that he can make up his own mind to abandon them. To do that I need someone inside their organization who can reach him and sow doubt in his mind. You are an American, and Colonel Nagashita's disgust with you is well known. I could not manufacture a better agent to be inserted into their school."

"I understand your reasoning, but why do you need your grandson turned away from them? Can't you just explain things to him?"

"There are two facts of life in Japan for the Imperial family, Mr. MacNeal. The first is that an industrial shogunate has imposed itself and has, realistically, stripped away the last of the power the emperor ever had. This is especially frustrating for a virile young man who wants to shape the future of his nation. Because of his blood, he cannot enter industry and exercise power, yet because of his blood, he is the best choice to lead his nation."

The little man's voice picked up new power as he continued. "The second fact, and it is a *fact*, is one of history. My father renounced his divinity as part of the settlement of the Great Pacific War. He paid that price to preserve his nation and its identity. Christians note their Jesus gave his life for his people. In the same way, my father made a supreme sacrifice. However, his renunciation of divinity does not change the fact that blood of gods runs in our veins.

"You might think that curious, Mr. MacNeal, a relic of a past time, a myth. It is not. It is fact and, at once, both wonderful and terrible. The power that blood confers on the Imperial family is incalculable and, were it misused, could be disastrous."

An uneasy shiver ran down Sin's spine. *Blood of the gods? This is as crazy as giant spiders invading Phoenix, yet I find myself believing him.* "You think Arrigo El-Leichter is trying to use your grandson and his divine blood in some way that will hurt Japan?"

"Not just Japan, but the world." The man's hands came together into a black knot. "The El-Leichters are

based in your Phoenix and operated out of Hawaii until indicted in an illegal phone credit-card scheme. They have many followers who are influential throughout the world. They claim connection with a brotherhood of space travelers, and we have no way of knowing how much of what they say is true."

Something told Sin that no matter how bizarre this sounded, the El-Leichters were just as dangerous as the people Coyote had sent him to Japan to find. He distrusted any conclusion based on next to no information, but he'd also learned to trust his hunches. "All right, you want me to infiltrate the El-Leichter institution and dissuade your grandson from following them. I'll do it, but on two conditions."

"You will not find me ungrateful if you succeed, Mr. MacNeal."

"I believe you. First, I want Nagashita kept away from me and my friends. I need running room, and I don't need a shadow right now. If I need him, I'll call him."

The man in shadows nodded. "Done."

"Second, when this is over, I'll need help finishing off the job my boss gave me to do. I would like your help in that."

"This you will have, *if* you save my grandson."

"I'll do my best." Sin nodded solemnly. "What if that isn't good enough?"

The little man remained immobile for a second, then his head nodded forward. "Colonel Nagashita informed me you have a gun. I assume you know how to use it."

"You want me to kill your grandson?"

"I do not desire his death, but it would be better to mourn at his funeral than to preside over the destruction of the world."



Lost in his own little world, Mickey pushed a stamped tin car along the sidewalk in front of the box in which his family lived. The rear wheel supports scraped along the ground and left wavy white lines on the concrete. The wheels had long ago vanished, but Mickey didn't mind. In that vehicle, he saw himself and his sister and father and Rajani all driving off to a place where they could be happy.

He did not hear the man walk up, but that came less because of his hearing loss from repeated ear infections than it did from the man's stealthy nature. Instead, Mickey *felt* his presence and looked up. The man's bald head eclipsed the sun, giving him a nimbus halo. Despite having to look up at the man and his having such a startling silhouette, Mickey saw he was small. Having met Rajani, though, he did not mistake a tiny physique for powerlessness.

"Yii."

"Yes, hello to you, too." The man's voice came softly, barely a whisper, yet Mickey heard it clearly

above the roar of the crane piling more apartments onto the building. « *How are you today, Mickey?* »

« *You can brain-talk!* » Mickey smiled openly, for a half-second forgetting how such things had spawned revulsion and ridicule by others.

« *I can indeed.* » The man squatted down, and the sun briefly blinded Mickey. Reaching out, the man took Mickey's lower jaw in his hand. Mickey pulled away, but the man caught him again. « *I will not harm you, Mickey. I have come to help you.* »

The little boy blinked with surprise. "Hela?"

"Help, yes." The man's dark eyes seemed to glow with a light blue outline for a moment, and Mickey felt the flesh of his face and lips tingle. That ticklish sensation traced along the crack in his upper palate and on back through his sinuses. It contracted and shot off out of both ears. "How could they have let you go for this long? This should have been repaired before you were out of diapers."

Mickey stared at him with innocent eyes. "Hela?"

The little man nodded solemnly and stood. "Yes, I will help you. I will make you whole." He extended his hand to Mickey. "Come with me."

Mickey shot a glance back over his shoulder at the door of his house. "Orfey."

"Give your sister not another thought, my child. You know she would do anything she could to see you made well." The man's voice surrounded him like one of his sister's hugs. « *This is your chance to become what she wants you to be, and you're giving her back her life.* »

«But, I should say good-bye.»

"When you return you can say hello," the man said in a voice so compassionate that Mickey missed the lie in his words. "Come with me."

Mickey stood and took the man's hand. The fact that his flesh felt cool but dry did not strike Mickey as unusual. Smiling his broken smile, he walked off with the small man and after 10 paces they had left Flagstaff worlds behind.



Rajani almost refused the ride from the ramshackle pickup truck that slowed and pulled off the road in a dust cloud. Most of the vehicles she'd seen in a similar condition had been burned-out hulks left beside I-17, and some of those had more parts than the truck stopping for her. Big and boxy, it was missing the right front wheel-well panel, and the rusty front bumper hung lopsided like a madman's grin. The grill might once have been a chromed grid, but enough pieces of it had vanished over the years to make it look like a crossword puzzle template.

The light of the single working headlight pinned her in place, and she contemplated darting back into the brush at the edge of the road. She reached out with her mind and sensed no hostility from the two

occupants of the vehicle and, in fact, caught a reverent joy from the one on the passenger side.

The passenger door opened slowly. The old man climbed out, apparently stiff and sore. He turned back and looked at the younger man behind the wheel and said something to him in a tongue Rajani could not decipher. Holding on to the open door so he would not slip in the gravel beside the road, he came around and smiled at her.

"Welcome. If you wish a ride, we will give you one."

The opposite door opened, and Rajani instantly got a twin blast of concern and fear from the younger man getting out. She noticed that both of them wore their straight hair long, with the youth's jet-black and the old man's steely gray. "Grandfather, stay away from her. She might be one of them." The young man reached into the truck to pull a shotgun from the rifle rack over the rear window.

The old man frowned. "The young ones, they know nothing. Come with us, little sister." The old man looked back at his grandson. "Will, this is a great day. Do nothing to spoil it. Leave the gun there."

Will shook his head but did not free the gun from the rack. "Picking up a hitchhiking gangbanger on a lonely road. I can't imagine what you would have done if I'd let you make this trip alone, Grandfather."

Despite the younger man's reticence, the warmth and happiness being radiated by the older man drew Rajani forward. She did not flinch at the gentle touch of the older man's hand on her back as he guided her around the door and into the middle of the bench seat. She smiled as sweetly as she could at Will, and his frown lightened a bit, but he remained sullen as he pulled his door shut. His grandfather climbed into the cab, and Rajani found herself slightly uncomfortable on the crowded seat.

Carefully avoiding her left knee, Will jammed the truck into gear and started them off. "We're heading to the reservation east of Phoenix. Okay if we drop you there?"

Before she could reply, the old man patted her right hand. "We will take you wherever you need to go, little sister. I am He Whose Antics Are The Light in The Eye of the Raven."

"Raven's eyes are both glowing tonight," Will grumbled.

"You may call me George, and this is my grandson, Will."

The pure joy in the older Native American radiated out and stilled the apprehension given off by his grandson. "I am Rajani."

"So, Rajani, what's your story?" Will jammed the truck into a higher gear. "Have to run from a drug bust in Flag?"

She tried to think of a plausible story to offer them, but she knew that what had fooled children would not pass muster with these two. She glanced over at the older man, and once she looked in his eyes she knew she could safely tell him the truth. "My parents were born on another world, but I was born here. I was named Rajani after a Hindu goddess in honor of Dr. Chandra, my parents' best friend. I have been in a stasis shell for the past two decades in a secret research facility maintained by the government, and I am traveling to Phoenix to stop someone from falling into a trap being set by a monster from outside this dimension."

The truck swerved a bit as Will hit the break and started to steer onto the shoulder. "You expect me to

believe that?"

"Keep driving, Will. We will not leave here," George smiled sagely. "We will do everything we can to help you, little sister."

"Grandfather, she's nuts!"

The older man's voice took on an edge. "Will, only weeks ago you were told that what I have to teach you has value. You yourself saw the storm and the creature forming above Phoenix. You know that happened, and after that you started your studies."

"I know what I saw, Grandfather, but that's worlds away from a blonde bimbo from Betelgeuse." Will's face flushed. "I'm sorry, miss, but I can't buy your story."

Rajani sensed in Will a conflict that pitted himself and his self-image against his heritage and all the things his grandfather had tried to teach him over the years. Will wanted to be a man of the 21st century. He wanted to leave superstition and nonsense behind, but he kept experiencing things that suggested to him that his grandfather's ancient ways were still valid. A huge part of him wanted to be worthy of his grandfather's legacy, but the modern man laughed at his desire to master rituals and traditions that had been stripped of meaning by the real world.

"Will, reach out with your heart." The older man reached around Rajani's shoulders and touched his left hand to Will's forehead. "See her with my eyes. Look beyond her surface, and see inside her."

George gave Rajani's hand a squeeze and whispered conspiratorially to her. "Open yourself to him. Let him in."

Rajani nodded and purposely pulled her defenses down. She sensed his probing. It came feebly, yet with enough substance that she knew he would be strong if he learned how to control his abilities. She sent confidence and praise back through the link they had established, which made Will smile for a second before he blanched and stared intently out the window.

"He will learn, little sister. He will learn." George let a wheezy laugh spring melodically from his throat. "This person you are to warn, who is he?"

Rajani shrugged. "I am uncertain, but . . ." She recalled the search drones and their check-pattern for people. "I think I want to find Coyote."

Will stiffened and even George seemed to be momentarily sobered by her suggestion. Will's foot pressed down on the gas a bit further. "Coyote, did you say?"

Rajani nodded. "Do you know him? He's in grave danger."

George shook his head. "We know of him. He is a legend. Some say he is dead, and others say he has come back after he killed himself. He was instrumental in defeating the monster in Phoenix."

"Fiddleback."

"The Recluse." George smiled, and his eyes focused distantly. "An appropriate name for one who manipulates from afar."

"So you can get me to Coyote?"

The old man shook his head. "We do not know where he is."

Rajani slumped down into the shell of her leather jacket. "Oh."

George winked at her. "We do, however, know of someone who, rumor has it, knows him."

Will looked over. "We do?"

"Drive, Will. We are making a slight detour." The old man interlaced his fingers and bridged them outward, cracking his knuckles. "We may not be much in comparison to Fiddleback, but if I can be a pebble in his shoe, I will be very happy."

Rajani could not shake her feeling of unease as she and George walked down the dimly lit corridor on the 10th floor of Phoenix General. Will had parked at the base of the tower and let them out, but his grandfather refused to let him accompany them. "What I have to do is best done with only two."

She'd not known what the old man meant, but as they approached the tower she sensed his aura changing. It dulled, then expanded and enfolded her when he took her hand. George smiled and marched boldly on toward the hospital. He hesitated until two EMTs caused the automatic doors to open, then he pushed on through into the crowded emergency-room lobby.

Rajani watched in stunned silence as the Native American walked through the lines of bleeding and moaning patients without notice. He slipped around behind the admitting desk and quietly typed a name into the computer. Information came up over the screen, and he smiled. As the admitting clerk turned back toward her terminal, he picked up a pencil and dropped it, distracting her while he blanked the screen and retreated.

Without saying a word, he led her over to a bank of elevators. As with the doors, he waited until the elevator opened to let passengers out, then he and Rajani entered the box. He hit the button marked 10, then let her hand go. The doors closed, and they began their ascent.

"How did you do that? Did you make us invisible?"

George shook his head and wheezed. "No, I made us improbable."

Rajani frowned. "Improbable?"

"All of them, guards, nurses, clerks and patients saw us. What I allowed them to see was an old Indian man walking hand-in-hand through the hospital well after visiting hours with an extraterrestrial fugitive being hunted by the government." He smiled as she blinked in shock. "Of course, such a thing is utterly improbable, and I increased their confidence in that conclusion. Because they knew they could not have, in fact, seen such a thing, and because at 2 A.M., the mind begins to play tricks on them. They refused to believe it."

The elevator's bell dinged, and the doors slid open. George started down the hallway, then took a turn around the nurses' station and headed off toward the northern wing. With her following closely and quietly, they walked down to Room 42 and, ignoring the 'No Admittance' sign, George opened the door. Glancing at the cardboard nameplate in the door bracket, Rajani trailed after him.

An undercurrent of physical pain ran beneath the troubled sensation Rajani got from the large African-American lying in the bed. Twin IV bottles dripped liquids into him, and another tube appeared to be sucking fluid from his left lung. In the darkness, his black skin became an ebon sheet pulled tight across his face. An oxygen tube ran below his nose, but the ragged sound of his breathing sent a shiver down Rajani's spine.

George's face focused down into a frown. He held his hands out as he approached the left side of the bed. They moved fluidly over the man's body, hovering an inch or so above him except where they dipped toward his chest. The Native American grunted, then shook his head. "He should be mending, but his will to live is ebbing."

The man's eyes fluttered open. "Who?" he croaked hoarsely.

Rajani sent out waves of reassurance as she approached the right side of his bed. "We have come a long way. I am told you know Coyote."

The big man nodded weakly. "Coyote." He snorted out a breath, and Rajani caught a flash of mental anguish. Images of a beautiful woman crystallized in her brain, then dissolved in blood.

Rajani stared at him, confused. "Coyote had your wife killed?"

"No, no." The man swallowed hard. "He couldn't prevent it. They only told me two days ago. Didn't know."

"I need Coyote's help, Mr. Garret!" Rajani gently grasped the fingers of his massive right hand. "Coyote is in grave danger from Fiddleback."

Something sparked in Garrett's dark eyes. "Fiddleback? Coyote is not here."

"I need to find him. Can you tell me where?"

Garrett shook his head. "There are people you need to meet, but I can't take you."

Rajani frowned. "Why not?"

"Little sister, his wounds are too grave." George lifted up the edge of the sheet and Rajani saw darkness tinging the outline of the tube in the man's chest, "It will be months before he goes anywhere."

"We don't have months," Rajani shot back.

"You don't have minutes," snarled a young, blond punk pushing the door open. He and a confederate slid through the narrow opening and allowed the door to close behind them. Each wore dark boots and gray jodhpurs with suspenders. The leader carried a submachine-gun of a particularly compact and ugly look, while the woman behind him held up a blocky automatic pistol with a thick cylinder grafted on to the muzzle.

She purred like a cat. "Looks like a three-for-one, Karl."

"Warriors," Hal whispered and slumped down in his bed. Rajani sensed his desire to fight, but hopelessness overwhelmed him.

"That's right, Garrett. We're here to finish the job. Waited a bit for the heat to come off."

Rajani smiled at Karl as she caught the image of a hulking man swim through his mind. "And for Mr. Garrett to be left helpless and alone."

"Save it, bitch. Defiance won't even make it into your epitaph." The gunman stepped back from the foot of the bed and waved his female companion forward. "Heidi, the honor is yours."

The blonde woman made a great show of mechanically pulling the slide on the pistol back, then letting it pop forward. The sound made Rajani shudder and she sensed a bit of pleasure from the woman at her reaction. Rajani glanced over at George to see if he had picked up the same sensation, but his eyes had glazed over, and Rajani felt nothing at all from him.

"Hal Garrett, you have been sentenced to death by the Warriors of the Aryan World Alliance." She extended her right arm and slowly let her forearm drop down so the gun pointed at Hal's head. "You are guilty of crimes against the Aryan nation, and you will pay for your treason. Your co-conspirators will die with you."

As Rajani saw the image of a bullet congealing in the woman's mind, she lunged toward the foot of the bed. The fingertips of her right hand slapped the silencer upward as the girl tugged on the trigger. Feathers flew as the bullet popped through the pillow.

Heidi snarled and tried to bring the gun to bear on Rajani, but she'd moved inside the larger woman's striking range. Rajani drew her right hand back, then shot it forward and hammered the woman's sternum. Coughing out a gasp, Heidi reeled back as Karl tried to bring his gun up.

Suddenly, a huge hole exploded in the door. Metal and splinters formed a cloud that blasted into the two white supremists. A yellowish tongue of flame stabbed through the hole, and the strobe light froze Karl in place as the shotgun pellets opened his chest. Heidi, who had caught most of the first load, smashed into the far wall and slid to the floor as if her bones had become as fluid as the blood leaking from her. Karl fell over her, and his gun clattered to the floor.

The shotgun held to cover the two racists, Will kicked the door open. "Saw them enter and pay off a guard. I followed." He looked at his grandfather. "I saw them with your eyes, Grandfather. Thank God the rest of you were clear."

Garrett grabbed Rajani's sleeve with renewed strength. "Go to The Pit. Speak with Bat. He'll help you. Go!"

"Let's go. They had backup downstairs." Will kicked the pistol out of Heidi's hand. "At least two more."

Rajani shook her head. "We can't leave you here. They will come and find you and kill you."

"I don't have much choice." Garrett's body started to tremble from the exertion. "Take the guns and get out of here."

"No!"

Rajani's shout startled all three men. She plucked the IV needles from Garrett's arm and hand, then pointed at the tube in his chest. "Pull it."

Will shook his head. "You *are* nuts!"

She looked up at George. "You trust me. Pull it."

The old man nodded solemnly. "She knows what she is doing."

Rajani turned and pulled both her sleeves up. She took Garrett's head in her hands and pressed both thumbs gently into the hollow of bone where his brows met. Her fingers splayed out along the sides of his head, and her palms pressed against his cheeks. Garrett stared up at her from the space between her thumbs and forefingers. "Trust me, Hal Garrett. Work with me."

The man nodded, then winced as George eased the tube out of his chest.

"Clear."

Rajani stared into Hal's eyes and projected herself down through them. She moved into his mind and sought what she had found in Mickey's father's mind. She worked in toward where his self-conception existed and found a scarecrow-thin doll with three gaping holes in it. Its limbs—save the paralyzed left leg—hung limply and flapped in an unfelt breeze. The fingers of his right hand swung back and forth barely above a shiny black coffin.

«You know better than that, Hal Garrett. You did not kill your wife. There was nothing you could do.»

The scarecrow's burlap face remained slack. «I could have done something. I could have gone away and made her safe.»

In the background Rajani saw the images of two small children. «You will not fail them, Hal Garrett. You are strong, and you fight for their future. Surrender now, and those who hunt you will be free to hunt your children. Capitulate now, and that which hunts Coyote will hunt us all.»

The scarecrow's arms slowed. «*Not enough time to heal.*»

«Work with me. Trust me. I will heal you.»

The scarecrow nodded, and Rajani shifted the focus of her vision. The mental images of his mind faded, and she replaced them with visions that Dr. Chandra had long ago worked her through. She saw Hal Garrett for what he truly was: a community of multicellular structures. Each depended upon the other, and all had come from common stock. They fought together to maintain life, but Rajani began to work on them so they would actively pursue life.

She reached down into the neurons that made up Hal Garrett's brain and sent a trickle of electrical energy into certain cells. They dutifully passed the stimulation on down the line, spurring glands to produce hormones. Those hormones flooded through the body, triggering other cells to react. Dormant genes snapped on for a second or two, and cells began manufacturing proteins. These coded messages then drifted elsewhere in the body to prompt other actions.

In an instant, the community of cells that was Hal Garrett went to battle stations. Cells at the sites of his wounds went into near-cancerous rates of division, multiplying wildly to seal the two holes in his lungs and the one in his stomach. Bone marrow pumped out new cells to help oxygenate the blood, while leukocytes and macrophages began hunting in packs for lingering bits of infection. His body began to metabolize what little fat he had left and fed the mitochondria everything they needed to fill him with

energy.

Rajani pulled herself back into her own skull and released Garrett's head. It did not fall back on the pillow the way she would have expected. Instead, his eyes tightened and the muscles in his neck bulged to hold it up in defiance of gravity.

"Thank you." Hal threw the sheet back from the bed. Swinging his legs over the edge of the bed toward George, he clutched at the railing to steady himself. He massaged his left leg for a moment, then pointed toward the chest of drawers beside the door. "My clothes should be in there."

Will shivered. "You can't leave the hospital."

Hal sucked at the droplet of blood on the back of his hand. "Son, lots of people come into hospitals to die. I've just decided I'm not one of them. Now, unless you're really looking forward to a firefight with the other Warriors," Hal said slipping an arm over George's shoulder, "get me some clothes so my butt isn't hanging out, and we can blow this pop stand."

Rajani smiled up at the big man. "And find Coyote to warn him."

Hal winked at her. "And find Coyote to warn him."



Coyote caught Mong's puzzled look out of the corner of his eye. Ignoring it, he cinched the Kevlar vest tight to his chest and pulled a dark T-shirt over it. He slipped his left arm through the loop on the Bianchi shoulder holster, then inserted his right arm through the other side and settled the Wildey Wolf in place on his left flank. He readjusted his web belt and the holstered Colt Kraits at each hip, then flexed his legs and decided the boots were laced tight enough.

Mong shook his head. "For this first excursion into dimension walking, I want you to be comfortable."

Coyote half-grinned. "Without this hardware, I would be most uncomfortable. I know there is danger out there, and I want to be prepared. More importantly, though, I'm likely to dimension walk wearing this much or more gear, so I might as well learn how to do it with this stuff on as not."

"This is a good point, Kyi-can, and one I will concede to you." The monk pointed to a wooden bench at the foot of Coyote's bed. "Please, be seated. Begin your breathing exercises. Begin to clear your mind."

Coyote did as he was bidden. Sitting, he ignored the clack of spare clips in the thigh pockets of his fatigues and concentrated on maintaining a good posture. He forced his mind to forget the itching sensation at the back of his head where Mong had stitched his scalp. Breathing regularly and slowly to an internal metronome, he closed his eyes and began to calm and control his body.

"Your first venture out, Kyi-can, will capitalize on what you have seen and experienced in your meditations on the void. Your previous masters crafted you in a manner that has made you most adept at learning these skills. Mi-ma-yin had rejected his identities, but you never really had one. You were without labels and tags so you could assume them as you needed them. Even your lack of knowledge

about your predecessor as Kyi-can is in keeping with this."

Coyote nodded slowly as Mong's voice grew distant. *I am*. With that thought, he crystallized his core and cast off all but the last of his links with the reality that he had been born into. "Proceed."

"The first place you will go is a proto-dimension. It is not far from here, so we are able to protect it the way we protect Kanggenpo." Coyote heard a swish of robes that suggested to him that Mong had seated himself on the floor. "This is a dimension that we use to enter and exit the monastery. If it is necessary, the proto-dimension can be isolated and even contracted until nothing can exist in it."

"The dimensional equivalent of an airlock?" Coyote smiled, then went back to breathing regularly.

"Quite so. Now clear your mind and fill it with an image of a place that is neither light nor dark, warm nor cold, it is not sharp, nor is it entirely soft. It is safe and welcoming. When you find it, define it and move toward it."

Sounds like the description of a womb. Coyote realized this characterization was not entirely inappropriate, so he latched onto it and wove it into the place he was imagining. As the concept completed itself in his mind, he felt a substance to it that he had not experienced before. He forced himself to stand and drift toward that substance, imbuing it with a gravity that pulled him in as he moved toward it.

Something in his mind told him that his next step would carry him into the stone wall but, as his hand reached out to brace him, it encountered nothing. He opened his eyes and found himself standing in a smoky-gray world with dry air that smelled of long-dead flowers. He moved his right hand up and around in a figure eight that set the mist swirling, but the spirals he created vanished by the time they got six feet away from him.

"You have done very well, Kyi-can." Mong materialized out of the mist, his red robes the brightest color in the small, spherical dimension. "You reached this place quickly and without difficulty."

The tall man accepted the praise with a nod, then frowned. "I know one must crawl before he can walk, but this place has less definition and substance than the proto-dimension I first encountered outside Sedona in Arizona. There we had color and distance. This feels like being swaddled in gray cotton."

"You must understand, Kyi-can, how proto-dimensions work. Imagine, if you will, that all the various dimensions are books shelved in an infinite library. A proto-dimension is a worm's burrowing through several volumes. This proto-dimension, for example, gives us access to several of the dimensions from which we harvest the staples that sustain Kanggenpo."

As Mong spoke, Coyote saw several red-robed monks move through the swirling mist and vanish. "Then to stay with your library analogy, I could travel to a dimension directly if I knew where it was indexed in the library?"

"Precisely." The monk gave him a pleased smile. "The index consists of a number of factors, many of them tactile and sensual more than quantifiable. Still, there are some creatures that have been able to define dimensions with a coordinate system that makes them accessible to their machinery."

"I know. Crowley possesses a device that was able to send us to a dimension he called Plutonia. It was populated with creatures that reminded me of Fiddleback."

The monk held his left hand up and circled it quickly. "Please, be careful. Here we are not as well warded as we are in Kanggenpo itself. It is possible for your thoughts to slip out and alert enemies."

"I don't understand."

"In the same way that thinking about a place enables you to find it and move to it, it is possible that something could track back along that link."

"The mountain coming to Mohammed."

"Precisely."

Coyote nodded. "It would be possible, though, to travel to any dimension provided I could define it."

"The journey could be difficult, but, yes, it is possible." Mong's head came up and he looked a bit distracted. "Did you have a particular destination in mind?"

Coyote dropped his hand to the Colt Krait on his right hip. "Last time we fought on my home turf. I think taking the war to Fiddleback would be a good thing."

"There is *nothing* good about going there!" Mong spun and caught a bleeding monk as the man reeled into the proto-dimension. Mong's eyes blazed scarlet, sending a red pulse of power straight down into the center of the ground. The mist immediately started to spiral down into its wake like water draining from a tub. "Go, quickly, run!"

Coyote saw Mong toss the monk down into the widening hole and knew he should follow. At the same time the elder monk dashed to his left and disappeared through a dark gash in the dimensional wall. Without a second thought, Coyote leaped over the growing hole in the floor and dove through the shrinking black slit.

He completed a shoulder roll and came up with a Krait in his right hand. His thumb snapped the selector lever off safe as a spark of red from Mong's eyes blossomed into a fire-flower on the roaring creature to Coyote's right. The fire's light turned the creature's dun fur coppery and filled the night with bitter, cloying smoke. The creature screamed and broke off its charging attack, but as it turned away, Coyote saw the fire burn all the way through to its spine, and the monster collapsed in a heap of limbs.

"What was that?" Coyote crouched down in the brush and watched the thing burn. At least 12 feet in length, from bandy lower legs to the top of its head, the monster's general size and pelt reminded him of the mythical Bigfoot. At the same time, this creature had eight limbs and only one eye. An auxiliary set of legs posted down from the upper part of the double pelvis. A powerful set of arms hung down from broad shoulders, then another pair of weaker arms sprouted from a narrower set of shoulders. While clearly not as strong as the lower arms, they were set closer to the face and more suited to tasks that required finesse instead of strength.

"It is probably the source of yeti legends." Mong dropped to one knee next to the broken body of a monk. He pressed his fingers to the man's neck, then shook his head. "He is dead."

"What about the other one? There were three of them."

Mong shook his head again. "The gorfash are meat-eaters, and there are more of them out there." Mong looked up at the starry sky and apparently made order out of stellar chaos. "Normally, their bands do not

wander in this area until well after the harvesting season."

Coyote looked down and saw that the brush came in neat rows. Huge gourds hung from lush vines and, breathing in, he recognized the faint scent of whatever had been a key component of his meals over the last week.

"Can't say I like the idea of dying to defend squash. Shall we go after your other monk?"

Mong hesitated a moment, then shook his head. "No, your guns would be useless against them."

The tall man holstered the Krait and stood. He drew the brushed-steel pistol from his shoulder holster and took it off safe. "The Kraits are only 10mm, but this is a .457 Wildey Magnum. The bullets go fast and make big holes. Which way?"

"No, Kyi-can, we need to get Trinle here back to Kanggenpo." Mong pulled at the dead man's arm, then recoiled when it came off in his hands.

Before Coyote could ask the monk why he was trying to hold him back, a scream pierced the night. He turned to face the sound and sprinted off toward it. Dry saw-blade grasses rustled as they tore at his clothes. Coyote raised his left hand to protect his eyes, then dropped down as he scrambled up a tall, steep hillside. The grasses sliced the skin on his arms and shoulders, but he crested the hill without noticing the pain.

Below him, in a valley drenched by the light of a blood-red moon, he saw a dozen of the gorfash whooping and dancing around in a circle. The hapless monk trapped in their midst darted back and forth, trying to escape. Casual cuffs spun him to the ground, then monsters leaned in and bellowed at him. They flashed enormous fangs and raked his clothes away with their claws. Naked and bleeding, he huddled in a fetal position on the grassy ground.

Coyote's eyes narrowed. Twenty-five meters, a dozen targets. Two are juvenile and, judging from the breasts and swollen bellies, four are female. Six are males massing 400 pounds at the least. One bullet, maybe two. He reached down into his left thigh pocket and pulled out two spare clips for the Wildey. How fast can one of these cross this distance?

He pointed the gun at the gyrating circle of creatures and squeezed the trigger. Fighting the recoil, he followed the one creature staggering out of line and pumped a second round into it. The first, he saw, had hit it wide of the midline, while the second produced a through-and-through hit on the abdomen. The gorfash went down, and Coyote smiled at his estimate of two bullets per creature.

Then the wounded gorfash got up and charged at him.

It raised its four arms and rushed him, making itself a perfect target. The third bullet caught it right at the bridge of the nose, snapping its head back. The monster stumbled forward, dead before it hit the ground, with its brains sprayed back behind it. Coyote kept the gun on it for a second in case it rose again, then brought it around as the rest of the troop roared in at him.

This is not good. I started with 21 bullets. If each one takes me three, I'll be dessert. He triggered off two more shots and succeeded in knocking one back into the gorfash behind it. The trailing gorfash's chest smashed into the lead one's back, then he sailed up and over his wounded fellow. He brought his smaller arms in to cover his bullet head, then his larger arms flailed through the air before they hit the ground and broke his fall.

Two shots kept him down, then Coyote dropped the clip and slammed a new one home. He let the slide snap shut, then he rapid-fired the Wolf. Starting low, he let the recoil track his aim-point up. He knew what he was doing would have been foolish under normal circumstances, but with the thick knot of gorfash bodies racing at him, there was no way he could miss.

Another new clip went into the gun, and he screwed one eye shut. The loss of depth perception made the gorfash seem even closer as they ran up the slight incline to where he stood. *It's over unless I think of something.* He dropped into a crouch and popped the bullets off as fast as he could.

I'm in too deep.

Suddenly it hit him. *They're cyclopes!*

As the rushing gorfash wall descended on him, he tucked himself into a ball and rolled back off the hill. He dropped through the air, then hit on his shoulders and continued to roll down the hill. He immediately splayed his arms out and grabbed on to whatever he could find to stop his tumble. Razor-edge grass filled his left hand and somehow held strongly enough to slew him around to the left and a resting place. Above him, the gorfash's momentum carried them out into the air. Their battle roars shifted tenor to screams of terror as they spun out of control through the air. Two of them collided in mid-air, then whirled apart. Crashes, crunches and whimpered shrieks filled the night as the creatures hit the ground.

Only one of the gorfash seemed unpanicked by the surprise, and he flew through the darkness like a creature born to it. He held his arms and legs wide, both to cut his speed and prepare for landing. He let his body begin to rotate forward, and Coyote saw him orient himself to absorb the shock of the landing on his strong arms and smaller set of muscular legs.

The gorfash hit solidly off to Coyote's right and a little below his position on the hill. He heard scrambling through the brush, then saw the four-armed silhouette rise up at the edge of the grassy circle where he'd landed. The gorfash bellowed out a challenge and Coyote chuckled as he raised the Wildey.

The gorfash charged at the same instant Coyote saw the Wildey's slide was locked back in the open position. *Empty!* He pulled his feet up and rolled away from the line of the creature's attack, but he knew it was too late. Turning back around to face the monster, his left hand clawing for the Krait holstered on that hip, Coyote steeled himself for death.

Something intervened. Two hands grasped him around the ribs from behind and tossed him to the right. Flying through the darkness, Coyote heard the dry whisper of something moving very fast through the air, then a thick, wet, hollow *thunk*. The gorfash's bellowing died in a gurgle, then Coyote heard a heavy crunch as the monster hit the ground.

Coyote tucked himself into a ball to roll off the energy of his fall. He set himself into a crouch and returned the Wildey to its holster. Pulling one Krait, he trained it on the dark outline of the gorfash that had almost killed him, then slowly closed with it. The musky scent mixed with the sweet odor of blood turned his stomach, but he kept moving in closer.

He stepped over the lower end of its body and saw it was lying facedown. Halfway up on its right side, beneath the lower armpit, a ragged wound ran from spine to flank. Dropping to one knee beside the dead creature, Coyote shifted the Krait to his left hand and probed the wound with his right. *That's clean through. Cut the spine and splintered some ribs. Got lung and probably heart—this thing had to have a huge heart, maybe more than one.*

He ran his fingers through the thick pelt. With this fur to absorb some of the impact and the size of the creature, it would take something like a poleax to do this much damage. Coyote's eyes narrowed. A poleax or a naginata. Who—or what—was out here?

Coyote's pistol came up as Mong broke through the brush. "Kyi-can, are you hurt?"

"*Marei*. I escaped injury. You?"

"I am fine. Come, we must go." Mong waved him forward urgently. "There are things that may track us from this place. Much power was used here tonight."

Coyote dimly recalled Crowley having made a similar statement after another dimensional encounter. "Too much power or too much violence?"

"Both. And there are things that are attracted by both. Come." Mong reached out and grabbed his left wrist. A searing yellow line split the landscape like a tear in a movie screen. Mong yanked him through it, and Coyote caught a brief glimpse of the gray proto-dimension a second before both of them dropped to their feet on the floor of his monastery chamber.

Mong released him. "For what you did today, I thank you. Two monks will live."

Coyote nodded his head. "There was no real option for me."

"Yes there was." Mong's face tightened. "You could have, should have, obeyed me. You are good at traveling through dimensions and could be, in fact, good enough to mount an assault on Fiddleback's home, but not yet. Here you know the rules, so your impulses are often correct and even meritorious. Away from here, though, they can get you killed."

Coyote waited five minutes after Mong left, then headed straight for the training room. He found it empty, but this did not surprise him at all. Employing the pocket flashlight that he had brought with him to Tibet, he descended the stairs, then swept it along the weapons' walls. As he got to the pole weapons section he smiled when he saw a *naginata* with a new haft.

Above it hung an older weapon of a similar design. He pulled it down and inspected the long, sharp blade. Despite its obvious antiquity, it had no nicks in it. It looked clean, and he wished he had access to the equipment in the secret room of his home in Phoenix. "A little chemical spray and a blacklight and we'd see if you've been blooded."

He played the light over the blade again, then paid special attention to the guard on it. There, deep in where the blade had been joined to the haft, he saw a piece of a thick fiber. Again he wished for equipment he didn't have with him, but this time he wanted it just to confirm what he already knew.

That's from the gorfash's hide. He returned the naginata to its place on the wall and turned out his light. The Yidam I fought in here tried to kill me and it used a naginata. Something, using a naginata, saved me tonight in gorfashland. Why the sudden reversal? Coyote shrugged at his own question. And what will it do next time?



Straightening his tie, Sinclair MacNeal approached the secretary. He tugged at the left sleeve of his jacket to make sure it hid the wrist recorder Lilith had finally gotten to him. Smiling, he stopped in front of the desk. "Sinclair MacNeal to see Ken Martin."

The brown-haired secretary looked up and pursed his lips. "Do you have an appointment?"

"No. Just tell Mr. Martin I'm here. This will only take a minute."

The slender man shook his head. "No appointment, no visit. Sorry. That's policy."

Sin sighed. "Mr. Martin will vary his policy for me. Trust me."

"I have scars from the last time I trusted someone, Mr. MacNeal." The secretary glanced down at his appointment book. "Besides, the policy is Dutch Allied Chemicals' policy, not Mr. Martin's. I can get you in a week from Tuesday."

Great I have a mission for the emperor and will save the world and some secretary is going to keep me from step one. Sin reinforced the smile on his face. "Look, tell Mr. Martin . . ."

"Is this going to be some sort of pseudo-spy code word thing?" The secretary covered his feigned yawn with a long-fingered hand. "I'm afraid we don't do James Bond here."

Sin's nostrils flared. "You know, the last time Kip and I went deep-sea fishing, we used a guy just like you for bait. He was shorter, so we only got mako sharks. With you, I figure a great white."

The secretary blanched quickly. With a pencil, he scratched a line through a name in the book. "Looks like the 8:15 just canceled." He hit an intercom button. "A Mr. Sinclair MacNeal to see you, sir."

"Sinclair MacNeal?" blasted back a tinny voice. "Well, I'll be. Send him in."

Sin opened the door to the office beyond the secretary's station and smiled as Kip Martin stood behind his walnut desk. The stocky man rolled the sleeves down on his white shirt, then came around the edge of the desk and offered Sin his hand. "Good to see you, Sin." The man smiled and shook his head. "Never figured it would be this side of the Hawaiian lake, but you're looking good."

Sin pumped the man's hand. "So are you, Kip. Nice office."

Kip smiled proudly and opened his arms to take it all in. "Long way from where I started with you."

Walnut paneling covered three of the walls and, in turn, was covered by several lithographs of sailing ships and a huge mounted sailfish directly across from the desk. Beneath the fish Sin saw a number of framed photographs that showed Kip with celebrities and fish they'd harvested from the ocean. Sin couldn't recognize a couple of the types of fish, but he knew Kip would tell him all about them if he got the chance.

The fourth wall, which stood behind the desk, had a panoramic view of Tokyo from Kimpunshima. The city looked largely like a land of gray stalagmites and smoky haze, but there was some variation there. From between several buildings, Sin saw hints of the green preserve surrounding the emperor's palace. Likewise, some blue ocean peeked up from the bay and the cloudy haze occasionally parted to let other glimpses of blue through.

"Hey, buddy, you studied hard to get ahead. When we brought you on as a security accountant, I knew you were destined for better things." Sin broke their grip and dropped himself into the chair in front of Kip's desk. "They working you hard?"

Kip shrugged somewhat wearily. "Usual 7 to 7 drag."

"They have you working Japanese hours?"

"Sort of. I get an hour for lunch, and I don't have to come in on Saturday." Kip smiled. "Other guys head out to the links, I take a fishing charter out."

Sin frowned. "I'd a thought you'd own your own boat now."

"You know what they say: A boat is a hole in the water into which you throw money." Kip's mood downshifted from jovial to neutral. "Had one for a while, actually, it was a steal, but I lost it."

"What happened?"

The man's eyes focused on where his hands rested in his lap. "I don't know. I was out and hooked something. It was big, really big." He looked up but didn't focus his eyes on Sin. "I guess it was also pissed. I woke up about a week later when they wheeled me out of an intensive-care unit. Don't fish outside the harbor much now."

"That's bad news. How's Susan?"

Kip's face fell a bit further. "She ran off with the intern who treated me."

"That's bad." Resting his elbows on his knees, Sin leaned forward. "You should have let me know, bud."

"What could you have done about it, Sin? Besides, it wasn't her fault. When she married me, I was a 10 to 2 American accountant making decent bucks. The move here allowed her to see a lot of the world, but not much of me. We grew apart."

I never guessed his life was such a mess. "I don't think I'm going to ask anything more because I've got one last strike before I'm out."

Kip's smile returned and his mood lightened. "Hey, no blood, no foul, my friend. I met my present wife, Miko, through an executive matching service here. She's native-born and grew up in a traditional family. She loves my ass and doesn't mind the long hours I put in. Every night it's a good meal, hot tub, massage and lights out." He patted his belly. "The living don't get much better than this."

"Great, man, really great." Sin leaned back with a genuine smile on his face. "Nobody deserves better than you."

"Thanks." Kip leaned forward conspiratorially. "So, what are you doing in Japan? I heard a rumor that

you were seen at a party in Kimpunshima a week ago. I tried to check up on you to see if it was true, but the lead on the flight attendant they said you were with fell through. It's like she dropped off the edge of the Earth. Same with you."

"I'm here, Kip, in the flesh. I'm working for Lorica Industries. They hired me on as a consultant in all sorts of things. Right now, the new CEO—everyone calls him Mikie 'cept to his face—is thinking of buying a chunk of Kimpunshima. He's sent me over to figure out the lay of the land. He wants to know how much it's changed since I was here. He wants me to get current with everything our people will run into here."

"Tall order."

"True enough, but I've got an expense account that will let me reach to the very top." Sin winked at his friend. "I've got to cover everything from the hottest and most chic restaurants to, I don't know, this Galbro stuff that was being talked about at the party. I figured I could use another opinion, and I value yours."

Kip leaned back and brought his hands together in a gesture Sin recognized from the past. *Something is bothering him.* "Spill it, Kip."

"I'll be happy to snarf down as much food as you want to point in my direction, my friend, and Lorica will find that I know some truly exotic places to while away your time and their money."

"But?"

Kip frowned. "I'd leave the Galbro Institute alone. They're weird people, and they're into very strange stuff."

"What are you talking about?"

Kip pointed off toward the closed door and the secretary beyond it. "Before Mr. Congeniality out there, I had a real secretary. Janny Pigot was her name. Really efficient and had a smashing personality. Wasn't quite the looker she wanted to be—still had scars from childhood acne—but she was great. I would have dated her after Susan left, but DAC doesn't allow that and, quite frankly, I valued her more as my secretary.

"Anyway, she accepts an invitation to one of the Galbro weekend retreats in their center here. She was all excited about it and on Monday she returned a bit exhausted, but just brimming full of stuff. She and I normally chatted over coffee in the morning, and that day I couldn't get her to shut up. It was all sorts of crazy stuff, and I knew it was trouble right away."

Sin frowned. "What kind of crazy stuff?"

"Real crazy stuff, Sin." Kip opened his hands in a sign of disbelief. "I can't remember all of it, but in the middle she dropped a bombshell: My boat had been destroyed because I'd hooked a gray starship on a covert mission to the center at the bottom of the ocean. She told me that good aliens had rescued me and placed me on the shore amid the wreckage of my boat."

Sin laughed. "And you don't believe her?"

Kip swung his right leg up onto his desk and pulled up the pant leg. "I dunno. If you ever see an alien

that can do this, let me know." Yanking down his black sock, Kip exposed a puckered circular wound on his leg.

"Sucker mark. Looks like a squid tried to hitch a ride."

"Big squid. My boat was a 30-footer and my hip was dislocated." He pulled his sock back up, lowered his pant leg and pulled his foot off the desk. "Those facts didn't dissuade Janny. She went back for more, and back and back. Then weird things started happening, like files going missing for a day or two and copier counts not matching the numbers of copies ordered. Little stuff, pilfering, you know."

Sin nodded. "You think she was turning information over to these people?"

"No, but I think she was working on collecting evidence to convince me they were right. She started wandering around in her own dream world. She began to act paranoid, like refusing to answer the phone if it rang at seven minutes after the hour." He shrugged. "I had to let her go. Galbro hired her. I understand she's Arrigo El-Leichter's personal secretary now."

Sin shook his head. "That's bizarre."

"You'd do well to take a pass on it."

"I agree, but I don't know that I can." Sin smiled weakly. "A man I knew once, Joe Ybarra, said, 'Always do the hardest part of the job first.' If I check out one of these seminar things I can give it a big black star, then move on to the easy stuff. You understand, right?"

Kip nodded. "Right. I can pitch you in the direction of a recruiter for them. You can be in this weekend, if you want."

"Thanks. What are you doing for dinner? Can I take you and Miko out?"

"Not tonight, Sin." Kip fingered a pile of envelopes on his desk. "She's in Osaka visiting her mother. I, on the other hand, have tickets for the Daizaimoku Ospreys versus the Honchin Dragons. Want to go?"

"Corporate Basketball?" Sin chuckled lightly. "I haven't seen a game since I was here last."

"Ospreys are the home team, and they're being coached by Kevin Johnson. You might remember him; he was a Phoenix Sun."

"Yeah, I think I saw him play when I was 10. Sounds good. When?"

Kip glanced at his watch and then his schedule book. "Meet me here at 6. I'm skipping lunch today so I can go to the game."

Sin stood and headed toward the door. "Six, got it. I'll be exploring Kimpunshima until then."

"Hey, Sin," Kip called to him.

"Yes?"

"If you see any aliens during your wanderings," he laughed, "ask them who their insurance agents are so I can make a claim for my boat."



Rajani decided that Hal Garrett had impressed her. Despite still needing time to heal up even after what she had done, he had pushed himself to ensure no one followed them from the hospital. On the drive away, he had Will pull up to a "drive-by" pay phone. His call had been short and curt, with code words being exchanged for less than a half minute. When he hung up, he gave Will some directions, then lay back down in the bed of the truck.

Rajani lost complete track of where they were within the dark world of Eclipse. The ceiling of photovoltaic cells 100 feet above her head transformed the whole undercity into a dirty, forbidding world of perpetual night. Looking up, she could see man-sized nests clinging to the undersides of panels and jury-rigged walkways between buildings. Bonfires dotted the landscape despite the choking heat and, while she welcomed the warmth, she could see it made Hal very uncomfortable.

Neon signs provided more light than the few unbroken streetlights scattered around the city. A secondary set of roads almost halfway up to the ceiling looked largely untraveled and, when she did see a car up there, it looked sleeker and newer than anything in the thick traffic stream surrounding the pickup truck. Traveling amid the squalor and noise of Eclipse, she wondered if, in fact, Fiddleback had not already won the battle for Phoenix .

Will let them out of the truck at a dark intersection. He offered Garrett the shotgun, but Hal shook his head and leaned heavily against a lamp post. "Not necessary. Thank you for your help. Now, get out of here."

Rajani gave George a big hug. "Thank you for believing me and helping."

The old man winked at her and climbed back into the truck. "Believe in yourself, little sister. Fiddleback doesn't know it, but his days are numbered and closing fast on single digits."

As the truck lurched away, a number of individuals seeped out of the shadows and slowly started ambling toward the two of them. Rajani's night vision let her see that these young men were African-Americans like Hal, but they had been altered in subtle ways. She noticed it first in how their hands swung freely and heavily at their sides. *They have added weight to their hands to aid in hitting. And their faces, cheeks and brow ridges are enlarged to protect their eyes.*

One of the young men moved away from the pack and toward Hal. He raised a clenched fist, and Rajani almost moved to shield Hal before the young man could bludgeon him, but the waves of amusement coming from Garrett stopped her. "What it is, homey," the younger man said.

"What it will be, bro," Hal replied. He raised his own right fist, and their hands met in a gentle, even friendly collision. "I need a crib to stash her. Look, don't touch, Jalal."

"Hey, I'll be cool, and so will the rest of the posse." The younger African-American winked at Rajani. "Skin that color, she's a sister."

Rajani found she was missing more of the conversation than she was catching, so she relied more on

what her feelings were telling her than anything else. She sensed an incredible amount of pride among the young men and a fierce loyalty among them to their leader and Hal. Weakened though he was, Garrett seemed to have the stature of a divinity to them. What Hal requested, Jalal saw as duty, and what Jalal saw as duty the Blood Crips treated as a law of nature.

Jalal led them off through the streets and into an abandoned building. Rajani saw power cables going up to leech power from the cells above, though the hallways had no lights and most of the original paint had been covered in several layers of graffiti. Most of the apartments had no doors on them and had been torn to pieces on the inside.

Jalal rapped twice, waited, then rapped three times on the metal door at the end of the corridor. A small slit opened up, words were exchanged, then the door opened only wide enough for everyone to slip inside. Jalal directed Hal and her into a side room with two chairs, a table and two cots. Before he closed the door, she did see a vast collection of weapons in the outer room, and it struck her that the Blood Crips were better armed than the soldiers at the base from which she had escaped.

Hal sat heavily in one of the chairs. Pain passed over his face, but he forced it away with a brave smile. "Okay, I don't know what you did to me in the hospital, but I'm mending very fast. Who are you, and why do you need to get Coyote a warning?"

Rajani slipped her leather jacked off and rolled up the sleeve on her fatigue shirt. She turned her left forearm so Hal could see the gold lines running from her gold fingernails up her arm. "You won't believe me, but what I will tell you is the truth. I was born on your planet in the year 1969. In 1984, I was placed in stasis to combat a specific evil. It is the thing you call Fiddleback."

The mention of the name caused Hal's smile to disappear. "I was in the hospital when they dealt with Fiddleback, but they've told me about it." His dark eyes glittered. "So, I guess I do believe you, in part anyway. Now, give me details so I can check you out. If you're not some sort of trap, then we'll get you in touch with Coyote."

Whatever Hal did to run her story down took two days. During that time, she remained with the Blood Crips. While they did not let her out of the apartment, various members of the gang took turns entertaining her with everything from the vast selection of shows on their pirated cable feed to timing her in stripping down and reassembling automatic weapons.

Despite having trouble understanding all their slang, Rajani enjoyed spending time with the gangbangers. She sensed from them the same depth of curiosity about her that Chandra and the other researchers had, yet none of them hated her the way Chandra's aide Nicholas had. While teaching her how to break down and put back together weapons had reminded her of the various experiments Dr. Chandra had performed, neither he nor his assistants had reacted with the gangbangers' unbridled enthusiasm when she succeeded. Had Jalal not vetoed the idea, a couple of the Blood Crips had intended to let her "make her meat" with an AKM in a drive-by on the Warriors of the Aryan World Alliance.

After the two-day wait, Hal Garrett returned and brought three other people with him. Jalal escorted all of them into the little room, then shut the door and stood with his back against it. "We've been taking good care of her, Hal."

"Thanks." Hal, looking much better, introduced his associates. "Rajani, these are Natch, Bat and Jytte. If you pass muster here, we will help you get to Coyote."

Natch stood almost as tall as Rajani and held herself in tightly. Hidden inside a leather jacket, the woman

had tucked most of her hair up into a red beret. Rajani felt like a prisoner before a judge as Natch looked her up and down, then the small woman grinned just a bit and Rajani felt her opening up some. "Not from around here, are you, Rajani?"

"No, I'm not." Rajani returned her grin, then looked up at the tall, hard man standing behind Natch. If Natch had been a judge, then Bat was the executioner. She sensed him evaluating her on an animal-threat level. The surface thoughts she picked up read like tactical battle reports on how best to crack a tank. She realized, as she sifted through his ideas, that the plans were accepted or rejected not on the basis of efficiency or efficacy, but on how much fun he would have in employing each technique.

Shivering, she shifted her focus to Jytte. Physically she found the tall, slender, blonde woman appealing and non-threatening. She noticed something stiff about Jytte, but she brushed past it as she sought to probe the woman's mind.

Jytte shook her head. "Please, do not do that."

Rajani blinked. "What?"

"Please refrain from trying to get inside me." Jytte hugged her arms around herself. "I am a very private person. Please."

Rajani nodded. "Forgive me, all of you. Reading thoughts and emotions is, to me, akin to hearing. It is a sixth sense that I have learned to live by. I did not mean to intrude." She brought her internal defenses up to shield the others from her probes, but still caught a sense of relief from Natch and Jytte both.

Bat's hostility almost punched through her mental wards. "You don't look like an extraterrestrial. They're small and gray and have light-bulb heads. You're different. Are you lying to us?"

Rajani sat on the edge of the cot. "No, no I am not. I can explain that, if you wish."

Natch reached back and took Bat's hand. "Please do."

"The race you have described are known to me and my people as the *Cythera*, and the phenotype is the one they assume in all but one phase of their life-cycle. They are very intelligent and developed space travel ages ago. Then they discovered other inhabited planets in their solar system and, on one of them, they met and allied with my people, the *Jes'da*. It was the *Cythera* who devised the plan and built the ships that came here to explore your solar system."

Rajani frowned, trying to remember exactly how her mother had explained all this to her while still trying to work in the explanation Dr. Chandra had devised for some of the things that she could do. "We, the *Jes'da*, travel with the *Cythera* and coexist with them. Often, the crews are mixed equally despite the *Cythera* vastly outnumbering us. There are many *Jes'da* who have grown up only in the company of the *Cythera*, and they have begun to resemble them because of that association."

Jytte's face remained impassive as she shook her head. "Contact Lamarckism? The idea that environmental influences create changes that are passed on to offspring has been rejected for decades as fallacious." She looked at Natch. "Bat's children, for example, won't inherit his scars."

"No, no, that's not it at all." Rajani closed her eyes and concentrated. "Dr. Chandra said we were *psychomimetic* and, with training, *psychomorphic*. In infancy and on up through the age of five or six of your years, roughly one of our life-measurement units, we imprint on our surroundings and adapt so as to

best survive. Protective coloration, if you will, that makes us take the form of those around us.

"You see, I was born on this world, though my parents were from a *Jes'da* colony world. I was raised in a lab setting where I interacted with humans and my parents. I retain their skin color, but physiologically I became more like a human than my parents—and they both looked very much like the *Cythera* with whom they had grown up."

Muscles twitched at the corners of Bat's jaw. "Nice stripes. Have a tiger for a pet?"

Rajani blushed. "These 'stripes' are not natural." She tossed off her jacket, then unbuttoned her shirt and slipped out of it. She held her arms out so they could see the stripes running the length of her arms, then turned so they could see where they fused into the solid gold line running from the waistband of her trousers on up to beneath her golden hair. She reached down and undid the button at the waist of her pants. "The stripes run up from my toes, as well."

Hal held his hand up. "We'll believe you on that; you don't need to show us. Put your shirt back on and finish your explanation."

She sat again and pulled the shirt on, but did not button it. "The stripes are from the tattooing done during a ritual that you would take to be a baptism, I think. My parents were both practitioners, or adepts, in a philosophical tradition of my people. It is called . . . well, with my vocal apparatus closer to yours than that of my parents, I can't even say the word, but it's almost pronounced *c'dithrta* . It teaches us to be always flexible and adaptable, to change the way the universe is changing."

She found herself trembling, and she struggled to stop. Natch sat beside her and hugged her gently. That helped a bit, but the waves of adamant disbelief rolling off Bat began to burrow through her. *Hatred and prejudice I can deal with, but at least those things confirm I exist. He refuses to believe anything I say. He denies what I am. He will grind me into nothing.*

Deep down inside, defiance sparked in her. Her head came up, and she met Bat's dark stare bravely. "Our psychomimetic nature ends at one LMU, but those of us who practice *c'dithrta* are able, through exercises and meditation, to make changes in ourselves. It is not easy, but given time and the solitude necessary, it is possible. One of Dr. Chandra's aides, a man named Nicholas, was fascinated with this psychomorphic ability and studied it and *c'dithrta* . He may have even written about it."

Bat's expression did not change, but the negativity stopped flowing so freely. "Why stasis?"

"Stasis tubes mute outside influences. I went into stasis to meditate on the nature of Fiddleback with the specific goal of my becoming attuned to him. My father wanted me to become able to spy on him without being detected. I worked on the shielding first and, so far, I've not been detected, or I've been able to deflect Fiddleback's probes. My stay in the stasis tube was interrupted by Fiddleback's proximity, and I left without being able to fully understand him.

"The reason for stasis, though, was to protect me. While we are in our meditations, we are very susceptible to outside influences." She smiled at Bat. "Were I to meditate in your proximity, for example, and had I proper nutrition, I would become that creature you want most to smash down and destroy."

Bat's eyes narrowed almost imperceptibly as a hostile wave pulsed out from him. Rajani recoiled from it, then was almost sucked in by the undertow of respect pouring off him. She felt very confused, but Bat drifted away until he rested his back against the wall and folded his hands across his chest.

Hal looked at him, then back at her. "This meditation you were doing? You said it was interrupted when Fiddleback showed up in Phoenix?"

Rajani nodded. "I had a hard time making sense of Fiddleback's thoughts because they came through on an emotional level that was akin to dealing with a volcano. His frustration and anger nearly overwhelmed me, and they would have if I'd not been in the stasis tube. After that, I sensed his confidence because his tormentor was walking into a trap. Later I found things he had sent out, searcher drones, that were looking for Coyote. Will and George made the connection with you and so I'm here."

The big African-American looked over at Jytte. "Comments?"

"The Native Americans check out. They were the ones who helped Nero Loring when his daughter was after him. They do not work for Fiddleback." Jytte stood rock-still as she spoke, reminding Rajani of a machine spitting out reams of facts. "Area 51 is still a highly classified base in Nevada. Dr. Parit Chandra worked for the Department of Defense as a consultant until he was diagnosed as having brain cancer in 1986. His body, and that of an unidentified female, were found in the ashes of a cabin near Big Bear Lake, California. She had been shot six times—it was ruled a murder/suicide. Nicholas Hunt was cited as a co-author of a research paper Chandra had published in 1981, but all traces of him are lost in 1984."

Jalal smiled. "Chandra probably splashed Hunt to keep Raj here a secret."

"No! Dr. Chandra would never do that." Rajani hesitated. "He would never have done that. You're sure Dr. Chandra is dead?"

The plea to the contrary in her voice brought Jytte back from wherever she had been. The blonde woman blinked at her, then glanced down at the floor. "I am afraid there is little doubt of that. I am . . . sorry."

"Take it easy, Rajani." Natch gave her shoulders a squeeze. "He knew you were safe, so he had to have died happy."

Rajani brushed away a tear, then laughed lightly. "Tears. We don't have these. I guess the pod didn't filter everything out."

"Anything else, Jytte?" Hal sat back in the chair he'd taken.

"Incidentals check, both what she told you before and other things she has said here. I think she is legitimate."

"I agree." Hal looked at Bat and Natch and got nods from both. "Good. Reaching Coyote won't be that easy because our only contact with him is in Tokyo. Looks like we'll have to head there, so pack up for a trip."

Natch frowned. "Can you get us in?"

Hal smiled confidently. "I have some old Suns teammates working the corporate leagues over there. My 'staff' and I have standing invitations to put on a clinic, and I feel in the mood to do some teaching."

Rajani felt the rising confidence in the room and found her spirits being buoyed right along with them. Still, something tugged at the back of her mind. She concentrated, then looked up at Bat. "You didn't believe me, but not because I said I was an extraterrestrial. You didn't believe me because I wasn't the

right kind of ET. How did you know about the *Cythera* ? "

"One of them once bet that his champion could tear a man limb from limb in under a minute." Lethal cruelty slid through Bat's smile. "He lost the bet."



Twisting away from the spear thrust, Coyote let his momentum spin him around. His right hand came up in a fist that arced through where the *getsul's* head had been a second before, then he pulled his own head down as the spear shaft swung over it. Still tucked into a crouch, Coyote rolled backward and ignored the monk's anticipatory cry of victory.

Reaching out with his mind, Coyote yanked himself through to another dimension. Uncurling himself, he stood and waited as the tip of the spear probed the slit in reality that had swallowed him. Grabbing it right behind the head, he tugged it forward, then shifted it back to the right and shoved. He felt the butt end of it hit solidly, then he pulled hard on it, and the spear came free and into the new dimension.

Turning to the right, he opened another hole and stepped through it. He turned his steps back on themselves and opened another hole through which he threw the spear, then he backed away and crouched down. *That should be enough to delay him, if he comes after me. If not, that's three down and two more to go.*

Only three weeks into his training, Coyote had met and exceeded the demands made on him by Mong. The monk labored long and hard to test the limits of Coyote's abilities. He challenged him with a number of different tasks, binding them all together to place Coyote under incredible stress. Coyote wondered if Mong was truly training him or just trying to crush his spirit.

For the current set of exercises, Mong led Coyote to what he described as a "clutch" dimension. "Kyi-can, it is a proto-dimension akin to multiple bubbles all joined together within a larger bubble. An adept can use his skills to move through the dimensional walls without venturing very far, and this particular clutch is largely benign and easily included within our wards."

"Largely benign?"

Coyote remembered the old monk smiling when he replied to that question. "What little natural life there is there tends to be harmless and timid. There will, however, be five *getsuls* doing their best to kill you. You are to elude or eliminate them, preferably without fatality to them."

"Or me."

"Indeed." Mong smiled quixotically. "I do not fear for your life in this exercise, but I do fear for it if you do not master this exercise."

So far, so good. Coyote closed his eyes and reached out with his mind. He expanded his consciousness until he reached the logical limits of the dim, dusty-red dimension in which he had taken refuge. He waited like a trap-door spider and sought any sign that anyone was moving through the dimensions nestled next to his in the clutch.

Nothing. He had identified the various clutch dimensions with terms that made focusing on them easier. The dimension in which he currently stood he had designated as Rust. Moderately warm and fairly dry, he scraped his tongue across his teeth to rid it of the metallic taste in the air. The desolate Marscape struck him as the most normal of the proto-dimensions in the clutch. In eluding the *getsul*, he'd made a brief side-trip into Muck and tossed the spear into Night.

Angle is likely where they want to engage me. Muck, Night and Crush are my three choices out of here, and the spear should lure someone into Night. I was just in Muck, so it looks like Crush is it. Having made that decision, he took two steps to the left, focused his mind on splitting the wall between dimensions and moved.

Crush's atmosphere closed in on him like a hot and humid summer day inside an iron box. The dimension's gravity ran about 30% greater than that of Earth, as nearly as Coyote could tell, except for the occasional "up-spout" in which gravity geysered up or out or counter to normal. The landscape gently rolled through a series of gray hills, with a deep, dark-blue sky that appeared to be in perpetual twilight. The only sign of life he saw were broad, squat plants and ribbon-like kelp that thrived in the up-spouts.

Coyote crouched, not wholly by his own choice, and let his mind stream out to probe the other nearby dimensions. Rust remained clear, but he detected something in Slide. *Slide has an advantage for the defender. As I'm supposed to be the one being hunted, and he's searching the logical place for me to be hiding, perhaps I can surprise him.*

Coyote concentrated and cleared his mind as much as he possibly could. He stopped probing Slide and, instead, left himself open and passive. He let all the impressions he could from Slide pour into him, then inside his head he filtered out everything but the *getsul's* probes. Like a stealth aircraft, he deadened his own image, giving the *getsul* nothing upon which to track. In return, however, he picked up on the man's probes and used them to pinpoint him.

Soft shift. Instead of popping a hard-and-fast shift image into his brain, which is what allowed him to do rip-shifts to elude pursuit, Coyote assembled an image of Slide from bits and pieces. He imagined the lighter gravity and cooler, drier atmosphere. The air tasted cool and slick. He filled the flat, glassy landscape with the rivers of neon colors that flowed through it. Whirling Frisbee clouds filled the sky like blue polka-dots on a pink background.

Building Slide up image by image, he willed himself forward. Without taking a step, he dissolved himself through the wall between Crush and Slide. As he opened his eyes he saw the tableau before him matched that which he had imagined in all but one aspect. A *getsul* crouched a dozen feet in front of him, utterly unaware that his foe had just materialized behind him.

"You lose, sport."

At the sound of his voice, the *getsul* spun around and made a serious mistake. Slide, as Coyote had discovered in his first run through the clutch's dimensions, could easily have been designated Teflon or Grease. Everything had the frictional equivalence of ice on wet glass. As the *getsul* completed his turn, his pivot foot slipped back, and his other foot skipped forward. He went down in an abrupt and painful split, then fell forward and bashed his face into the ground.

Coyote winced as the man hit. Dropping to one knee, he bent forward, then pulled his head up, imparting just enough forward momentum to his body to start him sliding toward the unconscious man. He bumped up against the *getsul* and that bled off his momentum. He pressed fingers to the man's throat

and found a strong, steady pulse.

Only one left, I think. Kneeling there, Coyote checked Crush and Muck but found no one. I don't want to stay here. Maybe Muck to Angle to Storm, and I can hide there.

Concentrating again, Coyote made a rip-cut in the wall of Slide and pulled himself through to Muck. He sank about six inches into the red-gray ooze covering the ground. He recognized the gelatinous substance as something Fiddleback had transplanted to a tower in Phoenix. Because the slime, which Coyote thought must have been some form of life, concentrated gravity in itself, it created a bond between whatever it touched. *If not for the fact that it probably, eventually, eats the stuff it touches, it could make wonderful Super Glue.*

He stood, and the slime dripped off his legs. Taking great sucking steps forward, he came to a sheer hillside covered with the slime. Climbing up, he twisted around and planted his back flat against the rock face. Hanging up above normal human eye level, he focused his mind and probed both Rust and Angle.

Initially, he caught only a faint impression of a *getsul* in Angle, but that trace evaporated beneath the harsh glare of a far stronger sensation. Someone or something entered the clutch and its trace filled the whole series of pocket dimensions. At first, Coyote thought someone had made a bad mistake in not shielding himself, but then he caught the edges on the impression and he realized it had been curbed so it would not extend beyond the clutch.

This is deliberate, then. A lure and a trap. As Coyote sorted through the sensations being broadcast by this new hunter, he decided it was not Mong, nor was it any of the other monks with whom he had trained. He also discovered the hunter was male, but he couldn't bring himself to see the hunter as a man. The second he drew that conclusion, he knew who was out there.

The Yidam.

Twisting his way around to face the cliff, Coyote clawed his way up toward the top. The impressions of the Yidam pounded into him like hoofbeats. The Yidam stalked openly through the clutch, confidently and contemptuously advertising its presence. The hammering sensations came faster and harder as the Yidam approached, but they so overwhelmed Coyote that he could not pinpoint a direction, and he looked about in vain for any sign of the creature as he reached the top of the cliff.

Suddenly, there above him, the Yidam appeared through a slash in the sky. Cloaked in black, the Yidam stepped through to the cliff edge and stared down at him. His scarlet eyes flashed with gold, and his gaze seemed to bore right through Coyote. White tusks stood out in sharp contrast with his jet-black skin, and the cloak opened enough to let Coyote see the necklace of skulls hanging from around his neck.

Gold glinting from his talons, the Yidam's right foot swept free of the mucusoid carpet creature and caught Coyote over his left ear. Stars exploded before Coyote's eyes, and he sensed himself starting to fall. At the same time, something stabbed deep into his mind, using his disorientation to make him vulnerable. He snapped his head around to try to break that contact, but only succeeded in starting his body rolling through the air.

« Get out of my mind! » Coyote focused long enough to snap his mind shut, then immediately assessed his situation. He knew he had little control over his body as it still fought off the shock of the blow. *One chance.*

Coyote ripped through to Angle and braced himself for impact. He landed with his left shoulder on one

of the huge hexagonal plates that made up the world of Angle. The plate gave a bit, preventing his shoulder from being crushed, then pushed back and returned almost all of his energy to him. Bouncing up at the complementary angle from that at which he'd hit, Coyote spun up and off to the right.

Are you as cocky as you advertise? Coyote craned his neck back to watch the gash from Muck and tried to will himself back toward it. As he spun around, he lost sight of it, then, as it came back into view, he saw the Yidam's feet break through. *Bingo!*

Spinning uncontrollably, Coyote passed close to the opening into Muck. His feet flailed through the air and caught the Yidam in mid-chest, crushing two of the skulls. The blow immediately killed Coyote's spin, but sent the Yidam whirling backward and down toward the ground.

The Yidam hit hard with his head, but the soft ground prevented him from breaking his neck. His body continued to spin down, slamming his buttocks into the ground as well, then he bounced up and started forward somersaults through the air. He made some motions to control his flight, but he headed away from Coyote and could do nothing until he hit the ground again.

Angle's gentle gravity pulled Coyote down to a hexagonal plain. His legs managed to support his weight by the time he landed, but he let himself drop into a crouch, anyway. Reaching down, he jabbed his hands into the Earth and tore a new opening into another proto-dimension. Taking one last look at the flying Yidam, Coyote broke through to Storm.

A driving barrage of hailstones blasted Coyote to the snowy ground. Pushing off the ground, he tried to stand, but a thunder strike's concussive explosion knocked him down again. Lightning strobed silver into the dark world, then the hissing sting of wind-spiced sand blinded him.

Not necessarily my best choice. He blinked away the sand and set himself as he sensed the Yidam's approach. He turned slowly, resigning himself to always be facing into the wind, and raised his left hand to shield his eyes. A forked lightning bolt split the sky, silhouetting the Yidam off to his right, then an arctic wind separated them with a sheet of snow.

Cutting to his right, Coyote snapped a kick through where he had last seen the Yidam. To his surprise, he connected solidly and heard a grunt. Expecting a riposte of some sort, Coyote threw himself on his face, then rolled twice to the right and rose into a low crouch. A curtain of rain cleansed the air between them, drenching the Yidam and wrapping him up in his heavily sodden cloak.

With a half-step forward, Coyote drove his right heel into the monster's spine. Raising his left arm, he blocked the elbow flying back at him, then hammered his right fist into the same spot he had kicked. He felt thick muscles protect the spine from the full force of the blow, but he hit again, then leaped back as the Yidam fell forward and scythed his legs back through where Coyote had stood.

As he landed, something in the back of his mind painted a schematic over the outline of the Yidam. His mind tried to fit the monster into a foe identification template and rejected it when the height and robustness of the figure failed to drop into standard variations from the norm. Before the template faded, Coyote saw it contained detailed information on the weakness of the creature it had described, including the locations of nerve ganglia and points where a single strike could maim or kill.

Where did that come from?

The Yidam looked back over his shoulder. «*From your master, Dark Minion!*» The Yidam pushed off the ground and set himself in a long-legged fighting stance. Still hidden beneath the cloak, his elbows

broadened his outline, and his gold-clawed hands appeared through the slit at its center. «*I know why you have been sent, and it ends now.*»

Coyote pulled back to the right as the Yidam closed and posted a kick that would have pulverized his left shoulder had it landed. Backpedaling as fast as he could, Coyote ducked and dodged away from the kicks and punches the Yidam threw at him. The creature's sheer ferocity and power made it terrifying, but Coyote's discipline and control made him invincible.

The Yidam came up and around with his left leg in a roundhouse kick that Coyote avoided easily. *Too easily.* As he made that realization, he saw the Yidam lean forward and use his flying leg to counterbalance his upper body. Reaching out with his right hand, the Yidam caught Coyote's right ankle and tossed him back up into the air.

Coyote landed hard on a rock ridge. The fall stunned him. He looked up as the Yidam loomed over him and raised a foot meant to crush his skull in one final stomp. Coyote tried in vain to bring his arms up to protect his head, but his limbs would not respond. *Sorry, Crowley, Fiddleback is all yours now.*

The foot never fell. Egg-sized hailstones caught the Yidam in the back like a shotgun blast, cartwheeling him over Coyote and down into a little hollow. A white, wet blanket of snow unfurled itself over them, then an icy gust of wind crystallized it into a sheet of ice. Water soaked him, then another sand storm gnawed on what little of his flesh it could expose beneath the ice.

Pumping his legs, Coyote kicked free of the ice. Rolling over onto his side, he slid down the hillside to where the Yidam lay buried on his stomach. He smashed the ice over the creature's head and saw by the vapor cloud he still breathed. When the Yidam's eyelids fluttered for a moment, Coyote raised his right fist for a knock-out blow, but dropped it when the creature's eyes did not open.

Been here too long. Reaching out, Coyote bored a hole between Storm and Might, then knelt in the warm, dry darkness of absolute night. When he had first run across Night, the idea of being utterly blind had frightened him, but he realized the total lack of visual stimulation made concentration easier. The tenebrous atmosphere felt heavy, as if filled with humidity, and flowed around him like a stream.

Calming his racing heart, he gently probed Rust to see if the last *getsul* had taken up a position there. He found nothing, so he pushed his probing beyond Rust to Muck and Crush. Those dimensions remained clear. Beyond them he added Slide and Angle to his sweep of the clutch. *Nothing.* He quickly checked Storm but he got nothing from it either. *Is he in Night?*

Coyote focused his mind on the dark dimension, but sensed nothing. *Maybe he was moving fast, remaining one step in front of my probes. Maybe he homed in on me as I did the getsul in Slide.* Coyote instantly moved to the left, remained low, and raised his hands to ward off unseen strikes.

If he is here, at least we're even—we're both blind.

«Wrong, Kyi-can,» Coyote heard the Yidam's voice in his mind, «*I see in the ultraviolet range.*»

Fingers tangled themselves in his hair, jerking his head back, and an invisible fist pounded him into unconsciousness.

Uncomfortably wet and stiff, Coyote awakened staring up at the night sky over Tibet. Back between his feet he saw the heavily guarded East Gate, but none of the monks at the far end of the causeway paid him any attention. They stared out beyond him, chanting as always.

Pain centered itself in his nose, and he immediately knew it had been broken. Licking his lips, he tasted blood. He pulled himself up into a sitting position, resting his back against the *Dukhang* wall, and waited until the wave of dizziness passed. Resting his elbows on his knees, he cradled his head in his hands.

It makes no sense. He assumed the creature he had fought in the training room was the same one who used the *naginata* to destroy the gorfash. The first time he met it, the Yidam tried to kill him, but the second time it saved his life. The third time it sought him and tried to kill him, but then didn't do the job when it had the chance in Night. *No sense at all.*

Coyote slowly stood and turned to lean on the wall. Looking up, he saw the Yidam's image staring down at him.

Coyote shook his head. "You mock me because you're in control, but you should not take refuge in that idea. Things change, and I change. Fiddleback thought he controlled me, and you, like him, will learn how dangerous I can be when the tables are turned."



Given Kip's apprehension about the Galactic Brotherhood Institute, Sin had not been sure what to expect when he accepted a recruiter's invitation to attend a Friday-night seminar offered by Arrigo El-Leichter. Over the phone, the woman had made it sound as innocent as a lecture about a trip to some exotic locale, but the talk's title, "The Secret Masters of Your Life," came across as far more sinister.

Things were slated to start at 7:30 P.M., so Sin arrived 15 minutes early on the off chance he would get a chance to take a look around the institute. According to the map he had of Kimpunshima, the Galbro Complex occupied as much space as a small multinational corporation could be expected to use, though its percentage of residential to operational facilities approached those of a service organization. Galbro did have access to the docks on the underside of the artificial island and maintained a hangar at the Level Two airport on the island's south end.

Early arrivals for lectures were expected and greeted by two smiling, uniformed women. Both struck Sin as a bit vacuous and even incongruous because, while he was used to being greeted at the door in Japan, the greeters were seldom Aryan types like these two. They directed him across a large, inlaid marble foyer to a built-in booth where another Nordic type was checking a list and handing out name tags.

"Welcome to GBI. How may I help you?" Standing in a booth filled with books, videos, CDs, cassettes and posters, the blond man looked as wholesome and clean cut as an ad for virtue.

Sin gave him an innocent smile. "I registered for this evening's lecture. I am Sinclair MacNeal."

The blue-eyed young man studied the printout on his clipboard, then smiled and checked a name off the list. He looked over at several rows of name tags, then plucked one from the center of a line. "Sinclair K. MacNeal, here you are." He pointed off to his left and toward a set of double doors. "Go in and take a seat. Try to get near the front so you can see Mr. El-Leichter better."

"Thank you." Sin took the tag and pinned it to his jacket's breast pocket. Following the man's directions,

he walked into a huge auditorium and headed directly for the tiny phalanx of folding chairs arranged at the far end near a podium. The room itself had the look of a gymnasium, but Sin saw no court lines painted on the parquet floor, nor any basketball backboards hanging on the walls. Instead, numerous tapestries, quilts and huge paintings decorated the room, with all of them sharing a "Visitors from the Stars" motif.

Sin thought most of them laughably amateur in execution. This surprised him, because he already knew GBI was highly sophisticated, as evidenced by his name tag. He had arranged with Lilith to have his file modified to change his middle initial every three hours. Their providing him with name tag that used a "K" as his middle initial meant they had accessed his file 33 to 36 hours after their recruiter made contact. Given the level of security consciousness Lorica Industries had shown, it meant GBI had excellent computer crackers or a plant inside LoricaJapan .

The only reason to have these things up here is to put us at ease and to use as contrast later. Looking at these things, I would hardly think aliens the sort of folks who would destroy Kip's boat or be running secret missions. This should be interesting, if nothing else.

Sin found himself a seat in the third row, over on the right edge. Up behind the podium he saw a huge banner of a white, polar-coordinate grid on a light blue background—about the same shade of blue as the United Nations flag, it seemed to him. Superimposed on the white web he saw stars arrayed in the familiar Big Dipper constellation, with the North Star hanging there above the whole circle. Beneath the whole design, in all capital letters, he read "THE GALACTIC BROTHERHOOD WELCOMES YOU."

Below the painting stood two sets of doors, one on either side of the podium. The one nearest him, to the right of center, looked like utterly unremarkable fire doors, complete with a glowing red exit sign over them. The other door, on the left, had a touch-sensitive scanning plate next to it. It looked to Sin very much like the one in the top of the Lorica Tower in Phoenix . He devoted a certain amount of his attention to that door and resolved, at some point, to get past it and into whatever GBI had gone to such pains to protect.

The room quickly filled, and Sin found himself doomed to spend the lecture next to a rather dapper man who had saturated himself with cologne. That man, in turn, let everyone else around him know that he was attending this lecture for the fifth time and that "you will learn things here that you never even dreamt could be possible." He smiled at Sin and added, "We all have our little secrets here, don't we?"

"Sure," Sin laughed. "I'm an agent in the employ of the Japanese government who's come to infiltrate this whole operation."

The perfume man did not take the joke well, but the others around him laughed, and that silenced him. Overhead air-conditioning units hummed to life, and the breeze they created succeeded in blowing the cologne stench away for the most part. *Things are looking up.* The lights slowly dimmed. *It's show time.*

Wall-mounted loudspeakers crackled. "Ladies and gentlebeings, it is the Galactic Brotherhood Institute's distinct pleasure to present to you tonight's featured speaker: Arrigo El-Leichter."

Everything faded to blackness for a second, then a platinum spotlight encircled the security door behind the podium dais. The door itself clicked, then opened slowly with a white vapor leaking out around its edges. As the smoke drained away, it revealed a figure of a man.

Tall and slender, his face had a sharp, angular bone structure and a straight, slender nose. His thick blond hair had been combed back to emphasize his broad forehead and widow's peak, yet was piled

high to show off its natural wave and thickness. Despite not having a massive, muscular body, when he moved forward, Sin had no doubt the charismatic man was physically powerful and mentally sharp. His piercing blue gaze swept across the audience, reflecting the light of the spot back on them.

He wore a custom-tailored suit of white that bridged the gap between a military uniform and something that might be a fashion rage in the near future. The jacket, which was cut to his waist, featured a double breast with lapels flared on either side looking almost like wings. The slight flare to the legs of his slacks allowed him to wear white boots without having to tuck the pants into them.

Arrigo El-Leichter strode to the dais and mounted it in one easy step. As he took his place behind the podium, the spotlight dimmed and the house lights came up a bit. Track lights on the ceiling illuminated the Galactic Brotherhood banner, and a vent somewhere shunted enough air at it to make it wave slightly.

Arrigo raised his right fist to thump his left breast, then extended it upward and out in a salute mimicked by some members of the audience. "I bring you greetings and best wishes from the Galactic Brotherhood Institute. Those of you who are with us for the first time might not know it, but we were formed three decades ago to help all mankind realize the unity of their creation and to help them attain their rightful place in the galaxy."

Sin felt the room's tension build as uninitiated folks like him began to wonder what they were doing there, but Arrigo drained it off with a smile. "You have probably heard many things about us and our work here—many wild and wondrous and even *crazy* stories about what we do and who we are." He laughed lightly, and the audience joined in. "Well, I will leave it to you to judge, after this evening, if any of those things are true. All I ask of you, right here and now, is to open your minds, and try to put aside your preconceptions. Don't ask yourself if what I will share with you is true or false, but ask yourself if it *could* be true, then judge from there what action you should take."

Sin smiled. The man's request sounded reasonable on the surface of it, but Sin saw the logical trap. He knew that if he were to accept as *possible* what the man said, then act on that possibility, he could be talked into anything. Arrigo was asking him to disable his decision-making faculties, then suggesting he could make a decision based on whatever he had left.

"The story I am going to tell you is going to sound strange and perhaps even disjointed. It is, in fact, far more complex than I am able to present here, and researching every facet of it is the main work of our organization. Rest assured that I would not offer any of these facts to you had not extensive and exhaustive studies been done of them."

The Galbro leader leaned heavily on the edges of the oak podium. "Over 60 years ago, on July 2, 1947, a spacecraft of extraterrestrial origin crashed during a thunderstorm on a farm outside Corona, New Mexico, in the United States. This has popularly been referred to as the 'Roswell Incident,' though it took place nearly 80 miles from that city. From the crash were recovered four EBEs—extraterrestrial biological entities—three of which died in the crash. The fourth remained alive and even recovered from his injuries. His name was Krlll.

"Krlll served as a liaison between the United States government and his people, a space-faring race we know as the 'Grays.' The Grays were, at the time of the crash, involved in a program of human kidnapping and animal mutilation. They managed to hide evidence of this from the United States government and, in return for aid in developing high-technology devices like antigravity spaceships, entered into an alliance with the United States and her allies. They later concluded a similar agreement with the Soviets and, by the time President Kennedy challenged America to put a man on the moon, the Grays, in conjunction with the CIA and KGB, already had an operational moonbase called Luna in

place."

Sin frowned. Man's race to the moon had taken place well before his birth, but he'd studied it avidly as he grew up. He'd also read enough about UFOs to recognize the reference to the Corona crash, but all of that had been explained away as a downed weather balloon. *This is nuts.*

Arrigo went on, keeping his voice low and sincere. "The Grays, to this day, continue their predation on mankind. They steal our people and use them for genetic experiments. Under terms of their agreement with the governments of the world, they built a number of underground bases, and the Grays use them to clone themselves and make hybrid Gray humans. You have heard of them from the few that have escaped. In some places in the United States, these forlorn individuals have become bogeymen, known variously as Gray devils or Gray-man or Grimmands.

"Through the alliance and agreements made in it, the Grays have succeeded in implanting one in 40 humans with tiny devices that, at an appointed time, will react to a signal and turn the afflicted into an army of zombies that will destroy the world as we know it. Those of you who have awakened with blood on your pillow from what you thought was a nocturnal nosebleed could well have been plucked from the safety of your bed and unwittingly turned into an implantee against your will!"

Various members of the audience apparently recognized themselves in Arrigo's description. Several rubbed at their noses, and one man in the back honked loudly as he blew his nose into a white handkerchief. Sin found himself wrinkling his nose unconsciously, then he frowned and exerted conscious control to banish the itching.

"I would be irresponsible, my dear friends, if I were to drop this bombshell on you without having some sort of solution to the problem the Grays pose. As you can imagine, they are not the only ET race in the universe. In fact, within a year of the Roswell Incident, a representative of another intergalactic race, the Noorn, arrived on our world and offered a warning about the Grays. He was ignored and ridiculed, mainly because he claimed to have come from Venus, when he really came from much farther. His name was Valiant Thor, and for years he worked to try to keep us safe from the Grays."

Arrigo looked down and seemed almost profoundly embarrassed for a moment. "Valiant Thor, while working with Dr. Frank E. Stranges, met and married my mother. I am his son, and his mission, after his murder at the hands of the Grays, has fallen to me. We have here, at the Galactic Brotherhood Institute, the equipment necessary to rid you of the Gray influence. We have training that will make you able to resist them and thwart their plans." He paused and smiled gently. "And it has been reported to me that one side effect of our training is an apparent increase in the material well-being of our students."

Arrigo stood up straight and clasped his hands before him humbly. "I know this is an incredible amount of information for you to digest. If you will turn to your left, one of my associates will start a video presentation we have that will show you much of the proof we have brought to light from beneath the shroud of a government cover-up. After that, I will gladly answer questions, then we can adjourn to a more informal setting where we will offer you refreshments."

The lights again went down, and a projection screen descended from the ceiling. Sin turned his chair toward it, and sat back to watch the presentation. It consisted of grainy photograph after grainy photograph of UFOs with complete listings of when and where they were sighted. Pictures of faces on Mars and clips from classic films like *ET* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* were included, the narrator noting their presentation as "fiction" was part of the Gray disinformation campaign designed to make people think of EBEs as harmless.

The barrage of pictures and short "eyewitness" segments appeared to Sin to be long on circumstantial evidence and twisted logic. He saw some of the thoroughly discredited Billy Meier photographs being touted as genuine, and heard once again the accusation that UFO debunker Philip J. Klass was a CIA agent. Claims of duplicity were made about people long dead, and the narrator asked questions designed to implant doubt in the minds of the viewers, using formulations like "Isn't it *curious* that . . . ?" or "Could it possibly be *coincidence* that . . . ?"

Sin found everything woven together in a nice package that connected utterly disparate elements into a web designed to gather everyone in. The shotgun approach to describing phenomena meant that almost everyone in the room would find one "fact" that rang true to them. Because that part of it checked in their mind, they seriously considered the other "facts" and weighed them accordingly.

The result was a conspiracy matrix that explained everything from natural disasters like the hole in the ozone layer to the assassination of President John Kennedy—allegedly at the hands of one of his own bodyguards. Taken as a whole, the conspiracy could be lifted out, and events would have still functioned the way they did, but the conspiracy made larger, sinister sense out of isolated incidents, it fed into the nascent sense of paranoia triggered in everyone when asked, "What if this is true, but the government doesn't want you to know it?"

Unconvinced, but impressed at Arrigo El-Leichter's ability to manipulate an audience, Sin watched the man return to the podium as the lights came back up, and the screen retracted into the ceiling. *He's very good. He offers hope and a promise of power, because he's manufactured the threat precisely so he can prescribe and provide the cure. No wonder Ryuhito would find this seductive, and why his grandfather is worried.*

Arrigo smiled at the crowd. "Thank you for letting us show you that very important information. Now, if you wish, I will entertain questions."

Sin concentrated on the man's face as a whole series of people asked him questions. Whether they were banal or probing, Arrigo never lost his smile and never seemed exasperated. He fielded every inquiry with the skill of third baseman playing pepper and managed to personalize each reply, yet added a bit of a message that included the whole audience.

I can't stand this. Sin raised his hand. Arrigo nodded to him, so Sin stood. "Sinclair MacNeal, Mr. El-Leichter. I've heard you say that the Grays control the world's governments in fact and through things like the Trilateral Commission—I believe, actually, that you said the Trilateral Commission took their name from the Gray coat of arms. What I would like to know is that if these people are so powerful and have labored so hard to keep their secret, how are you allowed to continue to exist?"

The edge in Sin's voice and the logic of his question immediately prompted nods from other members of the audience. Arrigo took this in stride and broadened his smile a bit. "Mr. MacNeal, that is an excellent question. What has protected me is the fact that I have gone public. If they were to hit me now, all of you would know that what I have said is the truth. So, instead of doing that, they allow me to speak and they labor to neutralize the people I have trained and those who would help us in our researches."

"Neutralize, sir?" Sin shook his head. "I'm afraid I don't follow that."

"For various reasons, we don't include this information in our video presentation, but the United States government maintains prison camps in Arizona to sequester those who know too much."

Sin made a great show of being surprised. "Mr. El-Leichter, I come from Arizona. There are no prison

camps there."

The smile on Arrigo's face shifted from one of amusement to a mask of beneficence. "Don't exist, Mr. MacNeal, or you have never seen them? You would agree there is a difference?"

The jaws of the trap snapped shut on Sin. He bowed his head. "You're right, there is a difference. And, no, I have never seen them."

"The Grays are very crafty, Mr. MacNeal. They do not take chances." Arrigo scratched at his right ear. "In fact, during your last stay in Japan, it is entirely possible that your father's corporation actually worked to construct one of the underground breeding camps south of Casa Grande."

Sin sat slowly and immediately knew his father was more than capable of making a pact with the devil if it meant shareholder dividends in the next quarter. *There are plenty of jobs that I don't know about. Build-more could have easily . . . wait a minute.*

Sin smiled and nodded his head. El-Leichter had succeeded in finding the "fact" Sin would latch onto. Very smooth. Probably has an earpiece linked to someone at a computer console. That's good, because my placement has got to make me a ripe candidate for recruitment.

"Well, then, if that is an end to the questions, please join us for refreshments in the lobby." Again Arrigo gave the audience a self-effacing smile. "My staff constantly reminds me that we do have certain costs, so some of my books and tapes are available outside, if you wish to learn more. We also have some GBI staffers there to help you with inquiries about our classes. Thank you for coming this evening."

Mild applause broke out, then the audience began to drift out toward the lobby. Sin purposefully hung back, yet provided the perfume man no opening to engage him in conversation. Sin assumed that he, as well as a number of other people in the crowd, were shills pimping for Galbro.

Arrigo El-Leichter strode over to where Sin sat. "I want to thank you for your question, Mr. MacNeal."

Sin laughed lightly. "Thank me? I hardly towed the party line here, Mr. El-Leichter. I would imagine you find doubting Thomases an annoyance."

"Ari, please, and may I call you Sinclair? Thank you." El-Leichter composed his face in a serious expression. "A question like yours shows you have actually been thinking about what you've heard. I could have hundreds of thousands of these people believing me in a second, many because they want to believe in *anything*. Now those people have as much right to our help as anyone, but they are not the sort of people who can help us."

"I'm not sure I follow you, Ari."

"Simply put, Sinclair, the Galactic Brotherhood can use everyone and welcomes everyone, but we *need* people who can think and who can lead." He glanced down at his hands, then back up into Sin's eyes. "I know this is a difficult time for you, and I applaud the sense you had in coming to Japan to get away from your divorce with Christina. It means you are capable of change and recognizing and making the difficult choices in life. I'd like to offer you a chance to maximize your potential."

Sin folded his arms across his chest. "You seem to know a great deal about me." *Including the divorce factoid that went into my file only two days ago.* "Your researchers are very good."

"Coming from a man with your background, I take that as a supreme compliment. Also, with your background, you'd know me to be an utter fool if I did not screen people to learn if they are Gray agents or not."

"Touché, Ari." Sin gave him a genuine smile. "What is this offer?"

Arrigo snapped his fingers, and one of his maroon-jacketed staff members slowly drifted over. "Mr. Handy here will drive you back to your hotel. We have a week-long workshop starting at midnight. I think you will find it very enlightening and rewarding. If you are indeed the sort of man your file makes you out to be, you will avail yourself of this opportunity."

Sin stood. "How much?"

"Good, very good." Arrigo smiled as he took a step back and gave Sin some room. "Always thinking. This workshop is free. Your accommodations and meals will be provided. All you need to do is pick up a shaving kit and a change of clothes. We will provide uniforms for most of the time you are here—we do that to promote solidarity in our cohorts, as I am certain you understand."

"All right, I'll do it." Sin started to offer the man his hand, but Arrigo had already moved beyond that range.

"Excellent." El-Leichter glanced at the security door through which he had entered the auditorium. "I will go make arrangements. You will find this very rewarding." He placed his hand over the scanner plate. The neon-green light outlined the bones in gangrenous hues, then the door clicked open and El-Leichter waved.

Sin returned the wave, then looked at his guide. "Shall we go, Mr. Handy?"

"Yes, sir." The man smiled and pointed toward the door. "You won't regret this, sir. You'll find this the most interesting week of your life."

Sin slapped him on the back. "Somehow I'm confident you are very, very right."



Rajani kept her finger on the elevator's "Door Open" button as Natch had instructed her. She quickly glanced out at the empty lobby one level below the New Palace Hotel's penthouse suites. "All clear, is that right?"

Natch popped some chewing gum. "Word up. We'll have you being a proper spotter in no time." Natch raked the lockpick in her right hand down while pressing up with the pick in her left. The lock next to the "Penthouse" button shifted slightly to the right, and Natch cursed. "Damn Corbin lock!"

"What does 'Corbin' mean?" After flying to Japan seated next to Natch and spending her first day there with her, she'd gotten a lot of the woman's street argot down, but Corbin was a new term.

Natch smiled gently. "Corbin is a brand name, kid." Natch used the pick in her left hand to probe the

lock, "It has mushroom tumblers in 3 and 5."

"Does this mean you cannot 'pop' it?"

"Child, there is no lock I can't pop, Corbin or otherwise." Natch frowned and went back to work on the lock. "Jes have to be really delicate with this one. Need the touch."

The tip of Natch's tongue appeared at the corner of her mouth as she concentrated. Rajani marveled at how Natch was able to focus on her task. Her hands moving with the skill of a surgeon, Natch played the pick down through the middle of the cylinder, then used the tension bar in her left hand to press up. She jiggled the tension bar, then raked the pick through the lock. Rajani heard a click, saw the cylinder twist to the left, and Natch laughed triumphantly.

"Let the door go." Natch hit the "Penthouse" button. "We're on our way."

Rajani did as she had been told, but frowned. "If this Mr. MacNeal is your contact in Tokyo, why are we breaking into his hotel suite?"

"Hal called him as soon as we got in on Friday night and left numerous messages for him on Saturday. Either MacNeal is ducking us, or something happened to him."

The elevator door to Sinclair's suite opened, and the two women stepped out into the foyer. Rajani smiled as she looked out into the opulence of Sin's accommodations. "This is not at all like the Hyatt, is it?"

Natch shook her head in response to the question, and Rajani immediately picked up a spike in the low-grade hostility she'd been getting from Natch throughout their morning's adventure. Rajani set her Yakult Swallows' baseball cap back on her head. "Why don't you like him?"

Natch shrugged silently and punched the glowing red message button on the side of the cabinet in the foyer. "Jes don't, that's all." The printer dutifully spit sheets of paper into the tray on a shelf. She sorted through them and then tossed them back into the basket. "Four from Hal, one from Lilith, one from a guy named Kip Martin and one from an Erika. 'Cept for Hal's, all of them came in on Saturday, and Martin wants to know why MacNeal stood him up."

Rajani opened herself up to the impressions in the room and smiled unconsciously. She had found her room at the Hyatt hopelessly sterile. Even the beds had nothing by way of unique impressions. Everything there struck her as washed-out and gray.

The suite, by contrast, felt like a riot of bright colors. Unfortunately, the strongest of them was a glossy black radiating out from Natch like a damp fog that threatened to swallow everything else. "Please, Natch, don't resent him so."

Sharp red lances jabbed out of the black fog. "Why not? It's his fault Hal was shot and Hal's wife Candy is dead. He hired the Warriors for Build-more, and his father gave the orders."

Rajani shook her head. "No, that's not possible." She opened her hands and raked them through the air. "The man who was here could never have condoned a murder like that. No, I can't believe it."

Natch's dark, almond-shaped eyes narrowed. "What do you know of him? You've never met him."

"People leave impressions, Natch. They leave them on things." Rajani looked around the room. "Living here for the past two weeks has meant Sinclair has left his mark on this place." Oddly, she found she could not impersonalize him by calling him MacNeal the way Natch had. "So have others."

Natch slowly smiled. "And I thought Hal had you along with me just so I could baby-sit you." She laughed and jammed her hands in her pockets. "Tell me about the others."

Rajani freed her mind of conscious thoughts and immediately found herself attracted to a big chair in the living room. She drifted toward it and ran her hands over the embroidered fabric. "There was someone here of incredible power and presence. The impression here is stronger than any other in the whole place, but it is focused right here." *Outside of my brush with Fiddleback, I have never felt anything this strong.*

"What do you make of this?" Natch tossed her a dark ball that unfurled itself into the silk stocking she'd pulled from behind a couch cushion. "Either MacNeal dresses funny, or he did the do with some b-squeeze."

Rajani caught the stocking and relished the softness as it curled over the back of her hand, "It belongs to a woman, but it is new, so that's all I can tell." She frowned. "What does 'did the do' mean?"

"You know, got down, got physical, did the lam *beda*." Natch planted her fists on her hips. "You know."

She followed Natch's gaze toward the suite's bedroom, then saw the other woman blush. "Oh, they engaged in procreative activities. Like you and Bat."

Natch's nostrils flared. "You some kind of psy-spy?"

"No, no, believe me." Rajani swallowed quickly. "As Jytte requested, I have remained very careful not to intrude. The only things I do pick up are those feelings that are so strong that you cannot contain them. They are the same ones that you humans tend to translate into physical action, like a caress or a kiss. I mean, literally, that is a sign that you cannot contain the emotion, and I pick it up like hearing a snake's rattle seconds before feeling the bite."

She saw Natch was not convinced. "Is not my assumption about you and Bat a logical one? You share the same room at the Hyatt. You spend a great deal of time together. You clearly care for him. Are these not the signs of a bonded relationship among humans?"

"My relationship with Bat is special, Rajani." Natch's eyes focused distantly. "He helped me out in a very dangerous situation. He wasn't doing it for me—he wanted to take me away from the broker to whom I'd been sold to hurt that man. It was one of the first times he and Coyote—the original Coyote—worked together."

Natch's head came up and her gaze met Rajani's openly. "I was in bad shape—they'd tethered me to a hype so I wouldn't run. I needed someone, and Bat got elected because of proximity. He didn't want the job, but I think no one ever needed him before. It surprised him, as did I when I didn't break when he touched me."

"You're an anchor for him."

"No. I'd love to be an anchor for him." Natch shook her head and pulled her blue Dragons baseball cap down to shield her eyes. "At best, I'm a brake on him, slowing him a bit, but he's bound for where he's

bound, and there's no stopping him."

Rajani sensed Natch's reluctance to continue, so she quickly shifted the subject. "I do not think, based on this stocking and the things I feel about Sinclair, that there was any bonding here. If not for this, I do not think I would have known she was here."

Natch shrugged. "Anything that will tell us where he is?"

Rajani moved past Natch and headed into the bedroom. She felt stronger impressions coming from the bed, as well as a hint of the woman's presence, so she stayed away from it. Instead, she stepped into the bathroom and discovered a surprise. "Natch, come here."

"What?"

Rajani pointed to the clear counter space on either side of the bathroom sink. "When I was allowed to watch television, I used to watch detective programs. They always get things like hair samples from brushes or can tell how much money someone makes by their choice of cologne."

"Word up. This room is chilled to stuff like that, though."

"Exactly, I think." Rajani turned to her and smiled. "In Hal's room, during the meeting we had this morning, I used the bathroom. Hal's shaving kit was all laid out nice and neat on the counter. He even had a little case there with places for everything, and it had the logo of the hop team he used to play for on it."

"That's 'hoop,' Rajani."

"Hoop, okay. The point is that Sinclair's shaving kit isn't here. If he'd been taken by someone, I don't think they would take his stuff with them, do you?"

Natch darted back out of the bathroom, and Rajani heard the sound of the closet door sliding open. "Most of the hangers are full, and the valet service's plastic wrap is still on his tuxedo. Looks like maybe one business suit is gone. Maybe the stocking woman has our boy out playing when he should be working."

"Maybe." Rajani walked from the bathroom to the dresser and fondled one of a pair of cufflinks sitting on top of it. "Could Jytte check to see if he's rented a car or bought train tickets or charged a gift or something?"

Natch nodded and pointed at the phone on the bedside table. "Call her and ask her to start."

"No, I can't."

"What?"

"Jytte acts very skittish around me." Rajani cupped the cufflink in her hands and shook it around. "She doesn't trust me. She keeps pushing me away."

Natch laughed. "She does that to everyone, including herself. Ever notice how she always sits in the darkest part of a room and keeps out of line with a mirror?"

Rajani shook her head.

"Then you've not been around her much. She got worked over by a guy called Pygmalion. I don't know much about him, except that he's supposed to do with flesh what Michelangelo did with marble. I heard Jytte used to be a frumpy little mouse of a woman."

"Is that possible? She's so beautiful now."

The petite woman shrugged. "Don't know, but that's what Jytte says. She also says she doesn't remember anything about the Pyg-man, but I think that's because she isn't trying hard enough to remember. I think part of her secretly loves the way she looks now, which fuels her hatred for Pygmalion and herself—him as the man who raped her body and her for letting herself be a victim. She doesn't want to face any of it, so she never lets anyone in and keeps to her machines.

"You, you're a threat because you can muck around in her mind." Natch winked at her. "I know, and so does she, that you're not doing that. I also think she had it bad for the real Coyote, and when he went the way of all flesh, she threw herself into making sure the new Coyote would become everything his predecessor wanted him to be. With him being off and out of touch, and you arriving with a warning, well . . ."

"It's messing with her wet-ware?"

"You're hooked tight." Natch looked at the closet again, then back at Rajani. "You don't think MacNeal is out scrappin' with the stocking lady?"

Rajani's hands flattened around the cufflink. "No. I think he went to a party in his tuxedo and was wearing these cufflinks at the time. He was confident and happy and in his element. He was doing all he could to make an impression, and I think he succeeded."

"One silk legskin: Exhibit A."

"True. I can't see him starting out so formally then backsliding. He would make the next outing even more spectacular." She glanced over her shoulder at the chair in the living room. "No, I think he subsequently had a visitor who asked him to do something for him."

"Is he in danger, do you think?"

"I don't know." She added the other cufflink to its mate. "These tell me nothing."

Natch frowned, then slapped her forehead with her open right palm. "If my head weren't bolted on."

"What?"

Natch marched back out into the main room with Rajani following behind. "MacNeal is supposed to be a big security expert, isn't he?"

"I guess."

The American woman knelt down and ran her hand beneath the dust curtain around the base of the couch. "He was bound to have a gun somewhere. Needed easy access, but had to be located in a place where it was not likely to be discovered by the staff, since guns are illegal in Japan."

Rajani marveled as Natch moved through the room and searched it thoroughly. "You've done this before?"

"Girlfriend, I've made a tidy living off finding things folks don't want found."

"What can I do?"

Natch shrugged again, then pointed at the metal briefcase beside the message unit in the foyer. "It's possible he kept it there. Check. If it's locked, sing out."

The *Jes'da* female picked up the briefcase and crouched slightly to balance it on her thighs. Gold-nailed thumbs pulled back on the buttons, and the latches snapped open. Rajani lifted the lid expectantly, then shut the case again. "Empty except for a stack of computer paper. What next?"

Natch straightened up. "Computer paper?" She shook her head. "And you call yourself a security *expert*, MacNeal?"

Crossing the room, Natch opened the door above the message center, exposing the printer. It sat on a Plexiglas stand that had nestled in it a stack of computer paper. Twisting the stand and printer around, Natch pulled on the bottom half of the paper stack, and it came out in one solid, doughnut-shaped piece.

"I don't understand."

"It's easy, Raj. Folks got to thinking that thieves are really stupid. We would take a printer or a computer, but leave the paper behind because it was heavy and had no value to a fence. They were right. As a result, though, they pulled a switch on the old hollow book hiding-place trick and took to making little hideaways in a two- or three-inch stack of paper."

"So, as long as the printer didn't run out of paper . . ."

"Or some clumsy thief didn't accidentally knock a pile of paper onto the floor . . ."

"The valuables would remain hidden." Rajani looked at the paper in Natch's hands. "No gun."

"Right, no gun." She set the paper back in the cabinet and closed it up. "That means, as you figured, MacNeal went of his own accord and had time to take his gun with him."

Rajani's left fist closed on the cufflinks. "And that means he knows he's walking into trouble."



Using a hammered-silver mirror, Coyote placed a new strip of white adhesive tape over his nose. After he had stumbled to his chamber upon his return from the clutch dimensions, he had slept for the better part of a day. Sometime during that day, he discovered when he woke up, he had been bathed and bandaged. Already the swelling in his face had gone down, and the outer edges of the bruising beneath his eyes had begun to turn a jaundiced yellow.

"You heal quickly, Kyi-can."

Coyote turned slowly. "So it appears, Lama Mong. When do I resume my training?"

"Whenever you feel physically able, Kyi-can." The monk watched him serenely. "The way you mend, it should only be a couple of days."

"I'm physically able now, Mong. You know as well as I do that I could go out into your main courtyard and take on everything you care to throw at me."

"Really?" Mong's face hardened. "Your bruises would seem to suggest something to the contrary."

The tall man leaned back against the stone wall and let the cold, rough stone leech heat from his body. "Physically, I'm ready, but I need answers to some questions before I decide to continue. First and foremost, why the charade?"

"Charade?" Mong folded his hands into the sleeves of his red robe. "What charade is this?"

"This shell game about training me to walk through dimensions." Coyote held his right hand up and started ticking things off on his fingers. "I have learned in weeks—I have *mastered* in weeks—skills it takes your monks a minimum of five years to learn—longer in most cases. Those monks adhere to strict rules of conduct to cleanse themselves spiritually. They can be expelled from the monastery for lying, stealing, fornicating and murdering, yet I have done all of these things, and the reason I killed was for money. In four hours of contemplation, I manage to attain a knowledge and understanding of the universe many would envy after a lifetime of meditations."

"I have often praised your prowess, Kyi-can, and I have told you that, as an outsider, there are things about you that are unimportant."

"That's bullshit, pure and simple, Mong, and you know it." Coyote's right hand closed into a fist. "The fact is that you've not taught me anything here, really. All you've done is reacquaint me with skills I already possessed. And you've done this while keeping me under a microscope. You've been watching me and testing me. Why?"

The old man's voice took on an angry edge Coyote had never heard before. "You are the one spinning this fantasy. Why do you think I would agree to open Kanggenpo to you, then participate in this testing?"

The tall man pushed off the wall and paced through his small cell. "You trained Crowley and, through him, learned of me. From him, you learned I had been one of Fiddleback's pets. He told you what I had done to defeat Fiddleback and, from the last journey he and I took together, he realized that my training had gone even further than the original Coyote had dared guess."

He looked over at the monk. "You were afraid I was still one of Fiddleback's minions. If I was, you would stop me, is that it?"

"You are every bit as quick as Mi-ma-yin told me."

"Why?"

Mong seemed to shrink as he sighed. "In 1989, I was sent as an envoy from Tibet to Beijing to plead with

the government to stop the dilution of our population. I had hoped, with the reforms sweeping the world, that the spirit of freedom had truly come to my homeland. In Beijing, I saw many things, wondrous things, from which I had been isolated in Kanggenpo. I became swept up in the fervor and intoxicated by the prospects of liberty.

"I was in Tiananmen Square on the 3rd and 4th of June. Yes, I had seen death before, but never like this. I watched as freedom-drunk students stepped bravely before tanks, knowing in their hearts that their countrymen could never run them over. I watched others march singing into the face of machinegun fire. And I was dragooned to help burn the bodies and hide the evidence of what happened, then I returned home to a new wave of repression."

Mong wore the pain of years on his face as he looked at Coyote. "There, in Tiananmen Square, I felt the first touch of the Dark Lords. I do not know if that was Fiddleback or another of his misbegotten brethren, but it showed me that malign forces did inhabit the universe. When Mi-ma-yin said you had been forged by one of them, I felt no choice but to bring you here so I could see for myself what you were. If, as Mi-ma-yin felt certain, you had been broken away from the Dark Lord's control, you could serve as a hideously powerful weapon to use against any and all of them."

Coyote clasped his hands behind his back. "What do you think? Do I still belong to Fiddleback?"

"If I thought that, you would not have recovered from your injuries." The monk smiled grimly. "I am not, however, the court of final arbitration."

"The Yidam." Coyote rubbed his chin with his left hand. "This begins to make sense. The night we fought in the training area, he sought evidence of any special ability Fiddleback might have given. He thought, because of the advantage he had over me, I would use it. Then he had to save me from the gorfash because he had not made his decision about me yet. But why was he . . ." Coyote's head came up. "The red pulse that you shot back into Kanggenpo, that alerted the Yidam to the *getsul's* distress. That's why you tried to stall me and keep me back."

"He has fought gorfash before."

"I see. Then, two days ago, in the clutch, he came to provoke me and get me to betray myself. He threatened to kill me, but did not." Coyote gingerly brushed the fingertips of his right hand over the tape on his nose. "Why not?"

The monk shook his head. "That is a question I cannot answer. Only he can answer it."

Coyote pressed his lips together into a flat line. "And I know where he is, so the only question I have now is how do I get there?"

Mong smiled. "You knew much before you came here, but the exercises I forced upon you honed your skills. You know what you are; that is your strength. As the Yidam has said, if you are worthy of the answer to your question, you will find the way to obtain it."

The setting sun cast the *Dukhang's* long shadow over Coyote like a shroud. He stood there with his back to the east gate, concentrating on the Yidam's portrait. Clad in boots, fatigue pants and a sleeveless black T-shirt, he tugged on black leather gloves and flexed his hands. A breeze tousled his dark hair, then died abruptly.

You know what you are; that is your strength. In Mong's words, Coyote found the key that unlocked

a huge portion of the mystery he still was to himself. He had known, both through what the original Coyote had told him and through evidence of his skills, that Fiddleback had been behind his training as an assassin. His predecessor as Coyote noted that he was one of the top 10 assassins in the world and especially effective against targets that had to be hunted down. *I am not merely an assassin. Fiddleback made me into a hunter who could move through the dimensions with a singleness of purpose: killing his enemies.*

That realization brought other things into perspective. When he shifted into Slide, he had appeared behind the *getsul* not by chance, but by unconscious design. He had used the man's probes to track back on him, and he appeared in Slide at a point where he could have killed the man with ease. Coyote also realized that the stronger and more able the foe, the easier the time he would have tracking him.

Other things confirmed for him the narrow purpose to which he had been directed. He had seen Crowley move things by the force of his mind, or cause things to burst into flame with a thought. He also knew Crowley could use psychometry to gain impressions about people from things they had worn or owned or touched. Crowley could also lift thoughts from the brains of others, yet another skill denied him. Coyote knew he could do none of these things, and he suspected that Fiddleback, when the time came, would have provided him with the empathic equivalent of bloodhounds to let him begin the chase on a target.

Coyote closed his eyes and summoned into his mind the image of the Yidam standing over him. Locking that firmly in place, he opened his eyes and began to modify the mental picture until it merged with the one on the wall of the *Dukhang*. He layered in the solid feeling he'd had in hitting the creature in Storm. He added the sound of its mental contact with him and the ferocity of its attacks. Lastly, he overlaid the tactical diagram he'd imagined in the clutch and changed it to fit and enfold the Yidam.

The daylight and wind world slowly dissolved around Coyote. Darkness seeped in at the edges and, even though he remained motionless, he sensed himself moving forward and down into the black void he had seen in the temple. *This is the Gonkhang—the lair of the Yidam.*

Though he had not given any thought to where a creature like that might live, the place in which he found himself surprised him. The basic architecture proved this place to have been part of the temple since its construction. Thick stone pillars supported the ceiling, and hanging oil lamps provided dim balls of illumination within the cavernous room. The dry, dusty air made the *Gonkhang* feel more like a crypt than place of worship, yet Coyote still felt the place once deserved reverence and respect.

Throughout the room, Coyote saw hundreds upon hundreds of tiny tableaux arranged on shelves and tables. Some of the tables were little more than rectangular boxes filled with sand and rocks that had been molded into rolling landscapes. On these Coyote saw vast armies of tiny figures arrayed in battle lines, as if frozen in some tangible holograph on the eve of battle.

Moving through the room in silence, Coyote recognized some of the armies that had been painstakingly rendered in miniature. Blue and gray forces vied for supremacy in a battle he guessed had taken place during the American Civil War. Brightly colored troops from a Napoleonic conflict dominated another shrunken battlefield. What could have been the bold Spartans bedeviling the Persians at Thermopylae appeared at his left and a scale model of Stalingrad's tractor factory appeared on his right.

Walking deeper and deeper into the *Gonkhang*, he saw many more battles and discovered he recognized few of them. Troops had been painted with strange colors, and their shapes had been modified so they no longer resembled any creature he could recognize. While part of him wanted to dismiss these new displays as fantasy encounters, the adherence to detail in the creation of the armies and

the care with which they had been laid out told him that they were every bit as real as the conflicts he recognized.

As he moved past huge conflagrations featuring giant robots and skirmishes between hordes of dinosaurian combatants, a shiver ran down his spine. *These fights must have taken place in other dimensions. The scale of destruction is unimaginable.*

A yellow corona surrounded the Yidam's cloaked figure. Coyote found himself approaching the creature from behind, but somehow he knew the Yidam was aware of his presence. Still, the monster kept his head down and continued to work on something sitting on the table before him. Getting closer, Coyote saw several lines of shiny metal figures waiting to be painted and realized what the Yidam was doing.

Coyote stopped. "What are you?"

The Yidam half-turned in his chair and raised the wire-rimmed glasses up onto his forehead. "You really mean to ask what *was* I, for this work is not that which a Yidam could accomplish. I *was* a military officer, a tactician and a historian."

Coyote nodded slowly. "I can see that. I recognize some of these battles, but not others. I know you can travel through the dimensions. These others took place there?"

"Other places, other times." The Yidam removed the glasses and set them on the table. "I found in myself a fascination with conflict, and I became well known among my peers as a brilliant theoretician. I studied everything I could about war and, eventually, I came to develop a comprehensive theory of war that turned previous admiration into scorn."

Coyote took a step backward as the Yidam stood. "You saw a common element in wars, or those things that triggered them? You saw something that you could not explain."

The oil lamps' light stained the Yidam's tusks a dull yellow. "Two things really, but they were related. The first was a spark of insanity that started conflicts. It takes one of two forms: an unreasoning confidence in the assurance of total victory or the unwavering conviction that unseen enemies will destroy you if you do not strike out first. The second thing proved more disturbing to me, and that was the transformation of perfectly normal and sane individuals into savages bent on creating as much pain and horror and suffering as possible."

"And, like Mong, in this you saw a Dark Lord?" Coyote realized he'd unconsciously balled his fists, so he forced them open. "Yet when you tried to explain what you had seen, you had no evidence, and no one would believe your unsubstantiated conspiracy theory."

The Yidam nodded. "When I learned of a mission to another star—your star—my wife and I volunteered. I had to learn if there were other races in other star systems, and if they were suffering the depredations of Dark Lords as well, or if they were free of such evil influences.

"It turns out I was correct in suspecting that a Dark Lord was working here." His red eyes narrowed to bloody crescents. "I was mistaken in bringing my family into danger."

Coyote tugged at the hem of his left glove. "You said I meant to ask what you had been. Now I ask my original question again: What are you?"

The Yidam smiled most grimly and his voice lowered. "I am now Kanggenpo's Yidam." His taloned feet

spread out as he sank into a fighting stance. "And if you are still a creature of Fiddleback, I will be your death."



Sinclair MacNeal raised his hand and smiled semi-benignly at the instructor standing in his little study group. "Ms. Markgraf, I'm not doubting what you're telling us about how the United States government shot down and recovered a Gray UFO off Long Island in 1989, but I question the logic of believing in it having happened. If you'll follow me, you've told us that James Forrestal, Secretary of Defense for the US, was one of the first abductees and that he was later killed by the CIA before he could go public with the information about the Grays. That means, especially with the increasing number of abductions going on in the 1980s, that the government knew they were powerless to stop the Grays, right?"

The matronly Aryan woman rested her hands on her hips. "So, what is your point, Mr. MacNeal?"

"Well, ma'am, if I knew someone could kidnap me or my family or my friends and really mess them up, and that I would be powerless to prevent the kidnapping and unable to help them out later, and I am going to piss that someone off?" Sin glanced across the circle at the thoughtful Japanese youth sitting there. "I mean, I understand a ruler's desire to keep his people safe, but there is no logic in shooting an alien craft when retribution is likely to come quickly and be nasty."

Ms. Markgraf smiled confidently. "Perhaps the president at the time had already been kidnapped and implanted. Perhaps he was acting under the orders of the Grays."

"Excuse me, Ms. Markgraf," Ryuhito began as he leaned forward, "but there is no logic to the Grays ordering humans to shoot down a Gray ship. Even if a Gray leader wanted the commander of that craft dead, the wisdom in showing humanity it possessed the technology necessary to shoot down one of their craft must be questioned."

"But, Highness, you and Mr. MacNeal continue to make the error of viewing the Grays while using human logic. They think in an utterly alien pattern, one that makes little sense to us."

Ryuhito nodded sharply. "This is apparent, Ms. Markgraf, because your explanation of their motives is utterly without logic. At the same time you claim we shot down a people possessing crafts capable of spanning the gulf between stars, humans were beginning the successful use of genetic therapy to combat congenital defects. You claim the Grays came here to steal our genetic material to replenish their own deteriorating DNA, but the chances of such an exchange working are miniscule. Moreover, the level of technology needed for them to travel here and determine that our DNA was harvestable and useful to them is well beyond that level needed to solve the problems for which they were going to steal from us."

Sin nodded and leaped into the fray. "Another thing, Ms. Markgraf, you've said we had high-tech weapons being developed to take out that alien craft. I think you said one was a sound-based weapon developed under the codename JOSHUA. You said it was used to shoot down the Long Island UFO, yet there is no record of that same weapon being used in the Gulf War with Iraq, or in any conflict, for that matter."

Looking flustered, the large woman fingered the whistle hanging around her neck on a yellow cord, "It

only works on Grays."

"Bah, nonsense." Ryuhito imperiously waved away her explanation. "JOSHUA was a weapon that concentrated sound waves. That technology has been used for the past 25 years for ultrasound scans and to pulverize kidney stones. High and sharp sounds have been employed in various forms for crowd control. Repetitious playing of simple rock 'n' roll records were enough to drive Manuel Noriega from the Papal Nuncio during the American invasion of Panama. What works on kidney stones would work on bunkers, and Saddam Hussein was not that different from Noriega. If the United States had possessed such power in 1989, they would have used it in 1991."

"Well, well . . ." Ms. Markgraf wiped her forehead on the short sleeve of her gray T-shirt. "I think these are good questions, and you should pose them to Mr. El-Leichter. It is time for you to break anyway and dress for dinner, so let us leave things that way until later."

Sin followed her gaze as she looked up at the figure standing in the picture window overlooking the large training arena. Arrigo El-Leichter waved benevolently at her and the study circle sitting in the middle of the AstroTurf field. He nodded at her, then gestured as if to urge her to continue.

Ms. Markgraf swallowed audibly, then licked sweat from her upper lip. "As I said, you will be dismissed." She raised the whistle toward her lips and gave them a short blast that lacked the sadistic intensity of earlier in the day. "Give me four laps, then go to your rooms. I will see you this evening, and you will have answers then."

Sin glanced up again at El-Leichter and, despite the distance, saw a self-satisfied smile on the man's face. Either Markgraf did something very wrong, and earned our group as the punishment, or we are being set up to feel superior. Perhaps both. He increased his speed a bit to catch up slowly with Ryuhito. At least they're not impressing the emperor's grandson, yet. And a bit part of me hopes I'm not there to see what they will do to impress him.

Arrigo El-Leichter turned from the window and walked over to his XR-8500 desk. His left index finger stabbed the curtain icon on the LCD screen, and the curtains slid closed. He brought his hand down to another icon and hit it.

"Yes, sir?" asked the disembodied voice of his secretary.

"Janny, dear, I will leave from here directly for the dinner tonight. You can finish up now, then go off home. Please set the phones up so I won't be disturbed."

"Yes, sir." An electronic hum filled the air as the woman hesitated. "Does that include your wife's private line?"

Arrigo's nostrils flared for a moment, then he regained control. "Yes, Janny, it does. Call Raoul and tell him I don't think it is necessary for my wife to attend me tonight. And, Janny, prepare yourself because you will join me for dinner tonight."

"Yes, sir! Thank you, Mr. El-Leichter."

"Ari from now on, Janny."

"Yes, Ari."

The tall man punched the lockout button on his desktop. Locks on the doors and windows snapped shut, then the surface of the desk changed. A darkness swallowed the normal icons on it and replaced them with strange sigils and images that appeared to be the stuff of nightmares. His hand drifted above all of them, then he touched a spot on the screen that had no visible icon on it at all.

The glass-panel doors on the centermost, floor-to-ceiling bookcase opposite his desk closed and locked tight. The top of it tipped toward the floor and, like a Murphy bed, the whole case rotated toward the ground. Numerous dark cables snaked from a hidden area behind it and might have appeared, had Arrigo ever allowed a casual observer into the room, to be electrical lines. He knew this was because, in their current dormant state, they looked black, exactly like most power cords.

As the bookcase touched down and locked into position on the floor, the substance clinging to the back of it quivered. Arrigo recalled thinking of it as black Jell-O when he first saw it, but that opinion had been modified by years of contact with it. At its heart he saw a green glow that began to pulse sluggishly. Ghostly green lights shot off through it, backlighting fibrous structures in the slowly swelling matrix. The cables thickened and, as they did, began to glow with jade energy.

As the green light began to pump faster, the glossy goo shifted shape. Sharply pointed things began to poke up like skeletal fingers. They never managed to pierce the gangrenous gelatin. Instead, it spread out between them like fleshy webbing, and that webbing, as it thinned to translucency, revealed the connective tissues binding the tall spires together into a bizarre, slime-laden skeletal hand.

Arrigo licked his dry lips and tried to tell himself he had nothing to fear, this time. Removing his clothes, he assured himself he had done well. He had done his master's bidding and even exceeded it. His master would be proud. He knew it, and he knew he would be rewarded.

He stepped forward and lowered his right foot into the amoeboid mass. He fought the shiver that the first cold touch always brought with it, but he failed. Deep down inside he knew he was reacting to more than the temperature. Despite the way the goop pulled heat away from him, he began to perspire.

Turning around slowly to face his desk, he lowered his body onto the giant palm and pressed his spine against the elongated middle finger. He let his head drift back until he felt the ooze's cold kiss through his hair. He shifted once to more comfortably accommodate his shrinking scrotum, then he raised his hands and crossed his arms across his chest. Capping each shoulder with the opposite hand, he closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe normally.

The throbbing began at the base of the chair, but quickly started up through the middle finger. Inch by inch it vibrated its way up his spine, and he found himself shivering as it reached the middle of his shoulders. His scalp began to itch as the vibration rattled his teeth. At that point he clamped his jaw shut tight and concentrated on breathing in and out of his nose. Like a horse snorting after a gallop, Arrigo El-Leichter braced himself.

Greenish sludge dripped languidly down over him from above. A thick, choking mask poured over his face and the fetid scent of decay filled his nose. He wanted to scream, but he managed to keep his mouth shut. Tasting that stuff, he knew, was the only thing worse than smelling it. It filled his ears, then drenched his shoulders and clung like honey to his chest. It coursed down his body to his loins, then cascaded down over his legs.

Once it had coated him completely, it became even more turgid. His wife, having once discovered him in communion with his master, had told her doctors he looked trapped within a diseased placenta. The image had not much pleased him, nor had the complication of having to deal with her because of her

discovery, but he did acknowledge the accuracy of it. *Through this I have been born again into power.*

The membrane surrounding him palpated his body. Two tubular tendrils shot up his nose and snaked their way down his windpipe to his lungs. He swallowed reflexively against the sensation, but he much preferred it to the burning in his lungs that they alleviated. The membrane tightened slightly around his chest, and his lungs no longer pumped.

«What have you for me, my pet?» The telepathically communicated question came not in words as much as colors and scents and feelings blasted straight into his brain. «*Have you the godling you promised?*»

Arrigo tried to nod, but he did not possess the strength needed to make the elastic membrane move. «I have him, master, as I told you I would. I have him in an Alpha group, and he believes himself superior. He is impatient, and his frustration will make him leap at what you offer.»

«Exzellent, my pet.» It felt as if something wonderful had exploded in his brain. Intellectually, Arrigo knew his master had just caused his pleasure centers to fire, but the rest of him craved more and more. «*What elze have you, pet? I senze zomething elze.*»

Arrigo felt barely able to contain himself. «That Alpha group has another who is as strong as Ryu hito. He comes from America and has many corporate ties. He is a security expert.»

«Thiz one checkz complete? He iz not the one we lozt?»

The human frowned. «No, this one is not Jaeger. He is too short, if nothing else. I knew Jaeger well; this is not him.»

«You did not know Jaeger well enough. Who iz thiz new toy?»

«He is Sinclair MacNeal. His father owns Build-more in Phoenix. He is here working for your Lorica Industries. He left after a bad divorce and is vulnerable.»

The distant laughter started gently and communicated itself to Arrigo as a gentle vibration running through the membrane. As it shifted in intensity and tenor, it grew to an uncomfortable tingle, as if he had grabbed an electrical cord. Then the membrane began to twitch and writhe, jabbing him with sharp edges and drumming directly against his skull.

«Have mercy, master!»

«My merzy you have, cretin. Lorica waz mine until the Witch lost it. Jaeger is using it! Clearly, this MacNeal is Jaeger's agent. Jaeger haz hidden himzelf from me and, thereby, thinkz himzelf immune to my influenze. He will learn the folly of that azzumption, and the man he has plazed into my cuztody will zerve az the bait that will lure him out of hiding.»

«Master, I will devise a program of torture to wrack the most out of him, and that will attract Jaeger.» Arrigo smiled at his own cleverness. «Ms. Markgraf will be most appreciative of a chance to avenge herself upon him.»

The membrane at the top of his head rose up, then twacked sharply down on his skull. «Have you learned nothing? If Jaeger choze him, he will be dangerouz. Kill him and dizpoze of the body. Jaeger will

know where he waz, and he will come to zettle the zcore.»

Arrigo shuddered as he remembered Jaeger and the man's skill and area of expertise.« *Master, Jaeger was very good at killing. I do not relish being the focus of his anger.* »

«You dizappoint me, pet. I reward loyalty. Yez, Jaeger will come for you, but I will protect you. I will let you put on a dizplay of power that will bring Jaeger back to me or deztroy him. That demonstration will win me the godling az well, and with him belonging to me, there iz nothing than can ever ztop me.»

Sin and Ryuhito shared polite laughter over a very poor joke made by another member of their study circle. While all wearing the maroon and gray uniforms provided by Galbro, everyone had seemed to Sin to be on a rough par. Gathered for dinner, on the other hand, and wearing their own clothes, quality and sense made itself readily apparent.

Sin, dressing more to his role as a corporator than he might otherwise, had chosen a pair of slacks with suspenders and a conservative shirt. At the last minute, he added the wrist recorder that Lilith had given him because he noticed Ryuhito also wore one of the devices. While the imperial prince had been cordial during the study group sessions, Sin had not really had a chance to speak informally with him. He hoped that showing an interest in the latest technological toys would make the prince open up and see him as an ally.

The two of them stood on the white crushed gravel that paved the walkways and central area of the Khmer Courtyard. Standing behind them, its stony smile unchanging, a copy of the *Lokeshvara* from Ankor Wat formed the centerpiece of the whole courtyard. Sin saw a circular line worked around the flat base on which he stood, as if the head were placed on an elevator for raising and lowering.

"I wonder if they move it for volleyball games."

Ryuhito looked over at him and smiled. "Possibly, though I think it more likely they shipped it in and loaded it here from below." He indicated the thick trees in the courtyard. "Bringing it in, even by helicopter, would have been difficult."

"Good point." Sin ran his hand over the smooth stone. "Nice copy."

"It would be, Sinclair, but it is an original. Good evening." Arrigo El-Leichter, wearing a more formal version of his paramilitary uniform from Friday night, executed a slight bow. He turned to the stunningly beautiful brunette beside him and smiled. "May I present my executive secretary, Janet Pigot."

Sin had to restrain himself from doing a double-take. The tall, obviously self-assured woman with El-Leichter bore no resemblance to the mental image he'd constructed from Kip's description of her. Her smooth cheeks bore no trace of childhood acne scars. *As wonderful as Miko might be for old Kip, there's no way he would have seen this woman more valuable as a secretary than as a bedmate.*

Sin took her proffered hand and shook it. "I'm very pleased to meet you. I know Kip Martin, and he asked to be remembered to you if I saw you."

Janet's smile broadened ever so slightly. "You are most kind in relaying that, Mr. MacNeal. I will have to call Mr. Martin and see how he is doing."

El-Leichter continued introductions around the circle, and Sin noticed Ryuhito watching the Galbro leader. Sin couldn't read the prince's face, but he suspected Ryuhito was trying to assess how much truth

there was behind everything they had been taught in the two days of seminars. *If what his grandfather fears is true, Ryuhito cares less about the source of any true power El-Leichter possesses than Arrigo's ability to share it with the prince.*

Before he could move around toward where Ryuhito and El-Leichter were beginning to talk, Mr. Handy tapped him on the shoulder. "Excuse me, Mr. MacNeal, but there is an urgent call for you from a Ms. Acres. It came through on one of our trunk lines, so I had it transferred to one of the classrooms. If you will follow me."

Sin nodded. *What could Lilith want? Has something happened to Coyote?* He looked up as Handy turned right when he should have gone left. "I thought all the classrooms were over in the east wing."

"The basic ones are, sir." Handy paused next to a security door with a keypad beside it. "These are the advanced classrooms and are closer. It will be faster, sir."

Sin nodded and tugged at his shirt sleeve, surreptitiously activating the recorder on his wrist. *Decode the tones, and can figure out the combination.* He smiled and waved Handy on. The man punched the combination in on the keypad, and the little red LCD on Sin's recorder flickered with each note it caught.

"This way, sir." Handy walked down a narrow corridor and into the first doorway on the right. Sin followed him a half-step behind and entered the room looking expectantly for a phone. What he found instead was Handy pulling what looked a lot like his Beretta M92S from a desk and jamming it into his ribs.

"We found this when doing a security sweep just now, Mr. MacNeal. Hiding it in the air-conditioning vent was good, but not good enough." Handy motioned with the gun for him to get his hands up. "Mr. El-Leichter says you're a Gray agent and that you have to die."

Sin took the extra half-second the Beretta's double-action required on the first trigger-pull to act. He made a grab for the pistol as Handy's finger tightened on the trigger. His right hand clamped down on top of the gun and jammed the slide back toward the hammer. The shell in the chamber ejected up and into Handy's face, startling the Galbro man.

Pushing the gun down and out of line with his body, Sin kicked up with his left leg and caught Handy solidly in the groin. The man groaned and sagged as Sin ripped the pistol out of his hand. He used it to club the man down to the ground, then held the gun on him and waited for him to get back up.

Handy lay still, and blood leaked from his scalp where Sin had pistol-whipped him. *Looks red. I guess he's human.* Sin knelt beside him and flipped him over. A quick search proved fruitless—Handy had no keys, no money and no identification.

"Okay, let me think for a moment." Sin picked up the live bullet on the floor, slipped the clip and replaced it. He knew his cover had been blown, but he didn't think having entertained the emperor would be a shooting offense. *I've been straight up about everything else—the only deceptions have come concerning a wife and my middle initial. No one could know I'm working for Coyote, and that wouldn't concern Galbro anyway.*

Suddenly, as he crossed to the doorway, it hit him. "Holy shit! Galbro is the place Coyote sent me to find. That means this is a finishing school for assassins, among other things, and that means . . ." *That means I wish I had more than 14 bullets.*

Sin looked out into the hallway and saw it was all clear. He stepped out into it and casually walked toward the far end. He slapped the clip home, then, holding his arms across his chest, he half-hid the Beretta. Moving down the corridor, he tried to remember the general layout of the Galbro Institute. *This direction should get me close to the front. With any luck.*

At the far end of the secured corridor, he entered a secretarial office full of desks with covered typewriters and retro-styled blocky, black phones. Except for a man in overalls spreading tools all over the desk, the room was empty. The man looked up as Sin came through the security door, but Sin just nodded at him and continued on his way.

"Wait a minute, buddy, what are you doing here?"

"I'm on an errand for Mr. El-Leichter," Sin gave him a smile. "Bitch, isn't it? Me doing errands and you wrestling with that Migoyan typer while he's out dining with the customers."

"You got that right. These things never quite work right when they're switched from Cyrillic—least they could have done was buy Estonian, you know?" The man wiped his forehead on his sleeve. "Don't mind El-Leichter chatting up the folks that pay our wages, but spending a bit to get some Smith-Coronas or Sonys in here would make my life easier."

Getting out of here alive would do the same to my life. Sin just shrugged and kept on straight down the center aisle toward the glass double doors at the room's far end. "That's true, but then they'd just find something else for you to do, eh?"

"You got that right, dammit." The man smiled. "Have a good day. Don't let the Grays get you."

Too late! Two uniformed security officers laughed as they pushed their way through the doors. One had a rubberized black body bag slung over his shoulder and held his AKM by the pistol-grip. The other had his automatic rifle dangling from his shoulder by the sling. Both stopped dead in their tracks as they realized the man they'd come to carry off was more ambulatory than he had any right to be.

Sin brought the Beretta around and clicked the safety down with his thumb. He jerked the trigger through the first double-action around, not caring for finesse because he knew, at the short range, he couldn't miss. The first round hit the man with the body bag in the shoulder and the second punched through his chest right below the ribs.

Before the shell casing had hit the floor, Sin shifted his gun to cover the second man. The Galbro guard dove behind a secretary's desk, and Sin heard the sound of the AKM's charging lever being pulled back. Having neither the time or inclination for a shoot-out with an automatic weapon at point-blank range, he dropped to one knee and triggered a three-shot volley that punched through the desk's lower edge. The second bullet started a scream that the third one ended, and Sin sprinted from the office.

The second he hit the hallway he wanted to kick himself for not grabbing at least one of the AKMs. He hesitated for a moment and debated going back, but hearing shouts from both ends of the corridor prompted a different course of action. Turning to his left, he planted a kick above the lock of an office door.

The door-jamb splintered as his kick drove the deadbolt back through it, and he found himself in a small room with a conference table and four chairs. He instantly knew the Formica-topped table wouldn't offer him any cover, but that mattered not at all. Above the four-foot-high, exterior cinderblock wall, tall windows offered him an easy way out. One of the chairs went sailing through glass, then he leaped up on

the table and out through the hole.

Nuts, this was a mistake! Sin landed in a crouch on the crushed stone paving of a garden patio. Forty feet across at the widest point, it had a 12-foot-tall cinderblock wall between him and freedom. Little jungle oases and gurgling streams combined with patio furniture to make the place seem relaxing, but it did nothing for Sin. Aside from a big brick barbeque to his right, the place offered little by way of cover.

A commanding shout from the conference room he'd just left sent him into a long, diving roll to the barbeque. AKM bullets nibbled away at the whitewashed and soot-stained construction, singing metallically as they ricocheted off the cast-iron grill. He heard other bullets whiz past and saw them chip bits and pieces off the Galbro wall backstopping him.

Putting his back against the bricks, he pulled his knees up and licked the sweat off his upper lip. You've done it now. You've got 20 feet to a wall that, if you're lucky, you can grab the top of with a running start. Arrayed against you, you have a handful of men with automatic weapons. They probably have radios and are even now calling in fire support.

Twisting around to lie flat on his belly, Sin worked his way around to the far edge of the barbeque. The guards continued to concentrate their fire four feet to his left, directing it at the corner around which he had disappeared. A quick glance confirmed the shooters were taking turns keeping their heads down, and they were getting sloppy while doing it.

Popping up to his knees, he snapped off two shots at the man framed in the window. The first bullet hit the windowsill and sprayed lead fragments into the room. The other hit the standing guard in the neck. It ripped a hole through his carotid artery, allowing blood to geyser out as the man pitched backward and out of sight.

Sin tossed himself forward onto his stomach and started working backward. As he did so, he glanced back behind himself, then forward again. He brought his gaze up to sweep the edge of the wall just as another of the Galbro guards gained the top of it, crouched and pointed her AKM at him.

Their fingers tightened on triggers at the same moment. Sin's first shot hit the wall about a foot below her, but the second blew through her right thigh. The third hit the magazine on her AKM and skipped down to punch through her stomach. She toppled back off the wall, her gun's flaming muzzle making an arc through the evening sky.

Her aim had likewise started low, but the automatic rifle's recoil walked the line of fire right across his legs. Only one bullet hit, and Sin screamed as it shattered his shinbone. *Minor wound, you can survive it!* he told himself in between the waves of pain rippling up his spine and into his brain. In their trough, he found his whole lower body had gone numb.

Shit. Oh, shit. He gritted his teeth against the pain and watched the dark stain spreading across his pant leg. Five bullets left, an infinite number of guards, a hole in my leg and a wall that might as well be a mile high. He swallowed hard and tasted fear in his suddenly dry mouth. It can't get worse.

From the Galbro building he heard Mr. Handy shouting orders. "Get that bunkerbuster over here and use a high-explosive round. He's hunkered down behind that barbeque. That's where he's chosen to die, so roast him."



The echoes of distant malevolent laughter shook Rajani awake. Instantly, one of Hal's half-jest warnings about earthquakes sprang to mind, and she rolled off her bed and stumbled to a doorway. Bracing herself halfway in and out of the bathroom's door frame, she felt a sharp pain in the palm of her left hand. Slumping to the right, she opened her hand saw blue-black blood welling up around a pair of gold cufflinks.

She slid down the door-jamb to the floor and shifted the pieces of jewelry to her right hand. She sucked at the blood from the wound, then looked at it again. *Little cut.* She concentrated, and the hole sealed itself over. She smiled and stood again, tugging the fabric of her one-piece bathing suit back down to cover the sides of her buttocks.

Hal had asked her to stay behind in the hotel, ostensibly to answer the phone if Sinclair MacNeal decided to return any of the calls for him. Hal himself went out to help the Daizaimoku Ospreys in a workout—firming up their cover—while Bat took Natch with him to prowl the Tokyo underworld. Jytte had locked herself away in her room with all sorts of electronic equipment, and Rajani had been given strict orders not to disturb her.

Tired of staring at the phone for hours, she arranged for her calls to be transferred down to the hotel's pool. As it was early on Sunday evening, she had the pool all to herself and swam laps to burn off the frustration she felt. She had left her stasis tube to warn Coyote of the danger from Fiddleback, but she found herself unable to get that message to him. While she knew she was unsuited to any of the jobs the other members of Coyote's cadre had undertaken, the fact that she was left behind angered her.

Feeling exhausted, she returned to her room and fell asleep with Sinclair's cufflinks in her hand. Sitting down again on the edge of the bed, she closed her hands on them and opened her mind. « *Please, Sinclair, call me.* »

She looked at the phone expectantly, but she knew that without a solid clue as to where he was, the chances of her message getting anywhere close to him was nil. She concentrated and listened for the echoes of her message, then let her mind drift out and, in imitation of the crystalline seeker drones, she tried to match the sensations in the cufflinks with those of a person in Tokyo's concrete heart.

She did not find Sinclair, but another message blasted through her brain for agonizing seconds before she swung her defenses into place. She recognized the thought patterns instantly and knew it had been his laughter that so rudely woke her up. *Fiddleback is here!* Worse yet, the fragment of message she got from him was tinged with Sinclair's aura: "Kill him, and dispose of the body."

She closed her eyes and instantly willed herself to look at things from an empathic point of view. The walls surrounding her exploded outward, and her viewpoint rose like a rocket through the roof of the hotel. Tokyo became reduced into a neon vector-graphic maze with millions and millions of glowing lights to mark every living creature in it.

From above and behind her she saw bolt after bolt of green energy lancing down into a glowing malachite sphere in the heart of the island in Tokyo Bay. She looked back up to the energy's source and saw a shiny black pearl with a fiery green corona surrounding it. A hot green spot whirled through the

middle of it, flashing out the beams that shot down into the city.

Looking at it, she saw a companion sphere halfway across the sky from it, then another above it and another below it. Barely visible against the black sky, she caught the faint outline of an oval, and she suddenly realized the spheres were eyes and the oval a head.

A weak green signal from below rose up to the image of Fiddleback, then the monster's icon vanished. Looking back toward the island, she saw the green sphere begin to dull. As its color faded, she saw a light that matched the cufflinks. *Sinclair is there, and they are going to kill him.*

Fighting the wrenching sensation of nausea, she forced herself back into her body. She tugged a pair of jeans on, stepped into some sneakers and darted out of her room without giving thought to calling the others or even taking the new leather jacket Natch had talked her into buying. She hit the button summoning the elevator, but after waiting impatiently for 15 seconds, she took the stairs and raced down five floors to the street level.

Dashing through the lobby, she turned sideways and squeezed through the slowly opening automatic glass doors. A liveried doorman stared at her with surprise on his face, then composed himself. He turned and pointed to a taxi, then summoned it when Rajani nodded.

The taxi pulled up beside her, and the doors slid open on a cushion of air. The little green light on the dashboard turned red as she climbed in. From the back seat she pointed out toward the bay. "That way, the island, go!"

The old driver looked at her, then off where she was pointing. "*Kimpunshima, hai?*"

"Go, go!" She reached into her pocket and pulled out a handful of crumpled yen-notes and dolmarks and threw them down into his lap. "Go!"

She barely noticed the wave of happiness pouring off the man as the taxi lurched forward. She didn't hear the squeal of rubber as he took off, nor did she feel the beaded seatcovers as the G-forces pressed her back into the seat. The garish neon lights strobing past made no impression on her because she had retreated deep inside and had deadened her external senses to concentrate on the cufflinks and their connection to Sinclair MacNeal.

Holding them in her hands, and pressing her hands tight between her knees, she focused her consciousness down and pushed it through the cufflinks and out again. As she did so, she visualized an ethereal thread winding aimlessly through the city. Shooting energy into it, she brightened it and forced it to become more substantial. Like an empty hose with water being pumped through it, the thread plumped and straightened out.

Filling it full, she made contact.

At once she felt elated and frustrated. The link worked to let her know where he was and what he was feeling, but she could not communicate directly with him. She remembered one time when Dr. Chandra had showed her how to build a telephone with two paper cups, two buttons and string. While the makeshift device did transmit sound, it was not sturdy enough for serious communication.

At least he's safe right now! She took heart in that and anchored her end of the link in the back of her mind. Opening her eyes, she looked out and, between shoreline warehouses, saw the brooding island that dominated the harbor. "There!"

"*Hai, Kimpunshima, hai.*" The driver steered his hack to the right, cutting off a lane of traffic and popped down a side street. Turning to the left, he raced through rows of warehouses. He deftly dodged weathered crates and trash piles. All the while he laughed aloud and kept up a running commentary of which Rajani caught little and understood even less.

A feeling of doubt, of hesitant confusion, shot down the link. Too little information came through for her to decipher it, but she did pick out the image of a telephone. *Yes, call.* Then it struck her that even if he did call, there would be no one there to answer it.

She pounded her fist on the top of the front seat. "Faster, faster."

The cab took a right on two wheels and merged via the shoulder lane onto the Kimpunshima bridge. Tall sodium lamps sank the whole bridge into a pinkish gray. The cabbie shouted curses at other drivers and swerved wildly in and out of traffic. Finally, he broke clear of the pack and punched the accelerator. Reaching the far end of the bridge, he hit his brakes enough to bring his speed back into the low hundreds of kilometers per hour and steered into the heart of Kimpunshima.

To Rajani, the only difference between the island and the city of Tokyo itself was the intensity of feelings she had coming through the link. *Danger!* She slapped the passenger-side window. "This way! We're close now. Hurry!"

The driver dutifully took the next right and came to a screeching halt as the dozen members of a *bosozoku* biker gang ran their big American motorcycles around in a circle in the middle of the street. Clad in black leather and chromed chains, they called derisively to pedestrians and brandished chains to threaten the cars they had stopped.

The sensation of fear sizzling down the link nearly overwhelmed Rajani. She tore at the door handle and opened the cab's rear door just in time to flatten one of the bikers. Stepping on the stunned man's chest, she vaulted from the cab and ran down the street. She heard people yelling at her and the sound of motorcycle engines being gunned, but they meant nothing as fear and surprise invaded her through the link.

Running as fast as she could, Rajani cut through alleys and vaulted fences. She chose her path unconsciously, letting the growing strength of the link reel her in. Through it she gained a sense of water, so she cut toward the shoreline. As she came out of an alley and into the grassy wedge of a park, she saw a jeep-like security vehicle pull up beside a cinderblock wall.

A woman got out of the vehicle with a rifle in hand and climbed up onto the hood. From there she stepped onto the roof, then jumped over to the top of the wall. Rajani heard gunshots, then saw the woman crouch and bring what the Blood Crips had shown her to be an AKM up to her shoulder.

"Sinclair!" she screamed as foot-long flames shot from the automatic rifle's muzzle. Rajani saw a secondary spark, then the woman flew back off the wall. She landed hard on the car's roof, then bounced off and lay dead in the street. *He got her!*

The moment of triumph Rajani felt in that died as shock and pain crashed in on her through the link. It pounded at her. It would have driven her to her knees, but she caught herself on the security vehicle's open doorway. Despair and resignation flowed through the link like blood through a sliced artery in the pain's wake. «*No, I won't let you die!*»

Rajani scooped up the AKM and cleared the damaged clip. She picked another one up from the ground where they had spilled from the woman's ammo pouch and jammed it home. Cranking the charging lever back and letting it snap forward, she leaped up onto the hood, clambered onto the roof, then made the short leap to the cinderblock wall.

Gunsmoke filled the courtyard below her. Off to her left, she saw a blocky mass of bricks and Sinclair MacNeal. Opposing him, nestled in an office building, she saw four men. One, radiating confidence like heat pouring from a bonfire, sighted down the thick tube he had resting on the windowsill.

"Clear!" he yelled. "I'm going to smoke the bastard!"

Clutching the gun at waist level the way the Blood Crips had done when talking about their combats, Rajani yanked back on the trigger. Still selected for fully automatic fire, the AKM kicked out all 30 of the bullets loaded in the clip. Impressive muzzle flashes lit the patio as the hail of bullets raked their way through the unbroken panes in the conference-room window.

All the field stripping and dry firing she'd done with the Blood Crips hadn't prepared her for recoil. The AKM's muzzle tracked up through the sky and twisted her around the right, flinging her off the wall. Crashing onto her back on the vehicle's roof, she somersaulted over her head and landed hard on the ground. Her head smacked the sidewalk and the smoking AKM bounced off toward the rear of the vehicle.

Stars burst in front of her eyes, then a secondary explosion ripped through her, complete with thunder and smoke. A red fireball shot into the air and transformed itself into a greasy black cloud, then chunks of debris started pelting her and the jeep. The windshield cracked as half a cinderblock punched through it. Smaller pieces of concrete pinged and clinked off the vehicle, then a hissing sand-rain condensed out of the smoke and splashed gritty sheets over her.

Rajani shook her head and rolled over onto her stomach. Pushing off the ground, she stood and leaned heavily against the jeep. Two more gunshots prompted her to duck, then she saw the figure of a man limping and firing back through the hole. She started to run toward him, then stopped instantly as he shifted the gun to cover her.

"Who the hell are you?"

"I am Rajani." She dug in her pocket and held her left hand out to him. "I have your cufflinks."

"Hell of a valet service the hotel has." He snarled as he hopped toward the jeep and leaned on the hood. "Can you drive? No, wait, I saw you shoot." He hopped around to the driver side and slid into the driver's seat, then bashed out the rest of the windshield. "Well? C'mon."

Rajani ran to the passenger side and tossed the cinderblock clear of her seat. She barely settled into it when Sinclair, letting his left leg hang out of the driver-side opening, shifted into drive and stomped down on the accelerator. "Don't know who you are, but thank you. You saved my life back there."

"I am here with Hal Garrett." Rajani braced herself as Sin swerved around a couple of bicycles. "We were worried about you when you were not at your hotel."

Sin winced and pressed his head back onto the headrest. "So, you black-bagged my room and kept my cufflinks for a prize?" His breath hissed out through clenched teeth, and Rajani felt white-hot pain stab through the link. "How'd you find me? I left no clues to where I was going to be."

Rajani could sense, through Sin's pain, that he was in no shape to understand any explanation she would give him. She also knew that he might black out at any second and, given the speed they were traveling, that would be dangerous. "This alley. Turn right and stop the car."

"Are you nuts?"

"I found you, and I stopped them from killing you. Trust me. Stop the car."

Reluctance pulsing through the link, he did as she asked. "Now, stay there," she commanded. Swinging out of the jeep, she ran around through the twin headlight cones and squatted down near his bloody shin. "This may hurt."

"You mean it might hurt worse?"

With the gold nail on her right index finger she sliced down through the fabric of his trousers, then peeled the cloth back. The dark, meaty wound brimmed with half-coagulated blood. She saw flecks of white in it, and she thought most of them were little chips of stones.

She started to reach around behind his leg, but Sin shook his head. "There's an exit wound, it's through and through, it feels like a lightning storm knotted up down there."

Rajani looked up and made eye contact with him. She caught his shock as he finally saw her slitted gold pupils. *Her eyes—they're not natural!*

« As natural as yours are, Sinclair.» Rajani reinforced the old link with him and pushed on through the stronger link. As she had with Hal Garrett, she sent a message to portions of his brain, spurring them into action to help him heal. She also triggered the production of endorphinic painkillers to dull the throbbing from his leg. A wave of contentment passed over him, causing her to smile as she withdrew from his mind.

Sin stared at her and blinked his eyes. "Lady, have you any idea what you did?" He blushed and shook his head. "Christ, you're better than morphine."

"Is that good?"

"In this case, that's great." Sin slid himself forward and out of the jeep. "C'mon, they'll be tracking this thing. We'd better abandon it."

Rajani frowned. "How do you know that?"

"I don't." Sin winked at her. "But that's what I'd be doing if I were running their operation. And the two of us are going to be damned conspicuous on the street." He limped over to a storm-drain grating. "You've got a suit on. Do you swim?"

"They have an Olympic-sized pool at the hotel." She hooked a thumb through her suit's shoulder strap. "I used it today."

"Well, let's go down into the hole then." He pulled the grate up and waved her toward the dark opening. "You won't get any gold for swimming down here, but chances are you won't get any lead, either."



Coyote stared at the Yidam as the creature reached up and unfastened the gold cloak clasp at its throat. The heavy, dark garment fell to the floor, for the first time affording Coyote an unobstructed view of his opponent. "My God, what are you?"

The reason for the Yidam's extraordinary height was the second shoulder girdle and pair of arms located a foot beneath the first pair. Set slightly back, the long, slender arms ended in long-fingered hands capped with gold talons, but they were not identical to the upper pair. They did not have its bulging musculature, nor did they possess the slender gold lines tracing from the talons up along the arms and over the shoulders. Coyote also noticed similar piping running from the gold claws on the creature's feet up its legs to the yak-hide loincloth and around to its back.

Moving more swiftly than he could imagine anything that size moving, the Yidam closed. Its upper hands grabbed his wrists and pulled his arms out straight from his sides. Lower jaw agape, its lower arms came up and took hold of either side of his head. "You did not slay me when you had the chance in Storm. Now I will see if you are what you believe yourself to be."

Their eyes met, and Coyote recoiled as the Yidam's ice-pick consciousness pierced his brain. Coyote felt like a lock with a crude pick jammed into it. He tried to fight him, but found himself unable to grapple with the alien mind. Though powerless, Coyote tried to pull away from the contact, but succeeded only in encysting part of his conscious mind.

The Yidam used no finesse to sort through his mind—he just pounded on in. He sorted through memories like a detective pulling all the clothes from a dresser drawer and tossing them over his shoulder. Coyote watched as the two months he could remember of his life were examined and then discarded casually. It seemed to Coyote that all he had done as Tycho Caine to thwart Fiddleback in Phoenix only heightened the Yidam's distrust.

As the claustrophobic memory of waking up in a body bag enfolded Coyote, he felt the first slowing of the Yidam's probe. The creature hesitated as it came up against a wall. Coyote knew this was the drug-induced amnesia his predecessor had subjected him to. *You even anticipated something like this*, he thought to himself in a mental salute to the man who had made him into Coyote.

« You expect a biochemical barrier to stop me ? » The Yidam's contemptuous laughter echoed through Coyote's skull, making his brain feel like the clapper in a giant bell. « *Behold, your body betrays you.* »

Coyote suddenly saw his own mind as a complex, three-dimensional network of interconnected neurons and synapses. The blocked areas comprised an egg-shaped area outlined in red. Each nexus point into that area had a small, hard, red dot glowing on it. They pulsed angrily like hot coals beneath the kiss of a bellows.

Other areas of that neural net began to glow under the Yidam's direct influence. In turn, Coyote felt other parts of his body respond and flood his bloodstream with hormones and chemicals. As they coursed up into his brain, he watched the embers dull, then the first of them winked out.

Coyote screamed as the Yidam burst through that first roadblock. Suddenly, instead of being trapped in

the small world comprised of two memory months, Coyote emerged like a snake from an egg. He found himself in a dark world that slowly expanded as the chemicals the Yidam had started his body manufacturing dissolved the barriers. The Yidam, preceding him and drawing him along in his wake, gleefully threw memories at him.

Like a spectator watching someone else, Coyote saw who he had been in random snippets of his life. He saw himself as a child studying detailed anatomical texts and working with cadavers. He caught glimpses of martial arts exercises in which human bones were substituted for the wooden boards others would have been instructed to break. He relived hours and hours spent in dim chemistry labs preparing poisons and explosives.

As each nexus opened up, Coyote rebuilt his cognitive network. Cohesive bits of information linked up to form new connections both within the previously sealed area and out again to his more conscious memory. He did not feel reincorporated with what and who he had been in the past, and he took efforts to maintain that distance as more bizarre and curious events sizzled through his mind.

He watched himself study a victim through the telescopic sight of a custom-built, .50-caliber sniper rifle. At the same moment he realized he had built the weapon himself and had hand-crafted the slug, he felt his right index finger twitch. The woman's head exploded like a balloon filled with red oatmeal. In the emotions that flickered past, he sought remorse or regret and he found it, but only that he'd clearly wasted three grains of powder in the shell that killed her.

Coyote went cold as he realized he had to be a sociopathic personality. Yet the second he made that judgment he rejected it because of the things he had done since he became Coyote. *A sociopath has no conscience and thinks only of himself. An amnesiac, while possessing no memory of his past, still operates within the boundary of his normal personality. It follows that I have something of a conscience, a loyalty to something, that guides me and that I was able to transfer over to Coyote and his mission.*

The Yidam continued his ruthless sorting through Coyote's lifetime. « *There is, Coyote, there is. I will find it, and then you will see what you really are.* » The Yidam increased his pace, probing memories for bare milliseconds before discarding them.

As the world of Coyote's past swelled, he began to visualize details in the darkness. Little stars began to glow in the night sky, but a dim haze made it difficult to see all of them. Below him, the world began to take shape. Off in the distance he saw the great curve of China's coast outlined in gold. Beyond it, Korea's dagger-like peninsula stabbed down into the black ocean and toward the islands of Japan.

Coyote began to feel vibrations from the haze. He realized it must have been the monks' chanting about the same time he saw he had centered himself above the lamasery. He also knew, as he looked east again, that he had spent most of his life in Japan. He quickly chided himself because he had known that fact from the file his predecessor had prepared on him, but now he *knew* it and, somehow, that felt far more significant.

Then, as the Yidam cried out triumphantly, Coyote saw a green-ringed pulsar rising where the sun should have been. As its burning pupil swept around, a bolt of light impaled Japan. The pupil passed twice more, its pace increasing, then it spun up to the point where it became a green band encircling the sphere's oasis.

Suddenly, a glowing green plane of light shot out and sliced cleanly through the haze. Coyote felt rather than heard faint screams, then the light hit him and collapsed into a single, sustained needle. It pinned him

in space like an insect in a collection, leaving him powerless.« *My pet, my pet, you have been returned to me.*» A chittering hum filled his mind, and he felt the muscles of his face contract into a smile.« *And you brought me a present!*»

The Yidam struggled against the energy being projected into Coyote like a game fish fighting a fishing line. He had searched for a connection to Fiddleback and found it, then realized too late that the Dark Lord had anticipated this type of foray into Coyote's mind. As the Yidam fought, his frustration bled into the link, and Coyote felt Fiddleback's delight in the Yidam's helplessness.

Coyote realized that Fiddleback had intended the trap to catch another Dark Lord and that it should have swallowed the Yidam whole.« *Is that you, Vikram? Did I not deztroy you when I had your wife? After all thiz time, can it be you?*»

«Living proof you do not always win.»

«I am entropy, Vikram. I always win. Mozt of your comradez welcomed me when I pozzezzed them. Your wife mozt azzuredly among them. Come to me.»

The Yidam continued his fight.« I am not for you, beast. Were you as strong as you imagine yourself, you would have destroyed me by now.»

Coyote sensed the Yidam's bluff and desperation in the link, and he bled it off into a red star that arced across the sky. The rest of the message passed unadulterated through the link like a gold spark and struck the black orb in its heart. A bar of black cycled through the band, then another gold spark raced back down the link.

«Father?»

«Rajani?»

The Yidam's return message blasted back too strong for Coyote to control or affect in any way. It passed back through the link as a ragged gold circlet. It struck the sphere and filled the corona with gold highlights, then that color drained away leaving a blue after-image in its wake. Another black line and another appeared in the pulsar's band as the cycling slowed.

The power in the link wavered for a second, giving Coyote a chance to do more than act as an unwitting conduit. He fused his revulsion with the past the Yidam had shown him into an alloy with his conscious hatred of Fiddleback. He infused it with his fury at having his mind raped by the Yidam and his body being possessed by Fiddleback and forged it all into a scarlet axe blade. He chopped down into the link and felt a searing jolt of pain blow the top off his head.

He found himself stumbling back within the Yidam's chamber. He landed on his butt, then caught the Yidam before he could hit the floor. Shaking his head to clear it, Coyote flipped the Yidam over to his back, then folded the cloak up into a pillow and placed it beneath the monster's head.

The Yidam's red eyes opened. "Thank you," he whispered hoarsely.

"That was Fiddleback. I know that much. What happened? Who is Vikram?"

The Yidam brushed aside his question and tried to get up, but Coyote pinned him to the ground with a hand in the middle of his chest. "No, damn you. You rip through my mind without so much as a 'by your

leave' and then ignore me. Do you think I am Fiddleback's minion?"

The Yidam sank back and shook his head. "No. Were you, the link never could have been severed. You are powerful, which is doubtlessly why he chose you."

"Good. Then you know that I can be a powerful weapon used against him. Answer my questions."

"There is no time."

"Give me the short form." Coyote looked up as Mong appeared in the *Gonkhang*. "Are we hidden again?"

"Four men died, and 10 are being cared for in our infirmary. They will not die in pain." Mong knelt by the Yidam. "We are reestablishing the wards and should be difficult to find."

"Answers, I want them now." His fists balled, Coyote stood over both men.

The Yidam reached up and grasped Mong's shoulder affectionately. "My wife studied religions the way I studied war. Through the Dalai Lama, she was introduced to Mong and he, in turn, instructed her in his faith. Though she was barred from visiting this monastery because of her sex, I was extended an invitation to take a retreat here. I happened to be here when Fiddleback managed to subvert the crew of the ship that had brought me here."

Coyote nodded. "Including your wife?"

The Yidam closed his eyes for a moment, then nodded. "Including her. Their subversion suddenly gave him a beachhead on Earth, and that precipitated another Dark Lord making a strike at him. During the time he was preoccupied, I returned to the United States and made arrangements with Dr. Chandra for the care of my daughter."

"You avoided possession by being here, I assume. How did your daughter—Rajani is her name, isn't it—escape Fiddleback?"

"I do not know for certain, but I assume Fiddleback was looking for a specific mental pattern. The *Cythera* he got instantly. My wife took more time, and my daughter, she thinks enough like a human to be difficult to spot or control." The Yidam smiled weakly. "Did you know you humans have a very disorderly mind structure?"

"Vast fortunes are made by people who try to help us deal with that problem." Coyote returned the smile.

"We have to find my daughter. She can read Fiddleback."

"Read him?"

"My meditations here helped me defend myself against Fiddleback. She is better shielded against him than I am, and if she is free of the stasis tube, she will be able to eavesdrop on his thoughts. That's why she was able to piggyback a message to me through the link." The Yidam's lower arms pushed him up into a sitting position. "In stasis, she was able to meditate without outside influences. When I first came here, I was not that much different than you or Mong." His spare arms hugged his knees to his chest. "Because I meditated here, the wishes, dreams and beliefs of the monks over the past 25 years changed

me into the Yidam that was meant to guard them from evil influences."

Coyote shivered and stood. "That's some change."

"It is, but as the price to elude Fiddleback and his influence, it is cheap." Accepting Mong's and Coyote's help, the Yidam pulled himself upright. "We must hurry and find Rajani."

"Do you know where she is?"

The Yidam nodded to Coyote. "In Japan and in danger."

Coyote winced. "Japan will take two days, maybe less if I can get a helicopter in here."

"No, there is another way." The Yidam looked at Mong and the monk nodded. "Go, Coyote, and prepare yourself. You have the skills you need to leave this place, and now I will show you the way home."



Sin tugged the storm grate back into place in the street above, then gingerly lowered himself down the steel-rung ladder in the manhole wall. With his pistol tucked into the waistband of his pants at the small of his back, he grabbed the wet, greasy rungs with both hands. Standing only on his right leg, he hopped down one rung, then shifted his grip. Each jolting hop sent pain up through his left leg, but he found the pain much less intense and decreasing noticeably.

He landed with a splash in the cylindrical tunnel. "Rajani, right?"

The woman nodded, her gold hair reduced to a dim gray in the darkness. "Yes, Sinclair?"

"Call me Sin." He squinted and looked both up and back along the tunnel. "I figure they'll expect us to head toward where these tunnels dump into the ocean. We need to find a crosscut tunnel that will take us deeper into Kimpunshima."

She pointed off in the direction she was facing. "You mean like that one down there?"

Sin saw nothing but blackness. "You can see in the dark, too?"

Rajani held a hand out to him, then looped his right arm over her shoulder. Sin immediately felt the physical warmth she radiated. "The plants in here are bioluminescent in the ultraviolet range. Come on, I'll help you."

"Okay." Is there anything she can't do? Not only does she stare me in the eyes and start my leg feeling better, but she popped a button in my brain that left me feeling better than Erika ever did. And now she can see in the dark. Sin glanced over at her. And didn't I think I heard her voice in my mind?

He heard a chittering and immediately filled his left hand with the Beretta. "Did you hear that?"

She nodded. "Rats. Let me concentrate, and I can make certain they will leave us alone." Sin would have made a comment, but his right foot slipped in the slime at the bottom of the cylinder. Rajani caught him and held him upright. "Are you okay? I can clear the pain again."

"No, no, don't do that." Sin coughed lightly. "It does deaden the pain, but, ah, you shouldn't be doing that to folks."

"What do you mean? I know it pleased you."

"Yeah, well, I need a clear head here, you know." Sin frowned because he got the distinct impression she *didn't* know. "You're rather unique, you know that?"

She nodded solemnly. "I believe I am the only *Jes'da* ever born on your world."

Born on your *world*? Sin swallowed hard. He knew she looked weird, and he wondered what kind of insanity it took to do the body mods and tattoos she'd had done. *Especially the eyes*. Now he knew: schizophrenia. "So, you're not from Earth?"

"I just said I was." She stopped. "We're at the tunnel. Away from the ocean, yes?"

"Yes, away from the ocean." Sin tested his left leg, and the pain had subsided to a dull, tired ache. He started to pull his arm from her shoulder, but she shivered. "Are you cold?"

"Yes, but this is something else." She faltered a half-step, then leaned heavily on him. "He's still there."

He homed the pistol and held her up. "Who?"

"Fiddleback." Her head came up. "He's here."

He heard the bubbling rush of water and felt a shiver run through Rajani. He turned toward the sound and faced the black tunnel behind him, but then the echoes shifted. He tried to place his body between the sound and Rajani, but couldn't be sure what was out there and where it was. "Help me, Rajani."

She mumbled something, but he missed it as the water boiled around his legs. He heard it churning to a filthy froth and felt the warm fluid flick up on his face and neck. Then something tugged at his left pant leg. He felt a hunk of the bloody cloth tear free, and something hard rasped against his bare flesh. New pain started from where Rajani had dulled the old pain, and Sin knew something had re-opened the bullet wound.

"Rajani! What is it?"

She shook her head weakly, her hair brushing against his neck. "Move. Go."

"I hope it doesn't track by scent, because I'm bleeding." Great. Bleeding in a river of sewage that's home to something slithery! I should've let the rocket kill me.

«No, Sinclair. That would have been bad.»

"Rajani? Did you just say something?"

« It comes again.» She leaned heavily against him, vainly attempting to get him to turn around. His left

hand grabbed the waistband of her jeans to hold her up, and he moved in the direction she wanted, but he could still see nothing. In the back of his mind, like the clicking of a Geiger counter approaching an atomic pile, a staticky sound built.

Something in the miasmic river made the gentle *thrupping* sound of a fish striking at the surface. Sin recognized it as almost being normal, but it seemed louder than it should have. The sound also ripped through the tunnel like a serrated knife sawing through bone.

Sin let Rajani steady herself against the tunnel wall, freeing his left hand. "C'mon, thing. You and me." He grinned toward where he knew Rajani stood, "It lives in a cesspit. How tough can it be?"

"Very," she whispered, "It is not from here."

"What?"

«Fiddleback wants us dead.»

Suddenly, a segmented serpentine form reared up through the sludgy water. Mandibles clicked once, then Sin cried out as something slashed across his chest. It sliced through his shirt, suspenders and flesh, then withdrew. With it went the mental static.

Sin hissed and pressed his left hand over the cut. "Proper tools to do a proper job." Sin swallowed hard. "Where is it, Rajani? If I can find it, I can kill it."

She said nothing, but he felt her hand on his shoulder as he reached around and pulled the Beretta with his right hand. His vision swam for a second, then he saw himself drawing his gun. *I'm seeing through her eyes!* In an instant the static pounded back into his brain and he felt fetid water splash up and over him.

What he saw disturbed him more than how he saw it. The creature had risen up and pulled back like a cobra preparing to strike. One of the two larger mandibles dripped blood. Other smaller ones ringed the creature's mouth and clenched reflexively as if to rip great hunks of flesh out of him. The composite eyes sat nestled deep in a spiny, chitinous skull and glowed a dull green.

Sin saw the viewpoint in his eyes crash toward his head as Rajani integrated their views. He blinked, and Sin saw through her eyes what his eyes were seeing as the creature's head drove forward. As it did so, the creature's mouth flared open, its jaws bending it out into a hexagonal shape.

He stabbed his right hand straight at it, and the creature engulfed his whole hand, gun and all. Sin felt the sting as auxiliary mandibles chomped down on his wrist, but he didn't pull back or fight it. The creature's eyes pulsed with green fire, and the spiny antennae twiddled back and forth as something inside the head bit down with a *chank!*

Sin's finger tightened on the trigger. The bullet blew out the back of its head and covered the wall behind it with glistening bits of chitin. The hot gasses from the muzzle plumped the jaws and pulled the pincers from Sin's wrist a second before the head shot back. It smacked the wall, splattering it with more dark fluids, then the whole creature slid beneath the sluggish river of effluent.

"Bit off more than you could chew, eh?" Rajani's sight faded from his eyes, so Sin didn't get a good look at the deep scars on either side of the pistol's slide. He turned back toward her, saying, "Hey, the joke wasn't that bad," when he saw her sag against the sewer wall. He caught her and held her up out of the

slime. "Hang in, kid. Rajani!"

« Father? » he heard resound in his head.

She went limp, and the world went black again.

Sin looped his left arm around her slender waist, then tucked his gun away. Scooping her up in his arms, he was surprised at how little she weighed given her ability to hold him up when he needed help. Even with her added weight, his left leg felt pretty good, and his right wrist barely pained him.

The sheer insanity of his situation clamped down on him like the creature's jaws had on his hand. He saw himself as another might. There he stood, a beautiful and exotic woman in his arms. Knee-deep in sewage, not a bullet to his name, and the blood of some creature that could have only come from a tabloid news story running down the wall of a tunnel, he saw himself like the hero of *American Ninja IX: Recomb Revenge*.

What was worse, to him, was that his particular mental image of the moment almost made sense, because it only took into consideration the cosmetic conditions. What made it more bizarre was how Rajani had healed his leg and spoken through his mind and let him use her eyes. Part of him hoped the whole adventure was a nightmare from which he could awaken, yet another part feared it was some hallucination Galbro was forcing into his brain.

Unfortunately, he decided, those two minority opinions safely bracketed the truth. Coyote had invoked the name Fiddleback to explain curious things that had happened in Phoenix . Now, here, in the darkness beneath an artificial island, another person had used the same name. And this time Sin had ample proof that something *very* strange was truly happening.

As suddenly as the creature had attacked him, Sin's worldview shifted. Instead of seeing everything he knew as full and real, it all became like building facades on a movie set. Where he had assumed incompetence or petty jealousies as explanations for things going wrong, now he entertained the possibility that a Fiddleback might have been orchestrating disaster.

In an instant he saw that further down that path lay paranoia. He resisted, slowing his progress toward it, but he did not wholly withdraw from it. *Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean there aren't folks out to get you.* He smiled to himself. *And I know there are folks out to get us, so I'd best get us out of here.*

Think, Sin, think. From a corporate security review he'd done three years before, he knew Kimpunshima had one manhole every 50 meters. He also remembered that at its center there was an open, festival-like area that was generally found packed with tourists at night. Splashing on into the darkness, he headed away from the ocean. *Forty manholes in, and I should be in that area. May have to go a bit north, as well.*

Rajani's eyes came open and glowed gold. She stared at him for a second, then she blinked and the glow faded. "Sin?"

"Easy, kid, I've got you. You're okay." He smiled at her even though he couldn't see her. "I don't know what that was, but it's gone now."

Her voice came in a weary whisper lacking even enough strength to echo from the walls. "It was from Fiddleback . . . one of his pets. He sent it to finish what they tried to do with you earlier."

"Will he send another?"

Her hair brushed against his left hand as she shook her head. "He has been distracted." She grabbed his left shoulder. "Here . . . we have to go up here."

"What? There shouldn't be anything here. It's not far enough."

"Up here." She pointed up, and Sin saw a faint checkerboard pattern above them. "I have friends up there."

"Can you stand?"

"I think so."

He gently lowered her legs, but kept his left arm across her back. She looped her arms around his neck and hung on until she had her legs firmly beneath her. Sin smiled and gave her a hug. "Good. Now for the hard part."

"Yes?"

"I can't see a bloody thing. Put my hands on the ladder."

She directed his hands to the metal ladder on the tunnel wall. Unlike the other one, it was not constructed of metal rebar rungs sunk into the concrete. This one felt to Sin like the lower end of a fire escape that had been removed from its original location and placed in the sewer. It shook a bit as he mounted it, and, as he neared the grating above, he saw it was made of wood. That confirmed to him that the opening was not an official one.

He pushed open the grate and slipped up into the dark basement. He felt so good about being out of the sewers that he never paused to consider what sort of place would want an open access point to the sewers in it. *She says she has friends here.* He pulled Rajani up out of the hole, then lowered the grate back into place.

Letting her cling to his arm, he guided her up the narrow wooden staircase. As he got near the top, he heard raucous American music blaring through the door and found the thick smoke of cigarettes killed the sewer stink clinging to both of them. *Good, a public place.* "Almost home, kid."

He pushed open the door and found himself in a dimly lit, cracked-tile corridor. It led past two bathrooms to the back of a smoke-choked bar. Sin swung his arm around Rajani's shoulder and threw her a wink. "Let's look casual, find your friends and go, okay?"

She nodded and slipped her left arm around his waist. "Okay."

From the amount of noise he heard in the corridor, Sin had assumed the place would be packed wall to wall with people. Stepping into the main room, he saw he'd equated the bone-cracking volume of the sound system with a need to compete with a crowd that didn't exist. He knew the folks who had been there were there recently because their cigarettes still burned in ashtrays and the heads on various beers were still going down.

"Welcome to Café *Marie Celeste*," he murmured.

Aside from a couple of barely visible people speaking in dark alcoves along the far wall, the last of the bar's patrons were streaming out between two lines of jeering *bosozoku* gang members. He immediately steered Rajani toward the door, willing to endure taunts and jibes to get out, but the gap closed down as they approached.

"These are your friends?"

Rajani shook her head.

A smallish man with a gash on his shaved head dropped his Lennon glasses down to the end of his nose as he blocked their path. "*Baka-da!*"

"What are you talking about?" Sin's eyes narrowed. "I've never seen you before, so how could I have done something stupid?"

The rat-faced man snarled at him. "Not you, *yanki!* The *mesu* did." His dark-eyed gaze shifted back and forth between them. "Give her to me, and you won't have trouble."

"*Namenna-yo!*" Sin balled his fists. "This isn't worth the pain you'll feel." The little man, with his gang fanning out behind him, looked more confident than Sin wanted to see.

Rajani moved away from him, then looked back toward the bathroom. "Sin, look out!"

Sin whirled and only caught part of the meaty punch coming in at his head. It clipped him hard, striking sparks into his vision. He felt his knees turn to water, and blood began to drip from his nose. He braced himself to kiss the floor, but he never hit it, and he couldn't figure out why.

Then he felt the pressure on his back and saw the arm connected to the hand that had a massive amount of his shirt in its grasp. He followed the leather-swathed arm as it swelled on up into a body that looked big enough to be two sumo wrestlers grafted together. The head on it had flat, gray eyes and looked like it had grown up in a bucket mold, with the short neck it sat on being wider than any part of the head.

"*Bukkoroshite yaru!*" The man holding him smiled with a mouth full of brown, picket-fence teeth. He raised his left fist. "I punch you until you die!"

The fist started down but never connected. Halfway to its target another arm reached over the biker's shoulder, and a hand closed around the fist. Muscles bunched on this new arm, and bones cracked in the fist. The interloping hand then shoved down and mashed the broken hand into a table top.

With a twist of the arm, Bat spun the fat biker around and smashed him in the mouth with an elbow, forcing him to let Sin drop to the floor. Releasing the shattered fist, Bat grabbed the big man around the back of his bull neck and brought his head down to meet Bat's rising knee. The biker collapsed to the floor, moaning. Bat stomped down on his outstretched right arm, snapping its bones cleanly, then planted a hard kick in the man's ribs.

Smiling demonically Bat beckoned the other bikers forward. "The man told you not to mess with him. Now you know why. C'mon, girls, I'm almost done with your friend, and I ain't even broke a sweat yet."

Natch stepped from one of the alcoves with a Beretta automatic pointing toward the bikers. "Don't worry, you won't suffer . . . much."

Bat took a step forward, and the *bosozoku* gang broke running.

Sin sat up and dabbed at the blood from his nose with his left sleeve as they crowded out the door. "Never thought I'd be happy to see you, Mr. Kabat."

"If I'd known you worked so well as bait, MacNeal, I'd have worn the boots with steel toes." Bat grabbed the unconscious biker and bashed his head into tables and chairs on the way to the door, then he tossed him out into the street. He looked out for a second, then smiled. "They got courage on the other side of the street."

Rajani frowned as she helped Sin to his feet. "Do you think they will try to jump us?"

"Hope so," Bat nodded grimly.

Jesus Christ! Sin used a napkin from the bar to wipe the blood off his face. "At the risk of spoiling your fun, I'd just as soon get out of here." He looked at the little bartender trembling in the corner. "*Denwa, arimas'ka?*"

The man brought him the phone, and Sin punched a number in. The man at the other end answered it after one ring. "Yes, Kazuo, this is Sinclair. I am with friends, and I need a ride. I don't know where, but someone here does. Thanks." Sin held the receiver out to the bartender.

The little man took it and started speaking very fast as Sin turned to the others. "Kazuo will get us out of here, and then we have to meet with Hal and some others as quickly as possible."

Natch tucked her pistol away. "Why the rush?"

"Because, Natch, the place I just left is the place Coyote send me to locate." Sin tasted blood on his lips. "Between Rajani and me, I've learned enough to know that it's a breeding ground for this Fiddleback and a legion of loonies."

"Fine, but why the urgency?"

"Because one of those budding loonies is the emperor's grandson." He rubbed the puncture marks on his right wrist. "From what I've been told, letting Fiddleback get his hands on him is roughly equivalent to looping a new ammo belt into a minigun. As none of us—hell, none of the world—is on that team, I'd like to do everything I can to frustrate Fiddleback one more time."



Acquire, imprint, kill! Mickey stood in darkness with his feet shoulder-width apart, knees bent and weight forward on the balls of his feet. *Acquire, imprint, kill!* His arms hung down at his sides with his fingers stiffened into a spearhead. *Acquire, imprint, kill!*

The lights slowly came up in the room, and Mickey found himself facing a host of misshapen, hunched figures. They bulged with muscles and carried clubs and swords in the massive hands that lurked at the

end of improbably long arms. Oversized jaws and outthrust muzzles contrasted with mismatched eyes and haphazardly set ears to make the pointy heads bottom-heavy.

«Magilla Gorilla, but bad.»

«*That's it exactly, Mickey. They have been bad.*» The little man's voice soothed away the concerns sparked by the cartoon connection Mickey had made. «*They were bad, and you must punish them.*»

"They have no hats." Mickey smiled as he spoke, his new face and jaw making it possible for him to pronounce words that had previously proved impossible for him.

«Hats?»

Mickey nodded carefully. "Magilla Gorilla has a hat. Why don't they have hats?"

«Hats. They lost them, Mickey. This is why they were bad.»

"Bad. Punish."

«*Precisely, Mickey.*» A tone sounded and the dozen screaming Koman charged at him in a frenzied knot. «*Mickey, ignore.*»

The bestial Koman surrounded him and smashed the clubs down on his head and shoulders. Mickey felt the impacts and heard them, but remained detached. He knew the knife thrust to his abdomen had split skin and had to hurt, but he channeled the pain away, as he had been instructed. The loud crack of a club against his right kneecap numbed his whole right leg, but he pushed the panic away.

«Now, Mickey, you may defend yourself. Sequence normally. Start with Claw! Go!»

Acquire. Mickey turned his head and scanned the group. He assessed them in terms of threat potential based on their weapons, size, skill, disposition, apparent intelligence, range and state of health. As one part of his brain sorted through the candidates and assigned them threat-assessment levels, another part searched through known-enemy templates and searched for the one that fit the Koman. Having fought them before, he came up with the original template he had memorized and visualized it as modified by supplementary data.

The Koman with a bloodied knife to his right won the designation as primary target. Mickey merged his image with the template. Red dots covered the Koman at forehead, throat and the center of its chest, showing areas of vulnerability. *Imprint.* Mickey's right hand contracted, fingers hooking halfway in, palm pulling perpendicular to the forearm.

Kill.

Mickey's hand struck with blinding speed. His fingers penetrated the Koman's flesh before the creature had a chance to realize Mickey had even begun to move. Leaning in toward the Koman, Mickey pushed his hand through the beast's sternum, snapping off the ends of a half-dozen ribs. As the bone fragments shredded the Koman's lungs and started them hissing, Mickey mashed its heart against its spine. His hand contracted as he encountered bone, and his arm retracted, taking four vertebrae with it.

The first Koman collapsed with the upper half of his torso folding backward and blood spraying out of the hole in his chest. Mickey turned back away from him, stiffening his left hand into a spearhead.

Acquire. Moving to the left, he spotted a Koman with a rapier. His mental template fused with the Koman. *Imprint.*

Kill!

With the skill of a championship fencer, Mickey arched his back to avoid a thrust, then stabbed his left hand at the Koman's eyes. His fingers pushed past them, shattering the bones behind the orbits. If the bone shards being driven through the Koman's brain had not been enough to kill him, Mickey's spearhand thrust going all the way to touch the back of the skull would have accomplished the job easily.

Mickey pulled his hand free with a sucking *thwok*, then spun. He acquired a target as he pivoted on his left leg and knotted his right hand into a hammer-fist. He imprinted his target as it missed an overhead stroke with a baseball bat. He brought his right hand through and killed the Koman by blasting its left ear beyond the midline of its skull and driving its body into another Koman.

Acquire, imprint, kill. Mickey worked his way through the axe and awl shapes, then moved to the more complex double-strike forms that required both hands, like hammer and anvil, nut and bolt and turnabout. Two elbow strikes, a kick and a ram's-head strike finished the rest of the Koman, then Mickey resumed his original stance.

The blood dripping from his hands ran down his legs to the growing puddle at his feet.

The small man came out of the darkness surrounding the combat arena and wore a pleased smile on his face. He snapped his fingers, and a large green orb on a leathery green stalk dropped down and hovered five feet above the ground. The scaled flesh surrounding it peeled back, and a translucent membrane slid diagonally away. It revealed a star-pupiled eyeball with a red circle iris. The eye tracked right, then down and left, then down and right, repeating the process until it had scanned him from head to toe.

The little man nodded appreciatively. "You did an excellent job, Mickey. Your forms were all correct. You have studied well." He squatted down and watched the bruising on Mickey's knee disappear. "Your recovery rate is fantastic. You are perfect."

Mickey smiled broadly. "Now I go home? Now I see Dorothy?"

The little man rested his right elbow in this left hand and tapped his teeth with a finger. "Soon, Mickey, very soon. There are only a couple more things you have to do, then I shall return you home." He smiled, and Mickey's disappointment vanished. "And, believe me, everyone will remember your homecoming for a long, long time."



The maelstrom of emotions swirling through the room made Rajani feel dizzy. "Please, stop it, all of you."

Sin and Colonel Nagashita both looked up from the map over which they had been arguing. Behind them, Kazuo and Bat both looked surprised at her outburst. Only Hal, standing near the street map with a Silva rolling map scaler, appeared to understand what had made her angry. Natch looked up from cleaning her pistol, and Jytte remained at the computer terminal in the corner of the room.

Sin frowned and wiped his sweaty brow with his shirtsleeve. "What's the matter, Rajani?"

She got a feeling of genuine concern and care from him, which made it easier for her to speak. "You are all working at cross-purposes." She pointed at Nagashita. "You resent Sin's planning because you believe this is a problem your command should have been given to handle from the start. You also don't like Mr. Takagi and his people being brought in on this. You are purposefully ignoring the gravity of the situation."

Sin nodded, then froze as she glared at him. "And you, Sin, you are just as guilty. You are angry because of having been shot. You also resent Colonel Nagashita because you think he's trying to take over this operation. You are ignoring the fact that he and his people have had vast amounts of training in this sort of thing, especially after the incident in the Olympics two years ago. You are pushing the use of the Yakuza as a diversionary force for the most part because it will work, but a little because their presence needles Colonel Nagashita."

Rajani let her own anxiety filter into her words. "You, Mr. Takagi, want to help because of your sense of duty to the imperial family. You are also thinking that this could give your people an entrée into Kimpunshima and perhaps even a chance to destroy the *bosozoku* group that has been annoying your uncle."

She just looked at Bat and shivered.

Sin looked down at his shoes in embarrassment. "You're right, Rajani." His head came up again as he looked at the IDC leader. "Colonel, let's table our problems until we have Ryuhito out and safe."

"*Hai*." The small, sharp-eyed man nodded curtly and unfolded his arms. Kazuo Takagi nodded in agreement, and Hal smiled. Only Bat remained untouched by her appeal.

"Then, if this meets with your approval, this is what I propose." Sin pointed on the map of the Galactic Brotherhood Institute at the patio from which he had left the grounds. "We have a wall breach here, which they're going to have to devote a lot of attention to. Kazuo, your people need to arrive here and put on a big show of force. Be aware they're armed with some heavy weapons, including rocket-propelled grenades, LAW rockets and even some SAWs. I don't know where they got them, but I've not got a hard time imagining a network of true believers within all sorts of corporations around the world. Be careful, and, if/when the shooting starts, you head in here."

Kazuo nodded. "*Wakarimasu*. Colonel, is that acceptable to you?"

Nagashita nodded. "Having you attract their attention is good. Your people, when they come in, will wear blue armbands so my people will not shoot them, yes?"

"*Hai*."

"Good." Sin shifted to the front of the GBI building. "This is the weakest spot in the GBI defenses. The public lobby has lots of glass, and the auditorium is clear, so even if an alarm is sounded and help arrives, the defenders won't have any place to hide. Aside from the book kiosks, there is no cover. We will get in quietly.

"Now this door here," he said as he tapped the map, "leads straight into their secure area. This is their spine, and it gives us instant access to the rest of the complex. I can get us through the door, then we have teams locate Ryuhito, secure him and get him out."

Colonel Nagashita's eyes nearly closed as he frowned. "I do not like the fact that our strike into the complex is predicated on your being able to breach this secure door. You said it has a Tojicorp Hogosha security door and palmprint reader. I think it we will have to blow it."

Sin shook his head. "Rajani, toss me that room service menu, please."

She took the laminated menu from the table and brought it over to him. Sin flipped it open to the room service section and smiled. "Kobe's finest. We're in, trust me."

Jytte hit a key on her console. "By retracing through the Lorica system, I have penetrated the GBI computer system at the most basic levels. They are in the midst of notifying the people who were scheduled to show up for a meeting tonight that it has been postponed."

"Good." Sin looked over at Colonel Nagashita. "This plan will work, trust me."

"I am afraid any trust I might have had for you vanished three years ago, Mr. MacNeal." Nagashita pulled himself up to his full height and gave Sin a stare harsh enough for Rajani to feel it. "However, I serve one who trusts you. Your plan has merit, and we will employ it."

"We're cooking with microwaves now. Jytte, can you access any higher computer functions from here?"

She shook her head in response, giving off waves of frustration. "This level allows for some administrative functions, presumably so field representatives can make appointments and add people to schedules from remote locations. I have tried to gain upper-level access, but they may have a cut-out system in place to prevent tampering."

Rajani frowned. "Cut-out?"

Jytte gave Rajani a quick, mechanical smile. "Data transfers from this basic system to the higher-level system may require an operator to physically move a storage medium, like a WORM disk from one network to another. For orders going down from higher to lower, the higher system can always call the lower on the same sort of access line as we are using."

The blonde woman closed her eyes and concentrated hard enough that Rajani caught no impressions or emotions from her at all. Jytte's fingers drifted to the keypad, then began hitting keys in short, sharp bursts. Her whole body stiffened for five seconds, and no one in the room so much as breathed. Then she typed another, longer sequence into the machine and sat back.

"The key to WORM disks is that they hold far more information than even the most busy system could ever handle. WORM means 'write once, read many' and this disk in the drive currently has been in use for the past month. To make their system ultrasecure, they should destroy the disk after each transfer, but financial analysts do not see that as economical. I will read all the data and see if there is a mention of upper-level access."

"Good hunting." Sin looked over at Hal. "You and Jytte will be our logistics coordinators. You'll come in with the second waves of Colonel Nagashita's men and take up a position in the GBI executive offices. You'll have the job of keeping us all pointed in the right direction. You'll also be the ones to get Ryuhito out when we find him."

Hal nodded, and Rajani sensed in him welcome relief at not being asked to actively engage in the assault.

This did not surprise her, given his recent brush with death and the loss of his wife, but Rajani knew his abhorrence of violence ran deeper than that. Hal clearly believed violence was one of the root causes of the world's problems and, while he might have acknowledged that some people fervently needed killing, the collateral damage done by violence was far too high a price to be paid easily.

Sin glanced at Bat, got a stony stare in return, then looked at Nagashita again. "You can have your people in place and pick us up here in an hour and a half?"

"Hai."

"Is that workable for you, Kazuo?"

"Hai."

Rajani turned away and slid the door open onto the hotel balcony as Sin escorted the two Japanese men to his elevator. She stepped out into the night and shivered, but shut the door behind her instead of returning for a coat. The new pair of jeans and thin, white cotton blouse with short sleeves did nothing to stop the humid air from chilling her, but she didn't care. It felt right to her to feel cold.

She tried to sort through everything she had experienced and learned over the last four hours. The shock of having sensed her father nearly overpowered everything. She had always hoped he had survived the years, but when she was put into stasis she had been told that the chances of that were slim at best. Her father had impressed upon her the absolute necessity of what she was doing and told her how proud he was of her for accepting that burden.

Leaning against the balcony railing, feeling the cold steel against her belly, she stared out at the imperial palace and the forested oasis surrounding it. Her father, in that brief contact, reminded her much of that building. He seemed as remote as ever, but also changed. He was not the same as a medieval palace in a modern world, but he struck her as more guarded and primal. He had changed as much as she had.

She also realized she was continuing to change, but not in the focused manner in which she had during stasis or before. Dr. Chandra and his aides, even the loathsome Nicholas, had been strong personalities, but they faded to insignificance in comparison to Natch and Bat and Sin. Moreover, her entire life had been one of learning and experimenting instead of actually living. She realized that, as nice as Dr. Chandra and his people had been to her, as much as they accommodated her, she was really just a large lab rat to them.

As much as it had embarrassed her to have the AKM's recoil knock her off the wall, she had reveled in it. Dr. Chandra and his people had taught her about the concept of equal and opposite reactions, but that was a practical demonstration of the principle. That was a lesson she would never forget, but it was delivered in a manner that no one would have ever allowed in the old days.

More importantly to her, though, she had actually done something. Deep down she knew that making the trip from Area 51 to Flagstaff with Dorothy and Mickey was an accomplishment in and of itself, but there she had help because the kids knew where their home was. In going out to rescue Sin, she had operated on her own. She knew that her action had been impulsive and even foolish, but she had no choice, and her inaction would have meant that Sin died.

She found that was the last thing she wanted.

As much as she liked the surprise Bat had shown when Sin explained about how her shooting had

caused the man with the antitank missile to shift his aim-point to the wall, the gratitude coming from Sin made her feel even better. She liked his laughter and even didn't mind when he joked that he would have had her drive the getaway jeep, but he feared her marksmanship with a car would have been even worse than that with a gun.

The people she had known in the lab were much like Bat in that they had a single focus that dominated their lives. Sinclair MacNeal struck her as a personality with multiple facets. His mind always raced on, looking for a use for something or an angle on it or a relationship of it to something else he knew about. He also cared about people, not just as resources, but as people. When he tipped the concierge for bringing her a new set of clothing from the hotel store, he did it with genuine thanks in mind instead of a desire to impress the other people in the room.

"Hey, kid, you going to be up to this tonight?"

She spun around and brushed strands of gold hair back from her face. "Sin! I didn't hear you."

He nodded. "You seemed pretty far away." He held out a blue windbreaker. "I thought you might need this. Thinking about your father?"

Rajani nodded, then turned back toward the palace. "Him, and a lot of things. And, to answer your question, yes, I'm up to going into GBI. Why do you ask?"

"You're going to be our early-warning system." Sin joined her at the railing and leaned on it with his elbows. "If Fiddleback was able to summon up that devil-worm just to nail us, imagine what he'll do to hang on to Ryuhito. We'll need to know what and where to react to it."

He turned toward her, and she read the concern from his face even before she felt it. "I know you can find the fighting tough to take—proving once again you're an intelligent person."

Rajani shook her head. "Not the violence, but the emotions it engenders. There are some emotions no one should ever have."

"Yeah, I imagine being around Bat in the *bosozoku* fight was like being forced to read that old piece of trash, *American Psycho*. I'm having a hard time here because I'll be keeping an eye out for El-Leichter, Nagashita and Bat to see which one shoots me first."

"Sin, you don't have to worry about Bat."

Sin raised an eyebrow. "Oh? He hates me as much as most of Tokyo hates this heat wave."

"That may be so, but he also respects you." Rajani half-smiled, "It started when you told him about how you got away from Mr. Handy, then it stayed alive when you talked about the devil-worm. What guaranteed it was how you formulated a plan and were able to work around the objections advanced by Hal, Kazuo and Nagashita. I think Bat finds you borderline dangerous now, which is quite an accomplishment."

"Forgive me if that doesn't make me sleep any easier tonight—if I sleep at all." He smiled at her. "So, can your psychic powers let you see into the future?"

"No, but they could let me see into you." She shrugged. "I don't think I need to, though, because I watched you in there. You know your plan is good, and you've done everything you can to make sure it

works. Fiddleback is your only random element, and you even have him partially covered. It will be dangerous, but it is also necessary."

"The only way we can guarantee failure tonight is to not do anything." Sin turned around and leaned his back into the railing. "Everything else is a toss of the cosmic dice."

She nodded and hugged the windbreaker tight around her body. "If only we knew the odds."

He winked at her. "Naw, if we knew the odds, we'd be smart enough not to go." He looped his left arm around her shoulders and steered her back toward the suite. "Come on back inside, Rajani. I have to call room service and I can add some hot tea to take care of that shiver, it's warm inside."

"No, Sin, I think I'll stay out here for a bit."

"Rajani, stay out here and you'll catch your death." He gave her a brief hug. "And that is not something I want to happen."



An unseasonably cold wind cut at Coyote as he met Mong and the Yidam at the heart of a crowd of monks. He was glad he'd chosen to wear a black turtleneck sweater over his Kevlar vest instead of the T-shirt he'd used during training. His Wildey Wolf rode in the Bianchi shoulder holster, and the two Colt Kraits occupied positions on his hips.

In addition to the small arms, he carried a short carbine that, at first glance, looked almost identical to the carbine version of the M16 automatic rifle. What differentiated the Armalite AR-12 Stormcloud from the generation of weapons that spawned it was the boxier magazine and larger bore. The combat shotgun fed shells in from a 12-round box, and Coyote had specifically loaded his with sets of three buckshot shells and one Dragonfire incendiary round. He had three clips and, while he had picked the weapon up out of professional curiosity after a conversation with Crowley, the lark struck him as being a fortunate bit of luck.

His black combat fatigue pants and combat boots, along with the turtleneck, almost looked like street clothes. He assumed he might have to pass for normal when he reached Japan, which is why he also had a nylon satchel folded into a tight little package and stuffed in his back pocket. The guns and spare clips could go into it when they arrived.

The Yidam, Coyote realized, would present a problem even in the weirder districts of Japan. Four Vietnam-vintage flak jackets had been cut apart and sewn together to provide the four-armed alien with body protection. He wore yak-skin boots that had been specially crafted to fit his clawed feet, and the talons poked through the ends of them like decorations. His arms, legs and head remained bare, but their dark color would help conceal him.

Concealing the long rifle the Yidam carried on his upper right arm—as if he were a country squire ready for a day of quail hunting—would be something else entirely. *I could break that down with a hacksaw, and I'd still not be able to conceal it.* Taller than Coyote by a clean foot, it had a bore he could have plugged with his thumb. From the shells distributed in the bandolier slung across the Yidam's torso,

Coyote knew the weapon wasn't a shotgun, despite the large barrel diameter.

"Loaded for bear, aren't we?"

The Yidam smiled, and Mong patted the gun the alien carried affectionately. "This is an old surplus weapon we thought to use against tanks if they ever worked through our shielding."

Coyote took another look at the weapon, then nodded. "14.5mm Protivotankovoe Ruzh'yo obr 1941 g PTRS. The Soviets manufactured those to stop German tanks. Shoots a 14.5mm tungsten-cored, armor-piercing incendiary round that it gets from a five-round clip. Semiautomatic fire, hellish recoil." He pointed to a polished wooden grip halfway up the barrel. "You're supposed to have a bipod there, but I guess you don't need it."

The Yidam shook his head. "No, I don't."

Coyote chuckled lightly, then frowned. "The 14.5mm round was good in its day, but any armor we're likely to run into has benefited from 60 years of technological development."

"I am not concerned about armor, just whatever sort of creature your former master can dredge up."

"Besides," added Mong, "these shells are new. They have even been modified to work better." When Coyote gave him a quizzical look, he offered one word. "Teflon."

That moment of levity faded as Coyote looked along the torch-lit causeway leading to the east gate. He could see people in all of the alcoves as usual, but fluid stains rendered in black by the torchlight caught his attention. *Mong said he'd lost people and would lose more.* Staring at the silent evidence of the evil Fiddleback could do with a stray thought, Coyote set himself.

"Mong, thank you for what you have given me in the way of wisdom and training."

"Kyi-can, we who know of the Dark Ones have a responsibility to fulfill. You repay me by fighting for the future."

Coyote reached out and squeezed the monk's shoulder. "My predecessor asked those he helped to 'pay forward,' not back. We will pay forward, with interest."

The Yidam brandished his tank-killing rifle, "It is time to return to the Dark Ones that which they have sown."

Mong nodded. "Our prayers are with you."

The Yidam led Coyote off along the causeway. "When I probed your mind, I saw that Crowley had shown you one of the transportational devices available for travel between the dimensions. We will walk to a place where one of these is located and move from there, because the 3500-mile hike to Japan would still take a while, even with shortcuts through other dimensions. This particular site is little used because it is located in a pastoral dimension with little or no value to the Dark Lords."

"I trust your judgment."

The two of them came to the massive stone gate and stopped before it. Coyote closed his eyes for a moment and exhaled a deep breath to the count of five. He forced his heart to slow and he cleared his

mind. Around him, he heard the pitch and tenor of the chanting shift, then felt an unseen pressure on his back.

He stepped forward and reached out with his mind. He sensed the Yidam's passage and slipped in behind him to speed his transit to their target destination. Things went smoothly for a dozen steps, then the ground seemed to lurch upward, driving his knees toward his chest. Coyote found himself racing forward with the exaggerated steps of someone running on a trampoline, then the terrain stiffened beneath his feet and he fell to the ground.

He felt grasses and opened his eyes to a bizarre nightscape. He felt hands on his shoulders lifting him up and thought it was the Yidam, but he came into view off to Coyote's right. Coyote turned his head and saw Crowley's silhouette, then nodded to his friend and was released. "What are you doing here?" he whispered.

Crowley crouched between him and the Yidam. "I assumed, after the display an hour ago, that you would be coming out."

"Display?" Coyote likewise crouched and let the long summer grasses in the meadow hide him.

"The net Fiddleback used to locate you shocked me out of one of the more pleasant social situations I've been in recently. There I was, reading Janine Fonda's palm and suddenly I'm hit with a piece of Fiddleback's brainblast. I started babbling uncontrollably for the time it took for him to shred Kanggenpo's defenses, then I stopped when he focused on you." Crowley laughed wryly, the sound seeming odd coming from a shadow. "Turned out for the best, though, because Ms. Fonda recognized the drivel I started spouting about Grays and how they've taken over the planet. Speaking of which, who is Gunga Din and what is that peashooter he's carrying?"

"Meet Kanggenpo's Yidam. He's on our side."

The Yidam offered Crowley his lower right hand, and the man took it. "I am the Yidam. I also used to crew with the so-called Grays."

"Lovely." Crowley shook his head. "Janine asked if I was a disciple of Arrigo El-Leichter, too, and mentioned she'd gone to some seminars he gave at the Galactic Brotherhood Institute in Kimpunshima. I did a quick check and realized that Arrigo must be another of Fiddleback's pets, and he runs a training facility. It also seems he has a working dimensional transport device in his facility there. Assuming you'd come out here, I arrived ahead of you, and that's when I found *that*."

Coyote looked off toward the south. Cutting across the meadow, he saw an S-shaped track of golden light that reminded him of a timed-exposure picture of car taillights at night. It stood almost twice the Yidam's considerable height, and he thought he could see humanoid silhouettes moving within it. Most moved through in the ground, heading from west to east, but a few moved in the opposite direction in the upper area. He had no way of telling how wide it was, but it extended from the middle of one hillside to halfway up the next and apparently ended in the same place it began: nowhere.

"What is it?"

Crowley shrugged. "I don't really know. Could be a tunnel through dimensions, I suppose. I've never seen its like before."

The Yidam stared at it, then folded his lower arms. "I've not seen such a thing either, but I have heard

tales. I think this may be a conduit between dimensions. I suspect having it track through here is to let it avoid detection. Chances are excellent, Coyote, that the turbulence we felt as we walked here was our cutting across its path."

Coyote frowned. "Is it Fiddleback's?"

"No. Too elegant." Crowley shook his head. "Another Dark Lord's work, I'd guess. Maybe the Empress of Diamonds or Midas Longclaws."

"We don't have time for this. Where is the dimensional transporter?"

Crowley flattened some grass back behind himself, and Coyote saw a low ring of stone. "You're in the middle of it. That stream over there powers it. Rearrange the stones in the pool in the right way, and it works." The occultist stepped over the stone ring and in the direction of the stream Coyote heard gurgling in the darkness. "I've got it targeted for a clear area about 20 meters south of El-Leichter's device."

"Are you coming with us?"

Crowley nodded toward the lightwall. "I think I'd best check that out. I'll report back as fast as I can. Good luck."

Coyote threw Crowley a wave, then charged the Stormcloud and took it off safe. The Yidam likewise worked a shell into the PTRS's breach, then held it ready. "We check. Go, Damon."

Coyote heard the swish of water, then the world lurched sideways. The night sky and lightwall vanished into a cool, black ocean. But before he or the Yidam could get used to that, thunder cracked the darkness, and they reappeared in a world of fire.



Sin reached over and opened the Japan Gray Line tour bus' front and back doors. "This is the Galactic Brotherhood Institute. Everybody out!"

Hal and Jytte led a coterie of Japanese men and women wearing oversized, garish Hawaiian shirts and dresses from the bus. They milled around, chattering away pleasantly, each carrying a tour bag and with cameras looped around their necks like talismans to ward off evil. Nagashita alighted last and tugged his gray blazer into place. Shouting at the tourists to line up, he marched to the front door, and they followed in lockstep.

The two GBI employees on duty looked at each other, then both came to the doorway. Sin recognized neither the man or woman from his first visit or from the classes he had subsequently taken. They paused at the door and shouted muffled questions at Nagashita. The colonel, in turn, just bowed politely, smiled and pointed at the lock before bowing again.

The man opened the glass door. "I am afraid we are not expecting you."

"So sorry," said Nagashita. He reached inside his coat and came out with a silenced Beretta automatic.

His hand bucked twice, and both GBI employees died with a bullet through the brain. Nagashita yanked the door wide open and waved his people through.

The callousness with which Nagashita had killed the two GBI peons irked Sin. He had agreed that the Internal Defense Cadre would secure the lobby, but he'd somehow imagined Nagashita would take any employees prisoner. *Then again*, he reminded himself, *he's treating this like a hostage rescue in which he's freeing the emperor's grandson. There's bound to be retribution in the mix.*

Sin keyed the radio he wore. "Team 1 is in. C'mon. Natch, have your folks hold."

A black van roared up and came to a quick stop behind the bus. The side panel slid open, and four black-clad ninjas poured out. Each carried a silenced and suppressed HK MP-7 submachine-gun and wore a traditional *katana* across his back. Two carried between them another satchel that they hustled into the lobby, then dropped in the midst of their compatriots. The first team's ninjas had peeled off their colorful clothing beneath which they wore the dark togs of their profession.

Sin grabbed his own tour bag and tore his gray Gray Line shirt open. He walked straight past the two ninjas stationed at the door and met Nagashita. Sin pulled his own Beretta from his bag and screwed a silencer on it as Nagashita pried one of the doors to the auditorium open. "Clear."

"Let's do it." Sin slipped through the door and crouched low to the right. He swept his gun across the dark room, ready to shoot anything he saw. Nagashita entered the room right behind him and likewise found it clear. Sin looked over at him and caught his nod, then the two of them ran across the room to the security door while the rest of the IDC ninjas entered the auditorium and fanned out.

"This is the door you can defeat?" Nagashita pressed his back against the wall beside the light panel.

Sin nodded and tucked his pistol in his waistband. "This Tojicorp door lacks a bit. When someone presses his palm against it, he leaves a handprint. The Allard Technologies version of the device maps the print both for comparison for identification and to screen out in the future. The number of maps it keeps varies, but Tojicorp dumps the map information fast, saving on storage and making its unit cheaper."

He reached into his bag and brought out a huge Kobe steak encased in clear plastic-wrap. Using his right hand, he pressed it to the panel, and the green scanning light activated. It passed down, then up again.

Nagashita grabbed his shoulder. "Why is it not open?"

"Give me a minute. The meat provides the correct backdrop to make the old palmprint stand out. It's probably just sorting through all the marks left on the glass." Sin held his breath as the light repeated the cycle, then let it out in a low "yes" as the door clicked open.

Nagashita gave him a look that could have pierced his Kevlar vest. Tossing the steak aside, he pulled the door open, and four ninjas poured in to secure the hallway. They reported it clear, and Sin followed them. As they moved up the hallway, Sin looked into the offices they cleared, then waved Jytte and Hal into the second one on the right.

He pointed at a computer console and the bank of mainframes behind it. "Jytte, can you take security down from here?"

The computer empath concentrated for a moment, then nodded. "I think so. I found some codes for the Taos center they just opened. I should be able to use them and get in."

"Good. Go to it." Sin helped Hal unfold the blueprint of the place and pointed out their current location. "We'll keep reporting where we are. Coordinate us with the Yakuza, if we have to bring the Dogs in." Hal gave him a sidelong glance, and Sin amended his statement. "Bat's with them, so *when* they come in, direct them to areas where we won't come up against each other."

"I'm supposed to be here, right?"

Sin turned as Rajani entered the room and killed a laugh. Swathed in Kevlar, she looked like the child of an overprotective mother who has been amply insulated for the first snow of winter. Her bright eyes still glittered, but she looked decidedly uncomfortable. "Yes, here. Warn us if Fiddleback brings us any surprises. You okay?"

She nodded. "First time I've felt warm in a while."

Sin laughed and winked at her, then dashed out the door and down the hallway. The ninjas of Falcon Team—his team—had reached the far end of the security corridor. "Jytte, we're at the end of the hallway."

Sin got no reply over the radio, but the door latch buzzed. He twisted the knob, killing the sound in seconds and stepped out into the corridor. To the right it looked clear, but a guard emerged from the men's room at the far end of the corridor. Left hand pressed against his sagging stomach to hold it back, he tugged at his fly with his right. He looked up with that surprised, fearful expression worn by anyone who had been caught with his fly undone in public, then started to take a half-step backward when he saw Sin's gun.

Sin snapped off his first shot hurriedly, creasing the man's stomach. The gun made almost no sound because of the silencer, but the metallic *thwang* of the bullet ricocheting off the bathroom door-jamb sounded incredibly loud to his ears. The guard gave a yelp, then scrambled into the lavatory on all fours.

Sin and two IDC ninjas chased after him. They paused at the door, and one ninja tossed a concussion grenade into the room. By way of return, they got two shots fired back at them. The bullets blew through the tile wall and out through the plasterboard wall in the hallway, but aside from stinging plaster shrapnel, the blind shots did no harm.

The concussion grenade went off with a loud bang. Smoke poured from the narrow, tiled corridor leading into the washroom. The lead ninja swept the room with crisscrossing patterns of fire, tracing an X on the wall of the stalls. The toilet bowls shattered, and a body splashed down back in the corner. Water mixed with blood ran out and into the central drain.

"Falcon is compromised. Let the Dogs go." Sin heard acknowledgments through his radio, then met the rest of his team back out in the corridor. They pressed on, heading toward the area in which the students had been housed. "Hal, does Jytte have a room number for Ryuhito yet?"

"Negative, Falcon. She's working on it."

He heard Nagashita's voice on the radio link. "Eagle is moving into the islands."

"Roger that, Eagle." Hal's voice paused for a second. "Falcon, Eagle, we have a change in the schedules. Ryuhito should be in the Sun Court right now. Go!"

The Sun Court, Sin recalled from the orientation tour, was the largest of the island courtyards that ran through the center of the complex. Located north of the Khmer and Yellowstone courtyards, it had a huge circular fountain full of solar imagery done in a Mesoamerican style reminiscent of the Aztecs. Their guide had described it as a place used for initiation ceremonies and celebrations like marriages. She had said the fountain could double as baptismal font, if needed, and was lit at night.

Sin sprinted down the corridor and took his first left down another corridor. The second corridor linked the two halves of the complex, so he fired twice at the big plate-glass window, then stepped through the hole as soon as the glass stopped falling. That brought him out into the jungle-like Khmer courtyard. He ran to the nearest palm tree and slapped his back against it.

"Falcon is in K-land. We're inbound for Helios."

"Eagle has Y-land. Converging on Helios."

"Falcon, be advised Rajani has bolted."

"What? Why?"

"Don't know. She ran out of here fast."

Shit! Sin nodded at two of his ninjas and sent them running forward to the next position. The white, serpentine paths of crushed stone all converged on the open area in the center where he had been enjoying drinks with Ryuhito before things had fallen apart. In their advance, Falcon team avoided the pathways and headed on an oblique angle toward the middle.

Peering out from behind the bole of another palm tree, Sin saw the giant stonehead had vanished. He thought he saw something else there, but couldn't be certain, so he waved two people to the edge of cover to check it out. As they moved up, he saw the head's replacement move, and he dove for cover screaming "Down!" into his radio.

The RamTech Roboguard IV had been painted over in the orange and black striping of a tiger, but its resemblance to any living thing ended there. It squatted in the middle of the courtyard like a streamlined mechanical toad, only rising up to its full three meters of height when it flicked on its running lights. The clawed feet dug into the gravel with a crunch as the stubby, L-shaped right arm mounted on the side of its clam-like body raked back and forth across the courtyard. The 9mm bullets from the built-in submachine-gun sliced through the undergrowth at a meter above the ground.

The projectiles shredded vegetation and cut one of Sin's two scouts in half. His companion had started to dive for cover and caught a line of slugs in a bar sinister across her chest. She went down hard, and Sin could hear air bubbling up out of her lungs in the darkness.

Below the Roboguard's body, the heavy barrel of a 25mm cannon wagged obscenely at Falcon team. Having seen the specs on the RamTech monstrosity, Sin knew that cannon could tear apart armored vehicles. Likewise, the heavier M2 machinegun located right below the SMG in the right arm could punch through anything his team had, but in keeping with the RamTech programming, the Roboguard had only used as much firepower as it needed to get the job done.

Which is a lot more than we can bring to bear to take that armored beast apart.

Suddenly, Sin heard gravel being crushed under running feet. He glanced to the right and saw Rajani

sprint past along the path, heading right for the Roboguard. "No, Rajani, no!" *She's not even got a gun!*

The Roboguard's left arm rotated outward and tracked her. Sin heard an explosive hiss of compressed air, then saw Rajani stumble and fall. *It only darted her. She could still be alive.* The hope that thought inspired died quickly as the Roboguard sidled over like a big bird approaching an egg and crouched above her recumbent body.

"Hal, we've got a RamTech Roboguard IV here holding K-land and Rajani." Sin licked his lips. "If Jytte's been saving a security-cracking miracle, now is the time to use it." He ducked his head as another 9mm burst swept through the undergrowth. "If not, the only way we're getting to Ryuhito is in another incarnation."



Rajani felt her heart skip a beat as Sin ran out of the command center. She started to send him a message telepathically, but stopped when she realized he had more than enough to think about without her distracting him. *And you have more than enough to think about without letting him distract you.*

She appropriated a high-backed chair and sat in it, sinking deep into the cushions. She focused herself and purposely tuned out the algorithms and equations bleeding off Jytte like radio static. She found it more difficult to push past Hal's underlying hatred of violence, but she worked around it and let her mind float. She sensed both the Eagle and Falcon teams as they moved purposefully to their jobs, then went out beyond the buildings.

In her mind she visualized them as being akin to the blueprints Hal had spread out on the desk, but she reversed the colors so the walls and doors became a neon blue in a navy-blue background. Sailing up over the walls, she started spotting and fixing in her mind where people were. For a second, a yellow lifelight burned down the hallway near Falcon team, then it winked out. Then, way out, she saw a number of lights blazing away, including the double-sized one she knew to be Bat.

In the vast courtyards she saw no one. "Hal, Khmer and Yellowstone look clear. Dogs are closing on the guards out at that end."

"Are you sure about the courtyards?"

Rajani nodded and checked them again. "Clear. No life signs."

"What about the Sun Court?"

"Clear. Wait." She frowned and shifted uncomfortably in the chair. To her mind, that large central circle looked clear, but she had a hard time concentrating on it. "Something is not right."

"Hal, Ryuhito should be in the Sun Court, according to this schedule I've found."

"Checking." Rajani let her anger power her, and she again focused on the Sun Court. As if her anger were a hammer, the black shroud shielding that area crumpled. Golden lights filled it, but at the center she saw a brilliant white light burning like magnesium and a tainted green-gray light beside it. "Ryuhito is there

in the Sun Court. I'm sure of it."

She heard Hal's voice squawk over the radio, but the earpiece pulled free of her ear as she jerked her head to the right. The blackness tried to shut her out again, but she fought it and forced it to remain down. She saw Falcon and Eagle teams moving toward the Sun Court, and confidence strengthened her.

Suddenly, a malignant green beam shot down through the sky and impaled the gray-green glow. For a moment, she saw the black silhouette of a centauroid spider creature devour the green-gray speck, then that speck returned with black marbling running through it, shifting from moment to moment.

The green light shot out through the holes in the marbling and slammed into all the gold sparks surrounding it. She saw the green energy surround the bright light and mask its brilliance. Then a jade circle expanded and eclipsed the original ball, but Rajani realized too late that it meant one of the green beams was coming for her.

She felt it slam into her forehead, and she jerked back in the chair.« *I am here for you,*» it communicated to her.« *Come to me, come to me all.* »

At once she knew this sending had come from Fiddleback through his agent in the Sun Court. As she listened, the human edge of emotion on the message began to fail. Through it she began to hear more of Fiddleback's sibilant tones, and she fed that back along the link line to create a disruptive echo.

Proximity will help!Rajani vaulted herself out of the chair and started running down the hallway. Distantly behind her, she heard Hal calling out to her, but she continued running. She sensed Fiddleback's growing satisfaction as, one by one, the gold lights shifted to green.« *Come to me; I am here for you!* » crooned the green energy.

As she ran on, Rajani suddenly understood something about Fiddleback, and it spurred her on to greater speed. He collected things—people and creatures—and fused them together. If he were forced to break them down first, he could still use them, but they were not nearly as strong or capable as they would be if they came to him freely. Given that all the golden lights in the Sun Court could not, even were they all combined, even begin to match Ryuhito's energy, she knew she had to prevent his seduction.

Gravel crunched beneath her feet. She heard gunfire in the distance, but she pushed on as her goal stood less than 40 meters north. *Wait. Was that Sin? Do I smell blood?*

She heard Sin call out to her as she rushed past cover and into the central circle of stones. She started to turn back toward him when the Roboguard's dart, having missed her carotid artery, hit her right below her larynx. The dart stung, and she brought her hands to her throat, throwing herself utterly off balance. She fell heavily and rolled onto her back.

Lying there sprawled out, she felt a rain of spent cartridges pour over her body. Looking up, she saw the Roboguard station itself above her. She wanted to scream, but could not because the drug in the dart paralyzed her vocal chords—a human would have been out, but with her xenobiological chemistry, a localized effect was the best it could produce.

I am dead!

«No, daughter, you are not!»

Off to the right, a huge figure stood and raised a rifle of immense proportions. The Roboguard started to

pivot right. The machine's right arm began tracking, then the underslung ball turret moved, then the arm again. By the time its decision tree determined the target did not fit any known attack profile, and it tried to bring all its weapons to bear, the giant's finger pulled the trigger.

The PTRS's projectile weighed over two and a quarter total ounces. By the time the four-foot-long muzzle flame chased it from the gun's barrel, it had accelerated to 3320 feet per second. At that speed, the bullet traveled the 20 meters from the muzzle to the Roboguard roughly three times faster than the sound of it being fired.

The teflon-coated tungsten projectile hit the Roboguard right beneath the spot where a GBI employee had lovingly painted one of the tiger's eyes. At the moment of impact, the Roboguard's armor began to bend and heat with the transfer of kinetic energy from the shell. The interior of the armor plating spalled off, spraying metal fragments through the CPU and severing fiber-optic connections to one of the two gyroscopes that kept it upright. That alone would have been enough to take the machine out of action.

The teflon coating reduced friction between the bullet and the armor so its speed had only bled down to Mach 2.5 when the tungsten rod fully penetrated the Roboguard's armor. At that point, the shell's outer sheath began to telescope down, injecting the incendiary charge into the interior of the Roboguard's body. Those chemicals, which had ignited on impact, blossomed into a fireball as they got enough oxygen to combust. In the blink of an eye, the sophisticated sensors, custom ROMs and electrical relays that gave the Roboguard the illusion of life and sentience vanished into greasy smoke and molten sludge.

The tungsten rod continued its flight and pierced the other side of the Roboguard's armor. Jets of fire shot out both the entry and exit wound like flames snorted by a dragon. They illuminated the whole Khmer courtyard, then vanished into dark afterimages. The Roboguard froze in its last position and, unbalanced, toppled over on its right side.

Rajani rolled to the left and away from the shower of stones the claws tossed into the air when the machine went down. She clutched at her throat, but could not find the dart. More importantly to her, though, she didn't find a gaping wound where her throat should have been, and she checked twice because she could not believe how little blood she had on her hands.

Sin skidded to a halt beside her and pulled her into the shadow of the Roboguard. "Are you all right?"

She nodded, then looked up beyond him as two other figures came running over. One she did not recognize at all, but the other . . . « *Father?* »

«Yes, Rajani. It is me.»

Her head craned back as she slowly stood. The creature answering her question towered above her. She recognized his color and his tattooing, yet he had changed incredibly since she had last seen him: the tusks and the extra pair of arms. Even his mind felt different as he spoke to her. Even so, there at the core she found someone familiar.

Smiling, she threw her arms around him.« *Father!* » She lay her head against his chest and nestled herself in the security of his four-armed hug.

Another mental voice pushed through the area and intruded on her happiness. From the surprised look on Sin's face, Rajani knew he heard it, too.« *Ollie, Ollie in free! Come to theZun Court , my friendz! Come one, come all!* » Underlying the message, Rajani heard the human voice she had heard before, but the bulk came straight from Fiddleback. That made her fight to resist it, but she could find no hostility in

the call. It might have been arrogant and patronizing, but not overtly threatening.

Her father looked at his companion, and both of them nodded. "This is our only play," her father's friend said. "If you get a shot at Fiddleback, take it."

"I will."

As she left her father's strong embrace, she sensed from both him and his companion reluctance and resignation. They knew the Sun Court would be a trap, but it would also be their best chance to rescue Ryuhito. They knew that fighting a Dark Lord straight up was foolish, but her father's companion also believed Fiddleback's ego and confidence would give them an opening to defeat him.

Sin walked a little ahead of her on the way to the Sun Court, but looked back and smiled confidently. "We'll win this one. Trust me."

Rajani returned his smile. "You, I trust. Fiddleback, I don't."

All four followed the Falcon team ninjas into the Sun Court and pushed on through to the front of the ninja ranks. Off to her left, she saw Eagle team with Colonel Nagashita at its head. Hal and Jytte appeared between her and Eagle team, and the Yakuza appeared with Natch, Bat and Kazuo on the right. Between her and the fountain, Rajani saw all sorts of folks dressed for the party Sin had quit earlier in the evening, and arrayed out beyond the circle of the fountain she spotted two dozen GBI security guards.

What attracted her attention most was Arrigo El-Leichter. His fists balled, his cruciform body floated 10 feet above the illuminated base of the fountain. Below him, suspended between heaven and Earth, Ryuhito stood on a hovering green disk. Verdant energy crackled from a halo around Arrigo's head, and she saw it reflected in the eyes of noncombatants ringing the fountain.

Arrigo's head came up, and his face locked into a demonic grin. "Ah, my pet haz returned to hiz zpawning plaze. Zplendid that the prodigal zon be prezent for thiz." He shifted his gaze and looked at everyone. "You are here to birth in a new order on thiz world."

Rajani felt his stare as if it were a lecherous caress, and she immediately wanted to bathe. She retreated a step to the right, and Sin slipped his left arm over her shoulder. She shuddered, and he hugged her.

"Ryuhito haz azked for a practical demonztration of the power I have to offer him. You know of thiz, your Internal Defenze Cadre?"

Hands clasped at the small of his back, Ryuhito nodded curtly. "I also see that Mr. MacNeal has returned, when you said he had been dealt with."

"That waz not me, but the vezzel I now occupy." Arrigo's body brought its arms together so his fists touched above his head. "You wizh to zee power? You wizh to zee that which I will give to you?" His arms shook, and his hands disappeared in long goutts of green fire. The flames swept over the crowd without burning anyone, then evaporated. "Thiz iz power."

"It's nothing," Sin laughed. "It's gone."

Rajani shuddered again. "It's not gone, Sin. Look at their eyes. Look at his disciples' eyes."



Coyote did not need Rajani's warning to tell him something was very wrong. Right in front of him he saw a rather plain woman's head and body jerk down as if she were in great pain. Her head curled on through her stomach, and her upper body followed, emerging on the other side of her spine. As the ripple effect continued to turn the woman inside out, swallowing her arms and legs as it went, she rebirthed herself as a 20-foot-long snake with a woman's head and a serpent's fangs glistening with venom. She coiled herself sensuously and flicked a forked tongue at him.

All around her, throughout the crowd that had willingly accepted Fiddleback's invitation to join him in power, other people started to change. One obese man's flesh disappeared back into himself as if his bones were sponges soaking it all up. He looked down at his skeletal body, then threw his head back in an attitude that should have been accompanied by wild laughter, but without lungs and vocal chords, the only sound he made came from the raspy click of his mandibles grinding in their sockets.

As Coyote saw others transform into bizarre creatures, none exactly like another, he figured out the one thing linking them all. The plain woman became a serpentine seductress. The fat man became thin. A slight, balding man bulked out and had a thick, black pelt covering him—with Coyote certain the man would have become a gorfash if he had known to model himself on one. *Each of these people is becoming a caricature of what they most desire to be. Fiddleback's gift is like a wish granted by an evil djinn. A child never again wishing to be hungry would find himself alone on an island with an unending supply of moldy bread and rancid butter.*

«Thiz iz because they are pawnz, Jaeger/Coyote. They are what they have made themzelvez to be. You are what I have wrought. You are a leader, and they are deztined to be your minionz.»

Fiddleback invaded Coyote's mind through the opening the Yidam had created in his probing. Unbidden and undesired, Coyote saw Fiddleback's warped vision of the future blossom fully. Coyote watched himself become engulfed in the green fire that Fiddleback had used to baptize the crowd.

Something deep down inside of him combusted. He felt incredible joy as unparalleled power pulsed through him. It raised him to heights he had never even dreamed existed. Legions upon legions of possibilities assaulted him, and he knew, with the power he had been given, he could do *anything*. He could make anyone's wish into reality, altering and adapting it as he saw fit.

Suddenly, he heard the voices of all those surrounding him. The snake woman shouted out her exhilaration and unbridled pleasure at the transformation Fiddleback had wrought. The skeleton man luxuriated in his new-found slenderness, and yet others reveled in their transmutations. From them, Coyote felt a sense of right and justice.

He saw his arms go out to embrace them all, then join with them physically. He absorbed them and their power.

He grew larger and stronger, his raw energy grossly outstripping that which his gigantic form alone should have given him. As he grew, with people flowing into him like droplets of oil combining on a still-water pond, he saw Bat and the Yidam shrink. They were nothing to him because they did not possess the sort of power that sustained him. Unworthy as morsels, he saw them as threats in that they

had the ability to destroy the creatures upon which his vast hunger fed.

«I will give you thiz power, my pet! You will know your full potential. You will deztroy our enemiez, and we zhall become invincible!»

The exultant tone in Fiddleback's voice sent a ripple of contempt through Coyote's mind. In the one second of clarity he had in its wake, he picked up a counterpoint to the joy and happiness still coming from those creatures he had allowed to become one with him. It resonated in low tones, but pulsed with dark energy. He dove down, clawing through all the positive affirmations and undying statements of gratitude. There, where his soul narrowed down into its blackest corner, he found the source of the undercurrent, and it greedily pulled him inward.

Like black pearls that had been pitted and scarred by acid, he saw the fears and terrors of those Fiddleback had changed. Clinging to themselves, naked, cold and malnourished, the core identities of the people decayed. Flesh sloughed off in dry ashes. The trembling horror and anger shot out from them like dark rays that twisted and warped into the green energy empowering their new selves. They had been changed, but only through the torture of who and what they had been.

«Now you know the zource. Now it iz all revealed to you. Come to me, my pet. Take up your rightful place at my right hand. What you azk will be yourz, if you will be mine!»

"No!" Coyote leveled the Stormcloud at the snake woman as she reared back to strike. His first burst hit her two feet below her head, stopping her lunge more effectively than a stone wall. The second cloud of pellets obliterated her face. Her body went limp for a second as her head arced down to the ground, then uncoiled with a spasmodic jerk, causing the skeleton man to jump back.

A huge winged shape that looked like the improbable marriage of pterodactyl wings to a shark's body soared into the air. It looped once to build up airspeed, then came in on an attack vector with its razor-studded jaws agape. It hit one of the ninjas and lifted her up into the air, then dropped her screaming body as it gobbled down her left arm.

Sin turned and snapped two silent rounds off at the flying shark. Holes appeared in the taut, fleshy membrane of one wing. The shark dipped that wing and arced down into a turn that set it up for a run at Sin.

Coyote tracked it with the Stormcloud and hit the trigger twice. The buckshot chewed a crescent bite out of the shark's dorsal fin, but did not even slow it down. The Dragonfire round, by contrast, did. The 25-foot-long flame jet hit the shark over its left-side gill slits. The fire stream continued virtually unabated out the other side, then the creature vomited flames. Its eyes went dead, and it crashed into the ground, rolling over and over, like a child's broken glider.

Men and monsters alike scattered as a mottled red and blue triceratops stampeded through the courtyard. Tracer rounds from submachine-guns glanced off its bony shield and sailed like fireworks into the night sky. Blood glistened black from its horns, and a blue satin Yakuza jacket flapped like a pennant from the left-most one.

Coyote turned to bring the Stormcloud to bear on the charging beast, but the Yidam's secondary arms pushed him aside. The alien giant calmly raised his PTRS to his shoulder and sighted down it like a white bwana hunting rhinoceri. The dinosaur, its eyes glowing with human knowledge of its invulnerability, raced straight at the Yidam.

The gun roared once, and the recoil slewed the Yidam all the way around so that he faced away from his target. The bullet hit the charging triceratops cleanly between the eyes, punching through the skull as if it were made of sun-baked clay. The tungsten core blew back through the hole in the skull that allowed for the entry of the spine and spun its way through the creature's body. The incendiary charge exploded in the tiny brain case, blowing the eyes back out on fiery pillars, then splitting the skull like a dropped melon.

The triceratops' nose dipped, digging into the ground like an anchor. Its body piled up behind the broad shield, stopping the creature barely seven meters from the Yidam. Its body settled back, leaving its legs splayed forward, then lolled over on its left side.

The skeleton man vaulted the triceratops' corpse like an X-ray of Bruce Lee. The bony fingers of his left hand slashed the face of one Yakuza to ribbons. The skeleton man hooked his right hand up underneath the rib cage of a second Yakuza and carelessly tossed him back over his shoulder. The Yakuza flailed his arms and legs as he flew, but could do nothing to prevent himself from being impaled on the triceratops' horns when he landed.

A look of pure, unadulterated joy lit Bat's face as he yanked two Yakuza back by the scruff of their necks to get at the skeleton man. The monster slashed at him with bloody claws, but Bat stepped back and contemptuously slapped the blows aside. The skeleton man's head came up in surprise, and Coyote knew he had realized that as frightening and dangerous as he might be, a trained fighter he was not.

Bat's right fist hammered that point home as it exploded on the skeleton man's jaw. Bone shattered, littering the ground with teeth and bits of mandible. Bat's left fist came up in a murderous hook that snapped ribs. His right foot came down, crushing foot bones into ivory splinters, then another right first fractured the skeleton man's left collarbone.

The skeleton man turned to run away, but even before he could bump into the dinosaur's corpse, Bat grabbed his spine in his left hand. Pleasure melting Bat's face into a nightmare mask, he reached down and took a firm hold of the skeleton man's right femur. Twisting it left and then right again, Bat ripped it free. As the bones below the knee dropped away in an inanimate pile, Bat spun the femur around and crashed it down through the skeleton man's skull.

Colonel Nagashita quickly crossed the open area between him and the hirsute behemoth created out of the small, balding man. The creature took one swipe at him with a fist the size of Nagashita's head. The IDC ninja leader ducked beneath the blow, then darted forward. Coyote saw a flash of light as Nagashita drew his *katana* and heard the creature utter a soft *oof* as the blade passed through its chest. Its upper half started to pivot toward the ninja, but when its lower half failed to start the same maneuver, the creature fell over backward, dead before it hit the ground.

«Rezizt, my pet! You know how I love to dizplay my power! You help me make my point to Ryuhito! Now, more playthingz for you to deal with, I think.»

From beyond the fountain, GBI's transformed guards entered the battle. Walking tall like men, they had become sable-coated wolves with glowing green eyes. A snapping, howling pack, they fell on the Yakuza and ninjas as they streamed in toward Coyote and his people. Coyote turned and nailed one with a close-range blast that tore one of its arms clean off, but the wolfman kept coming.

To his right, Sin dropped one with a single shot that went in right above its snarling muzzle and exploded out the back of its head. Beyond him, another died as Bat used the skeleton man's femur to cave its skull in. Natch popped a three-shot burst from her MP-7 through one's spine, taking it out of the fight, and

Nagashita killed another by decapitating it.

"Brain or spine!" Coyote shouted as he opened one up with a shotgun blast. Despite his best effort, it took another shot to kill it, and, despite his warning, the wolfmen pressed forward. Fiddleback's foul power, channeled out through El-Leichter's eyes, rebuilt new wolfmen from the scattered parts of the old ones.

Coyote tapped Sin on the shoulder and signaled him back a step while he used the Stormcloud to knock another wolfman down. "Where can we go? We're losing!"

Sin snapped off two shots that blew fist-sized chunks from a wolfman's head. "The main building. Room-to-room fighting, but they'll know it better than us."

Dammit! I have to do something! The press of wolfmen had already split the IDC ninjas off from his group, though they seemed to be holding their own against the former guards. *We are losing!*

«Join me, Coyote. I will then let you win!»

The hopefulness in Fiddleback's telepathic message reminded Coyote of the earlier sendings. He wants me to come willingly. That way he gets more power. If I am broken, I am of no use to him. Together, we can be invincible, which means he is vulnerable now!

«You are magnificent, my pet! But as I am vulnerable, so are your friends!»

The Yakuza started to break and run as Bat went down with a howling wolfman on him. The howl shifted to a yelp of pain as Bat regained his feet and held the creature aloft by its head. With his left hand clamping its muzzle shut and his right hand capping its skull, Bat wrenched his hands hard to the right. The creature's body twisted along with its head, preventing him from breaking its neck, but the spasmodic jerking of its body showed he'd clearly hurt it. Not content with that, Bat shifted his right hand down to the front of its throat and grabbed a handful of stomach muscles with his left. He slammed the wolfman down on the edge of the triceratops' shield, snapping its spine like a candy cane.

Though Bat's victory heartened Coyote, he knew they could not stand. A dozen of the wolfmen broke off to chase the fleeing Yakuza, but the rest poured around the open right flank and threatened to sweep around to cut off their retreat. Coyote could barely see the encysted ninjas off on the left for all the wolfmen attacking them. As the Stormcloud's breach snapped open and he unconsciously reached for a nonexistent spare clip, he knew the end had come.

«Thiz iz your lazt chance, Coyote! Come to me. Now!»

The sheer desperation in Fiddleback's sending made defying him easy, but still he hesitated. Cut and bleeding, his friends pulled back, fighting against forces that would engulf and devour them. Coyote knew, deep down, that if he accepted Fiddleback's power, he could keep his friends safe. Then he also realized that when he accepted Fiddleback's power, he would have no desire to keep them safe.

With a butt stroke from the Stormcloud he shattered a wolfman's skull and forced himself to ignore the stinging furrows left in his chest from its claw. "Never, Fiddleback, never."

«*No!*» Fiddleback's frustrated screech sliced through his brain like a razor, but Coyote realized it was not directed at him. He sensed another power entering the Sun Court. He saw nothing at first, but noticed instantly that both El-Leichter and the wolfmen turned their attention back to their own rear area. He

heard choked-off yips of pain, then saw a limp canine body flip end over end through the air.

Through gaps in the humanoid pack, he saw a slender, dark-haired, clean-limbed youth rendered in shades of reflected green and black. His hands and feet moved with blurring speed, and black blood covered his arms from the elbow down. Over his body, worked lovingly in bold swirls that helped define his musculature, black lines both thick and thin decorated him.

Where he struck, a body fell and, if it moved after that, only gravity or an involuntary muscular twitch was the cause.

"How dare you!" Arrigo spun in the air and scattered his soldiers with the wave of a hand.

The youth stopped in the oasis strewn with the torn bodies of his enemies, and blood streamed off his body. Beyond him, back where it could have been a gate in a wall, a golden circle glowed, and the tiny silhouette of a man slowly grew within it. Coyote thought, because of the image's size, that the man was far away, but when the silhouette assumed its full three dimensions, he saw the figure was indeed small.

"I dare. I dare many things, Fiddleback."

"You? You were nothing, and I gave you all you are. I now revoke my giftz to you." Arrigo El-Leichter's body pulsed out power. "Die!"

The little man, still hidden in the shadow of his warrior, waved the threat away. "Kill him."

Before the youthful assassin could move, Colonel Nagashita ran forward, vaulted off a mound of wolfman corpses and leaped into the air. He drove his *katana* through El-Leichter's abdomen. The look of betrayed surprise on El-Leichter's face metamorphed into a triumphant leer as he caught Nagashita up in both hands and started to compress his chest.

"Kill them both, then," the little man ordered his assassin.

He had no chance. As El-Leichter dug his fingers into Nagashita's ribs, the ninja leader twisted his own hands and rotated the *katana* blade 180 degrees in the wound. Ribs popped, and Nagashita jerked, but he retained his grip on the sword. He tugged up, then sawed the blade back and forth. Blood and entrails streamed from El-Leichter's wound, dripping down into the fountain's shallow basin, and the blood pouring from Nagashita's mouth soon mixed with them.

With one final effort, Nagashita twisted the blade around and brought it across, severing El-Leichter's spine. The green nimbus surrounding him died and, locked with Nagashita in death, he fell to the pool. The water flashed red, then green, then erupted in an explosion of green steam.

When it cleared, Coyote saw no one in the fountain. *So that is the dimensional gate here!* He looked up to see if the Japanese man who had been hovering with him had fallen outside the fountain, or had been taken along with the two corpses. He did not see him at first, but then looked up and saw the man floating in a golden throne.

The little man stepped forward into the backlight of the throne. "So, Ryuhito, do you want the power Fiddleback offers you, or would you like what *I* can offer you?" A smug expression of superiority accompanied the smile on the little man's face. "He provides you the power to transform yourself. I can give you the power to transform others. I offer my herald as a simple example of my art."

Jytte dropped to her knees. "Pygmalion!"

Rajani stared at him. "Nicholas!"

The little man smiled at Jytte, raising his right hand as if to caress her face. "You were one of my finest creations, Jytte. And you, Rajani, were always an annoyance. Mickey, kill her."

"Mickey?" Rajani cried out as the assassin started toward her.

He hesitated for a half-second, which gave Bat all the time he needed. Streaking across the battle line, he tackled Mickey and brought him down. Both of Bat's arms slipped up through Mickey's armpits and around the back of his neck. Locking his legs around Mickey's waist, Bat rolled up into a sitting position. The muscles in his arms and back bunched as he began to pull back on Mickey's arms and press his head forward.

"No, Bat, no!" Rajani screamed at him. "He's only a child!"

Pygmalion looked over at his charge and seemed about to issue an order when the golden gate behind him collapsed into nothingness. This appeared to disturb him for a second, then he turned back and frowned. "Ryuhito, if you enthrall yourself to Fiddleback, you will be his slave. I know, for I was until I made Lucifer's choice. As you can see, I do with one what Fiddleback could not oppose with many. Come with me, and I will give you this world to do with as you wish."

Ryuhito nodded. The golden throne flared in intensity and became a sphere. It contracted down to the size of a walnut, then floated over and landed in Pygmalion's open right palm.

Pygmalion smiled like a man who had just found an object for which he had searched his entire life. "Though I regret it, it seems I must leave you all alive here." He studied his surroundings for a moment, then let his gaze linger upon the gold sphere in his hand. "I bid you adieu."

"I go!" Mickey's voice squealed anxiously.

Pygmalion regarded him coldly. "I hardly think so."

"I go? See Dorothy? You promised?"

"You failed me, Mickey." The little man held the gold sphere up like a jewel and smiled at its glow. "I do not need those who fail, Mickey."

"You promised!" Mickey's voice grew hoarse with the shout, and he struggled against Bat. "You promised!"

"And that promise is broken, just as is the promise I thought I saw in you. You failed Mickey." Pygmalion spit on the ground. "You are nothing."

Coyote saw the boy try to twist free from Bat's hold, then he went limp and began to sob. Bat, still holding the boy tightly, seemed at a loss to deal with him. Mickey hung like a scarecrow in Bat's arms, tears streaming down his face and washing the blood from his convulsing chest.

Pygmalion smiled, then looked up at the others. "Consider him a present—and a warning. I have an army of warriors modeled after him. They will ensure that my work with Ryuhito will be uninterrupted.

This you will soon see, and you had best prepare yourselves for that day."

Sin slammed a new clip home in his Beretta. "I'm ready now."

"How glib, how droll." Pygmalion palmed the sphere, and its light died. "When we return, you will venerate him as your emperor, and you will worship me as your god." His laughter filled the courtyard, but by the time it echoed back to the center, he had vanished in a burst of gold light.



I looked up as Crowley stepped around a knot of docile wolfmen being led away by two of the IDC ninjas. "You missed the party."

Crowley toed the dead flying shark. "If you'd told me it was open season on lawyers, I would have been here." He winced, and I noticed for the first time that he was favoring his right leg. "As it was, I had a bit of a job to do myself with that gold tunnel."

"Are you okay?" I knew he always kept a tight rein on himself, but I couldn't sense even a hint of distress coming from him.

Crowley shrugged. "I'll live. Turns out the tunnel belonged to a Dark Lord named Pygmalion. He's fairly new and works a lot with folks from Earth."

"I know." I pointed to where Rajani, Jytte, Natch and Bat were standing with the warrior Pygmalion had called Mickey. "He was here and abandoned Mickey. Rajani, the Yidam's daughter, says Mickey was a timid five-year-old boy when last she saw him."

Crowley raised an eyebrow. "When was that?"

I shrugged and felt some aches from my clawed ribs. "Two or three weeks ago. She says he has a sister and father in Flagstaff."

"That will make for a fascinating homecoming." Crowley shook his head. "What do you know about Pygmalion?"

"Not much, and all of it picked up by inference." I slung the Stormcloud over my shoulder. "I gather Pygmalion was a human scientist named Nicholas Hunt. Fiddleback offered him power in return for loyalty. Pygmalion rebelled and has been annoying Fiddleback since that time."

Looking over at Mickey and Jytte, both creations from the hand of Pygmalion, part of me wanted to admire his handiwork. I could also sympathize with his rebellion against Fiddleback, and I knew well the pleasure of defying him. I also knew the seduction of the power Fiddleback offered, and I felt strong in resisting it—this time. *Will I always make that choice?*

Crowley's voice refocused my attention outside. "He's been annoying lots more than just Fiddleback. All the Dark Lords vie against each other for dominance. Pygmalion may well be new, but he is upsetting many of the old power structures. In many ways, he is responsible for having renewed the Dark Lords'

hunger for new worlds."

I could see it. Power is a drug that satisfies none. It only creates a hunger for more. Even though one might have enough power to survive, the mere fact that another wants your power makes you more ravenous. Dark Lords that had lain dormant for eons were now waking with empty bellies, and Earth seems to be in season.

Crowley looked around as another group of the transformed creatures walked away under guard. "What are you going to do with them?"

"For now, we're putting them in the secure areas of the GBI complex. Without Fiddleback to guide them, most are very shocked and stunned by what they have become." I shook my head. "They were looking for an edge, a secret that would give them an advantage over their peers. They thought they'd found it with GBI. Now they're just fodder for tabloid stories."

"At least they can find work in the circus." Crowley walked over and leaned against the triceratops' shield. "Pygmalion had some builder-beings in the lead constructing that tunnel through the dimensions. I moved the markers he had left behind for them into an area with a dimensional gateway. I managed to program it to randomly select a new destination every three seconds, so I've been scattering his no-deposit, no-return warriors all over the place. A lot of them looked like that guy over there, and some of them were good."

I nodded. "When Rajani spoke with Mickey, he became docile. She thinks she has broken the links in his mind that make him a killer on order, and the fact that he's not slain her is fair proof of that. He was fast, Crowley, *very* fast. The black swirls and lines look like decoration, but they're really carbon-fiber armor. I'd like to see an MRI of him because I think the bones in his arms and legs have been replaced with titanium replicas."

"Interesting. Where's the big guy you were with?" Crowley looked around, then glanced down at the dinosaur's shattered skull. "Out looking for a taxidermist?"

A single loud gunshot punctuated the night. "There was a loose Roboguard IV in the Garden of Contemplation."

We shared a smile, then both looked over toward the main building as Hal Garrett and Sinclair MacNeal led a group of five men toward us. Four of the men wore business suits and, despite the darkness, sunglasses. They seemed unimpressed by the odd menagerie of creatures in the Sun Court. The fifth man was smaller and moved with the care of old age, yet I sensed a vitality in him that even Pygmalion had not exhibited.

Sin stopped and pointed me out with a wave of his hand. "This is Coyote. Coyote, this is—"

"I know." I bowed deeply and held the bow out of respect. Straightening up slowly, I noticed, from the corner of my eye that Crowley had also bowed to the elderly man. I smiled politely and made an introduction. "May I present Damon Crowley."

"We have met."

Crowley smiled. "How kind of you to remember. It was a long time ago."

I looked over at Crowley and raised an eyebrow in a silent question.

Crowleyshrugged. "His coronation, a Red Army cell. It was a long time ago."

The small man surveyed the courtyard. "You are responsible for this?"

I nodded reluctantly. "Some of it. The man who catalyzed it, Arrigo El-Leichter, is dead. Your Colonel Nagashita killed him."

"My grandson, is he one of these . . . things?"

"No, sir, he is not." I frowned. "El-Leichter was a pawn of a Dark Lord we call Fiddleback. Ryuhito resisted him. Another Dark Lord, Pygmalion, offered Ryuhito something more. Your grandson left with him."

The small man sighed heavily, then remained silent for a while. Sin looked down and swallowed hard, but the small man shook his head. "You were to get to him and convince him of his error. Clearly things were worse than I imagined, and I did not charge you with the right duty."

He looked up at me. "Mr. MacNeal and Mr. Garrett have told me you are the person who is most capable of dealing with these Dark Lords. Is this accurate?"

"They are generous with praise and optimistic. However, with my friends I am willing to defy Dark Lords."

"Can you bring my grandson back?"

I hesitated as the full import of the question landed on me heavily. Could we find a Dark Lord's home dimension and extract Ryuhito? The logistics and timing for such an operation would be staggering. Part of me knew it would be impossible, but another part said that not even trying would be criminal. "It would be difficult and dangerous, but I am willing to try."

"Good. Whatever it takes, you shall have. From this point forward, this facility is yours to use as a staging area. My people will secure it. Draw up a list of things you need, and I will supply them. Whatever expenses you incur are mine."

"You love your grandson very much."

"This is true, but that is not the reason for my generosity here. As I told Mr. MacNeal," he said hoarsely, "I do not act out of love for Ryuhito, but out of my love for the world." He bowed and withdrew inside his group of guards.

Sinclair stared after him, then turned back with a surprised expression on his face. "Can it be done? Can we find Ryuhito and pull him out?"

"It can be done, but the odds of Elvis becoming the pope are a bit better than our chances of success." I jerked a thumb at the carnage behind us. "Had Pygmalion not intervened, Fiddleback would have won here. Going one on one with a Dark Lord is not a survival trait."

Crowleysmiled slyly. "I don't think we'll have to do it alone, Coyote."

"Oh?" The amused tone in his voice sent chills down my spine.

"As I noted before, Pygmalion is not a favorite of the other Dark Lords. In fact, in coming here I met one who pledged his help to destroy Pygmalion."

"Really?"

"Yes," Crowley nodded solemnly. "In fact, he said without him you will fail. I think he's right."

"Who?" A sinking feeling tugged my stomach toward my toes as I realized who Crowley had spoken with. "Fiddleback? An alliance with Fiddleback? I might as well commit suicide."

"Without him, you likely will." Crowley's eyes hardened. "While I don't begrudge you that option, I hope you reconsider. Alone, you'll kill yourself. And the rest of world will die with you."